

Russia Warns over Treaty Suspension: “NATO has a serious military advantage over Russia’s European combat capability”

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MOSCOW – General of the Army Yuri Baluyevsky, Chief of Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, has returned from Brussels, where he took part in the annual summit of the Russia-NATO Council (RNC), which was held at the end of the last week. At the summit, General Baluyevsky proposed to his colleagues a way out of the deadlock over the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE).

Russia suspended the CFE last December, saying that it would do so until its NATO partners resume the ratification of the updated version of the treaty, which reflects post Cold War realities – the Warsaw Pact, once a CFE signatory, does not exist anymore; instead, there are NATO and non-NATO members, such as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, which have ratified the treaty; no NATO country has done so, while Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn have not even joined it. Moscow believes that this situation gives the entire alliance unilateral military advantages, which it cannot accept.

Since Russia shelved the CFE treaty, NATO has somewhat modified its position. Before, it agreed to start its ratification only after Russia met its Istanbul commitments, that is, fully withdraws its troops from Georgia and Moldova. Now NATO suggests a parallel process – it will launch the mechanism of ratification, while Moscow will embark on complete and final withdrawal of its troops from the two former Soviet republics.

The Kremlin and the Russian General Staff consider these demands excessive and unacceptable. Moreover, they state with good reason that the CFE treaty and troop withdrawal (which has been fully completed in Georgia) are completely different documents. Drawing an artificial connection between them is no excuse for delaying the treaty’s ratification since 1999.

The West’s refusal to ratify the CFE treaty has compelled Russia to suspend it. For half a year, Russia has not supplied NATO with information on the deployment of its forces in the CFE-covered European part of the country (i.e. west of the Urals). It has also kept mum on their strength and modernization, and does not allow NATO inspectors to visit its troops. At the same time, it does not expect to monitor NATO’s potential. This situation does not promote trust between Moscow and Brussels, despite regular RNC summits.

The idea voiced by General Baluyevsky at the recent summit is aimed at breaking the CFE deadlock. He suggested that Russia should be allowed to lift restrictions on arms on its flanks – in the north and south of its European part. This would allow it to freely move armed

forces and hardware in this territory, and to react promptly to emerging situations. Russia would not increase the strength of its troops under this proposal.

Military experts understand what stands behind this proposal. Non-ratification of the CFE Treaty has given NATO a serious military advantage over Russia's European combat capability. The Russian Defense Ministry maintains that NATO is four to six times ahead of Russia in tanks and armored vehicles. Moreover, Georgia has also substantially increased its military potential, having received from its Western partners 175 tanks, 126 armoured vehicles, 67 artillery pieces, four military aircraft, 12 helicopters, and eight warships and motor boats, to name but a few. The Russian Defense Ministry stated that although these numbers do not exceed the CFE-imposed ceilings, provocations staged by the Georgian military on the borders with the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are "exerting a destabilizing influence on the military-political situation in the South Caucasus."

Russia's military leaders are also concerned over the presence of re-enforced American troops in bases in Romania and Bulgaria, and the Pentagon's plans to deploy anti-ballistic missile elements in Poland and the Czech Republic, (and eventually in Turkey, Georgia, Norway, and Britain) under the excuse of protecting its European allies from Iranian ballistic missiles. Moscow believes that these plans will sharply reduce the counterforce potential of Russia's strategic deterrent. In this situation, it is not surprising that Russia does not want to take part in the unratified CFE.

Baluyevsky's proposal was not supported by his foreign colleagues. A NATO spokesman reiterated the old position that the process of CFE ratification would start in parallel with Russia's troop withdrawal from Moldova and Georgia.

Obviously, NATO's military chiefs cannot make any new decisions unless the political leaders of NATO, primarily the U.S., make new proposals. General Baluyevsky was not disappointed with their negative response to his proposal, telling the press: "I have not yet finalized my idea of expanding flanks - this is just what I'm thinking about. But it may become a foundation for future discussion."

But the CFE's suspension is a defeat for all participants in the treaty, none of whom want to give in first.

By Nikita Petrov

for RIA Novosti

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