

The Military Integration of Belarus into the Russian Federation

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Abstract

This article presents the results of research, which set out to identify and characterize the measures taken by the Russian Federation for its military integration with Belarus and to assess their consequences for regional security. In the research process, the systemic approach was applied. Critical evaluation of literature, systemic and comparative analysis, and generalization were used to solve the research problems. As a result, it was determined that Russia has been exerting constant pressure on Belarus for two decades to achieve military integration within the Union State. The goal of these efforts is to establish military bases and, potentially, permanently deploy significant armed forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Belarus. As a result, Russia may gain a strategic spatial and temporal advantage over NATO and create real threats to the territorial integrity of the Baltic States and Poland. The Zapad-2021 exercises verified the extent to which Belarus can maintain its sovereignty in terms of military security and what role it will play in Russia's military plans in the event of a hypothetical confrontation with NATO.

Keywords: defense, military integration, permanent bases, Russian armed forces, sovereignty

1. Introduction

Since the mass protests that erupted in August 2020 against the rule of Alexander Lukashenka and his unyielding, confrontational attitude towards society, aimed at maintaining authoritarian power at all costs, Belarus has been distancing itself from the values of Western civilization and deepening its integration with the Russian Federation (RF) at the political, economic and military levels. Vladimir Putin, conducting regional and global rivalry, has never stopped in his efforts to absorb Belarus under the pretext of state unification. In a relatively short period of time, Belarus, weakened and dependent on the Kremlin, especially economically (Klimuk & Tarasova, 2019), may become a springboard for the implementation of Russia's aggressive policy towards the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) and its neighboring states. This development creates serious problems in terms of maintaining the stability of international security. This is supported by the fact that Belarus has never clearly articulated the limits of integration within the so-called Union State, its foreign policy is shaky, and there is chaos in its information policy. Minsk ceases to be a reliable and predictable partner, which makes it easier to achieve Moscow's expansive goals and gain strategic superiority over the West.

The geostrategic position of Belarus cannot be underestimated. If integration processes went too far and Belarus lost control over the deployment of Russian troops on its own territory, the security balance on NATO's eastern flank could be undermined. Belarus occupies an important place in Russia's plans for its war with the West. The Russian Federation's military integration efforts, and above all its efforts to establish a permanent military base, are key elements of the process aimed at tightening the Suwałki Corridor and cutting the Baltic States off from the Allied hinterland. Belarusian territory could also provide a convenient platform for confronting NATO and a real threat to neighboring states, at least with limited military intervention. Moscow is able to

use Belarusian territory either as a base of operations against NATO or to deploy advanced A2/AD forces to block allied movement (Hodges et al., 2019).

Until the presidential election, A. Lukashenko managed to counter any proposals from Moscow quite cleverly and avoid the pressure of military integration with the Russian Federation. However, with the lack of popular support domestically and broken ties with the West, his room for maneuver is effectively diminishing (Glod, 2020). As indicated by symptoms emerging in Moscow, it seems that the price of continuing to hold on to power will be a partial loss of state sovereignty, at least in the military sphere.

The problematic situation thus identified leads to the formulation of the main research problem: How is the military integration of Belarus with the Russian Federation expressed, and what could the consequences be for its sovereignty and regional security? The main research problem was fragmented into the following specific problems:

- 1) What are the strategic determinants of military integration?
- 2) What are the forms of military integration?
- 3) What might be the consequences of military integration?

This article presents the results of research, which set out to identify and characterize the measures taken by the Russian Federation for military integration with Belarus and to assess their consequences for regional security. In the research process, the systemic approach was applied, which allowed us to determine the relations between the activities undertaken by the Russian Federation towards Belarus and their consequences for its sovereignty and international security environment. Based on the systemic approach, the states and processes of mutual relations and interdependencies between the activity of the Russian Federation on the territory of Belarus and threats to the North Atlantic Alliance in the past, present and future were studied. In the research process, the critical assessment of literature and systemic analysis were mainly used. A comparative analysis and generalization were also helpful in determining various trends in military integration and their implications for international security. The conclusions presented in this article are the result of the application of inductive and deductive reasoning.

2. Strategic determinants of military integration

The main strategic priority of the Russian Federation (RF) is to integrate the post-Soviet space and expand its influence in the world (Bugayov, 2021). With regard to Belarus, V. Putin chose the path of slow integration rather than outright absorption. It seems that such a model of behavior was dictated by avoiding negative public sentiment towards the Russian Federation, which would most likely arise if V. Putin openly used military force. In the long run it could bring him certain strategic losses. Secondly, V. Putin most likely realizes that he can use the threat of blackmail with armed intervention to shape the attitudes of both the Belarusian president and the West that are favorable to Russia (Bugayov, 2021).

The Kremlin's long-term goal is to make Belarus dependent on the Russian Federation by promoting integration projects implemented within the framework of the Union State (Suzdaltsev, 2020). Russia perceives Belarus as a state incapable of functioning independently, and it wants to use the deepening process of internal crisis, which bears the hallmarks of chaos, to secure long-term influence and reap political, military, and economic benefits (Constitution Protection Bureau, 2019). Internal crisis is in Moscow's interest, which is why the chaos ahead of the August presidential elections was to be exacerbated by groups of Russian mercenaries dispatched to Minsk known as Wagner Groups (Belarus, 2020) and disinformation and public relations specialists (Kagan, 2020).

The Kremlin no longer sees Minsk as a special partner in ensuring the security of the Union State (Vieira, 2017) in the western strategic direction, as was originally intended. In exchange for Belarus's assistance in securing Russia's western flank, Moscow pledged to provide Minsk with the latest military equipment and weapons systems at a symbolic price to maintain the high level of combat prowess of the Belarusian armed forces. However, the promises were quickly verified. When Minsk asked to purchase the Iskander operational-tactical missile system in 2007 and Sukhoi Su-27 fighters in 2013, Moscow conditioned the deal on granting permission to deploy permanent Russian missile and air bases on Belarusian territory (Sivitsky, 2020). The situation was repeated in 2019 (Zas, 2019) when the purchase of Su-30SM aircraft was requested (Vtoraya, 2019).

These events may confirm the Kremlin's behind-the-scenes strategy based on two elements. Firstly, Moscow has long intended to weaken the Belarusian defense potential. The cessation of free or preferential arms supplies was to lead to a gap in the operational capabilities of the armed forces. Secondly, it aimed at a long-term, permanent basing of Russian troops under the pretext of the need to close this gap, which was to secure both the western strategic direction of the Union State and to ensure the protection of Belarus itself from NATO aggression (Sivitsky, 2020).

Until 2020, President A. Lukashenko successfully resisted Russian pressure. He publicly criticized the Russian annexation of Crimea and refused to recognize the annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He also stated that Belarus would never become an invasion corridor threatening Ukraine (Howard, 2019). Through a deft policy of balancing Russia and the West, he has not made Belarusian territory a source of threat and challenge to the neighboring Baltic States and Poland, as the Kremlin desired. Instead, over the past decade, he has ensured the stability of international security (Kulashevich, 2017), with which he has gained the respect

of the US and NATO (Socor, 2020). In 2019, he publicly disapproved the deployment of missiles with nuclear and conventional warheads prohibited by the INF Treaty on his own territory. By doing so, he hedged against hypothetical Russian intentions to deploy them in Belarus (Sivitsky, 2020). Lately, however, there has been a significant change in the narrative. On December 12, 2020, the Belarusian leader stated at a meeting of the Council of Leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States that the “integration of the former USSR states is an inevitable necessity” (Integratsiya, 2020).

By supporting A. Lukashenko, Russia seeks to gain military superiority over NATO. The Russian military leadership is well aware of the geopolitical importance of Belarusian territory in its rivalry with the Alliance (Brauss et al., 2020). The threat of an armed confrontation from Belarusian territory offers the possibility of a direct strike on Poland and capturing the Suwałki Corridor (Hodges et al., 2019), in order to link up with the troops deployed in the Kaliningrad Region. Consequently, this could cut off the Baltic States from the other allied states and prevent the movement of NATO personnel and equipment (Stoicescu & Praks, 2016). Thus, the Russian Federation could easily conduct an operation against Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia simultaneously, which seems very feasible under the conditions of its A2/AD anti-access capabilities (Dalsjö et al., 2019). Indeed, V. Putin seeks to give NATO states the impression that defending the Baltic States is risky and costly and that the Russian Federation can dominate them, even without waging war (Kagan, 2020).

3. Forms of military integration

Based on the heritage of the shared Soviet past, the Russian-Belarusian alliance appears natural and necessary. Since 2001, the military institutions of both states have been operating under the umbrella of the Union State military doctrine (Marin, 2020). This may support the thesis that there are no points of contention in the sphere of security policy, and the level of military cooperation is very high (Druzhit, 2019). The main beneficiary of the strategic alliance is Belarus, which, due to limited resources and lack of alternatives, can only count on Russia in matters of security guarantees (Gomolka, 2020). Russian military doctrines consistently emphasize the need for defensive engagement in favor of the Belarusian ally. An armed attack against Belarus is treated as an act of aggression against the Union State, which entails the consequences of the aggressor incurring retaliatory measures (Anaïs, 2020).

Over the past decade, Belarusian policy has not shown signs of loyalty to Moscow. This may have been due to Russia's failure to honor its commitments to transfer military equipment on favorable terms. Despite the fact that Belarus had no choice but to remain strategically allied with Russia, it has pursued autonomy in foreign policy since 2015 (Anaïs, 2020). A. Lukashenko perfectly understood the national security implications of this policy as he did not rule out Russian aggression on Belarusian territory. This is confirmed by the interview he gave in December 2019. In it, he expressed confidence that NATO would not allow Russia to violate the sovereignty of Belarus: “if such a threat comes from Russia, the world community will be dragged into a war. NATO countries will not allow it because they consider it a threat to themselves” (Lukashenko, 2019). Due to the weakness of its own defense industry, it will be difficult for Belarus to acquire modern armaments on its own, which argues for the necessity of cooperation with the Russian Federation (Wolf, 2021). Regardless of the political ambitions of both sides, the role of the military sector will steadily increase since there is no global security assurance system in the world (Druzhit, 2019). On the other hand, because Belarus has sought independence and self-sufficiency in the defense sphere, it will be difficult to obtain generous material support from Russia (Bohdan, 2017).

Many joint military integration projects have been implemented over the past two decades. Belarus hosts two facilities of strategic importance to the Russian Federation. An early warning radar (Wolf, 2021) enables the detection of ballistic missile launches from Western Europe and tracking artificial satellites, and a wireless communications center is used to relay orders to nuclear submarines operating in the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Oceans (Soglashenie, 1996). Efforts to build an integrated air defense system have been successful (Wolf, 2021). This is evidenced by the fact that since 2016 joint combat duty has been performed by air and missile units deployed on the territory of Belarus and the Western Military District (ERS, 2015).

Russia treats Belarus as an extension of its own military territory. It announces joint defense initiatives that, in reality, have not been approved by Minsk. It seeks to dominate territory and limit Belarus's veto power over initiatives incompatible with Minsk's national interests. For example, in September 2015, the commander of the Western Military District proposed absorbing the so-called Regional Groupings of Armed Forces (Usov, 2020) into the district structure, which would include all ground and special forces units of the Belarusian Armed Forces (Wolf, 2021). Such a move would deprive A. Lukashenko of the ability to command his own army and would allow the deployment of Russian armed forces on Belarusian territory at any time and any place (Cherny, 2020). Other examples include Russia's repeated declarations of its intent to deploy missile systems on Belarusian territory, which can be read as a response to the initiative to establish an American missile defense base in Poland. Although Russia initially presented this move as a joint initiative, Belarus strongly opposed it (Giles, 2017). However, if Belarus was forced to adopt advanced Russian air defense systems, Russia's sphere of influence would be shifted forward by tens of kilometers. It would intensify the so-called

Kaliningrad effect, further deepening the isolation of the Baltic States (Giles, 2017), and limit the freedom of movement of aircraft over Polish territory.

From a military perspective, preparing infrastructure to ensure the smooth reception and movement of military equipment towards the NATO border is more important than the establishment of air and missile bases. As confirmed by the Zapad 2017 and Slavic Brotherhood 2020 exercises, Russia is capable of quickly regrouping its troops in Belarus. However, this would require political consent, which may be extremely difficult in the current circumstances. In this situation, it cannot be ruled out that V. Putin will take measures to ensure the deployment of Russian troops in Belarus in peacetime (Abel & OÜ, 2021).

4. The consequences of military integration

Against the backdrop of non-transparent negotiations for deeper military integration, there has been speculation about Belarus's vulnerability to Russian interference in its sovereignty (Opeshko, 2018). Since 2015, many observers have begun to draw attention to the alleged risk of a Russian military invasion along the lines of Crimea. However, most Belarusian experts believe that this is a highly unlikely scenario as Russia is more interested in political and military subordination rather than occupation of the territory (Marin, 2020). This is confirmed by the measures already taken by Russia in response to the deepening political crisis (Leukavets, 2021). On the day A. Lukashenko was sworn in as president, in a secret inauguration ceremony, six Russian Tu-22M3 strategic bombers flew over Belarus near the Ukrainian, Polish, and Lithuanian borders (National, 2021). At the same time, two supersonic Tu-160M strategic bombers conducted attacks on ground targets at the training ground in Różany near Baranovichi. The likely purpose of the demonstration flights and deployment of airborne troops was to show that Belarus belongs to the Russian sphere of interest and that Russian armed forces can quickly and surprisingly pose a significant threat to regional security (State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021). In December 2020, the Belarusian Interior Ministry and the Russian National Guard signed a cooperation agreement. When necessary, physical support from the Russian Federation will be provided to Belarusian OMON (Rus. Otråd Mobil'nyj Osobogo Naznačeniâ) units tasked with suppressing street protests (Zhochovsky, 2021).

Since the beginning of 2021, further intensification of Russian military activities near the the Polish border has been observed, increasing the risk of unintended incidents. The military command of Belarus has called 2021 a year of combat readiness due to a planned increase of one-third, compared to 2020, in the number of joint Russian-Belarusian exercises (National, 2021). The defense ministries of both countries used the plans to hold the Zapad 2021 military exercise as a pretext to start the next stage of building mechanisms for the integration of the armed forces of Belarus and Russia. A. Lukashenka has publicly expressed consent for the Russian air force to use Belarusian airfields. Russia is keen on rapid interoperability, as it constitutes a deterrent force against NATO aggression. The exercises could be part of a cover-up for permanently basing Russian troops in Belarus, which would pose a serious threat to the territorial integrity of the Baltic States and Poland. Moreover, even a limited stationing of advanced Russian defense systems, as demanded by V. Putin and denied by A. Lukashenko to date, could effectively lower the confidence of NATO's most aggression-prone members to fulfill their treaty obligations effectively (Kagan, 2020).

The Zapad-2021 exercises (Kretsul, 2021) verified Russia's ability to conduct conflict with NATO on the Western Strategic Direction. Traditionally, these exercises always shed light on how Russia plans to conduct combat operations on the Western Operational Direction, what threats it wants to face and what capabilities it can use to end the conflict on its terms.

The Alliance cannot ignore these exercises as Russia deploys thousands of troops along the border with Poland and the Baltic States. As in previous years, Russia's 1st Guards Armored Army deployed some of its forces to Belarus as part of the Union State Regional Grouping (Abel & OÜ, 2021). In addition, the exercise verified new ways for assault units to operate in urbanized terrain (Episkopos, 2021). The establishment of two combat training centers for air force and air defense specialists on the territory of Belarus was also tested to deepen integration in the conduct of combat duty in the joint regional air defense system of Russia and Belarus (Shoygu, 2021).

Last year's exercises were unprecedented in several ways. Firstly, their scenario was influenced by political events that played out after the 2020 presidential election. Secondly, the level of integration of Belarusian and Russian troops was tested as part of the tasks performed in the western strategic direction. Although the symbolic Belarusian Military District was not created after the exercises (Abel & OÜ, 2021), some troops have not yet left Belarusian territory. Thus, this may indicate that V. Putin's efforts to establish a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus are materializing in the exercises. This is also indicated by the plan to check the effectiveness of the material supply lines. The Kremlin-linked Izvestia newspaper reported already at the beginning of 2021 that Russian logistic units will establish a special logistic base which will supply the exercising troops with ammunition, fuel, lubricants, food and other materials. The announcement can be seen as a signal that Russia has begun in advance to create conditions for the functioning of the armed forces on the territory of Belarus (Barros, 2021).

5. Conclusion

A. Lukashenka's strategy of maneuvering between the West and Russia has failed. In the face of violent social protests caused by the results of the presidential election, Russia not only did not cease to exert pressure on Belarus, but significantly increased it, and relations between Belarus and Russia reached a critical point. Moscow is seriously intent on military integration and thus demonstrating its geopolitical power. Moreover, in terms of Russia's upcoming election in 2024, the stability of the Russian authoritarian system depends on its ability to expand territorially.

Belarus has made a significant contribution to stabilizing regional security over the past decade. However, its status quo is under pressure from Moscow's strategic goals to undermine Belarusian sovereignty. Russian efforts to turn Belarus into a source of security challenges and threats to other states, particularly Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Poland, meaning that Moscow's promises to temper its demonstration of military power in the NATO neighborhood have proven illusory.

Russia apparently wants and is able to limit Belarusian sovereignty more than ever before. The question is whether Belarus is capable of resisting the compulsion to integrate. The evolution of V. Putin's appetites in the region will depend at least in part on NATO's ability to prevent Russia from repeating the Crimean scenario in Belarus. However, it seems that in geostrategic terms, Russia is not interested in annexation. Belarus is needed mainly as a buffer territory and to gain an advantage in space and time in case Russia decides to aggress against the Alliance. That is why military integration and the permanent basing of Russian troops on Belarusian territory are so important for Russia.

Russia will likely prefer non-linear (hybrid) influence tactics to achieve its strategic goal of controlling Belarus. This means that Belarus and the institutional framework of the federal state can continue to be used as a springboard for Russian expansionism in the Baltic region, which dramatically increases Russia's offensive capabilities westward. The hypothetical absorption of Belarus by Russia would undoubtedly create a number of challenges for the states located between the Baltic and the Black Sea. It would mean that the direct border between Russia and NATO would extend by about 1,200 kilometers. In addition, Russia could deploy and fully control state-of-the-art communications, navigation, and electronic warfare assets located on NATO's eastern flank. Finally, it should be recognized that a Russian military presence in Belarus would make it much easier for Moscow to launch and effectively conduct information and psychological operations, including blackmail, provocation and disinformation, against the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine. At the same time, the above arguments should be considered as serious challenges for NATO.

In the year ahead, V. Putin will intensify the deployment of Russian conventional troops to Belarus. The results of the Zapad-2021 exercise will show to what extent Belarus is able to maintain its sovereignty in terms of military security and what role it can play in Russia's military plans. In order to thwart V. Putin's aggressive plans, it is necessary to strengthen NATO's strategic deterrence further and to acquire new capabilities for collective defense, at least on the eastern flank. Unfortunately, modernizing and raising the readiness of allied forces is a time-consuming process, so it is believed that it will be necessary to increase NATO's military presence in the eastern area of treaty responsibility and balance the disproportion of power vis-à-vis the Russian Federation.

Declaration of interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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