

The German initiative for arms control: time for dialogue with Russia

On 28 August, the German minister of foreign affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, published an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* daily which put forward proposals to negotiate a new multilateral treaty on conventional arms control in Europe. Among Steinmeier's suggestions was the idea that regional ceilings should be defined, minimum distances and transparency measures introduced (especially in militarily sensitive regions such as the Baltic). New weapons systems should also be taken into account, as should military capabilities and strategies. An informal meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of OSCE member states was held on 1 September in Potsdam and Steinmeier's proposal was included in the discussion.

Commentary

- Steinmeier's initiative needs to be viewed in various contexts. Firstly, the German strategy provides that a dual-track policy of deterrence and dialogue needs to be adopted towards Russia. Germany (especially its MFA) wants to balance the decisions taken at the NATO summit in Warsaw on an intensified allied presence on the eastern flank with initiatives promoting dialogue and confidence building with Russia. Secondly, in domestic policy, the initiative is expected to strengthen the profile of the SPD ahead of the election to the Bundestag in 2017 as the 'party of peace and dialogue', in contrast to the 'confrontation-oriented' CDU. This is so because the defence minister from the CDU is responsible for the Bundeswehr's participation in NATO's activity on the eastern flank. Thirdly, the German MFA would like to announce the success of the German chairmanship of the OSCE in 2016. Initiating talks on the new arms control treaty before the meeting of ministers of foreign affairs in Hamburg in December this year would be seen as a success of this kind.
- Steinmeier's initiative undermines the efforts made by NATO member states thus far aimed at improving the transparency of Russia's military activity and at complying with and modernising the agreements currently in force (for example, the Vienna document on confidence and security building measures). Steinmeier's proposals can be used by Russia to redirect the discussion on European security away from the offensive modernisation of the Russian armed forces and their aggressive behaviour towards NATO flank countries and on to the issue of limiting NATO's military presence and activity on its north-eastern flank. The initiative may therefore fit in with the Russian efforts to create a buffer zone with a limited NATO presence in Central Europe and the

Baltic Sea region. For these reasons it has been criticised inside NATO.

- The European conventional arms control system has not been functioning since Russia unilaterally decided to stop implementing the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in 2007. The West's attempts to revive the negotiations with Russia on the CFE treaty have been unsuccessful. Negotiations of the proposed new treaty may lead to annulling the previous requirement for Russia to fulfil the so-called 'Istanbul commitments' concerning the withdrawal of the Russian military from Georgia and Moldova. NATO member states made the ratification of the adapted CFE treaty and its further modernisation dependent on this condition.