TOCHKI NAD U



Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations

Tochki nad U

East European Security Monthly

Issue 1

Authors:

Yauheni Preiherman

Dzianis Melyantsou

Siarhei Bohdan

3 August 2022

www.minskdialogue.by



Key developments

1. Gradual advance of Russian troops in Donbas and destruction of Ukraine's military infrastructure and armed forces.
2. Amidst intense militarisation of the region, Western countries are becoming increasingly involved in the conflict around Ukraine.
3. Deepening of military integration between Russia and Belarus.
4. Few and hardly visible attempts to de-escalate regional tensions.

Frontline developments in Ukraine

Since early April, Russia's offensive has focused on Donbas and the Black Sea coast of Ukraine. The Russian troops have advanced slowly yet consistently, counting mostly on the 'steamroller' tactics, which implies massive destruction of military infrastructure and manpower of the Ukrainian army without any attempts of quick penetration and capture of major cities. Russia's advance relies on its logistical infrastructure in the south (Crimea) and east (Donbas and adjacent regions of Russia). Apparently, the geography of the offensive is predicated upon Moscow's key interests and derivative military objectives: the need to occupy the entire territory of Donbas (Luhansk and Donetsk regions) and the coasts of the Azov Sea and Black Sea. The latter is meant to provide a safe land passage to Crimea and ensure that Ukraine has either no or very limited access to the sea, which is expected to alleviate Russia's exposure to NATO naval forces in the future.

One can clearly observe Russia's willingness to keep combat activity away from NATO's borders, although Moscow is in a position to launch a more massive offensive, including from Crimea. For the time being, the Russian command would probably like to minimise the risks associated with active combat operations in western Ukraine.

The growing supplies of Western arms to Ukraine, as well as the increasingly serious combat characteristics of delivered weapons naturally contribute to developments in the frontline and shape tactical decision-making of the warring parties. However, it would be premature to assume that Western armaments have fundamentally changed the course of the war. Russia is still being 'economical' when it comes to its military operation, i.e. it still does without large-scale mobilisation or putting the economy on a war footing.

Escalation spiral in the region

Tensions tend to escalate across Eastern Europe in military, political, diplomatic and economic domains.

Militarization

Western countries are being increasingly drawn into the war in Ukraine. German analysts estimate that Western systems already account for one third of the heavy armaments available in Ukraine (incidentally, NATO countries have also been supplying quite a bit of Soviet-era equipment to Kyiv). At the same time, some NATO states intend to go on with large-scale supplies of arms and ammunition, as well as training of Ukrainian specialists. Furthermore, a significant number of Western volunteers/mercenaries are fighting in Ukraine.

In addition to offering military support to Ukraine, regional actors tend to reinforce their own armed forces, which also contributes to the escalation spiral in the region.

Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak stated that the country would create NATO's strongest land forces in Europe. Warsaw has procured American *Patriot* surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems and British *Sky Sabre* air defence systems. Negotiations are underway with Germany over tank deliveries. A framework agreement has been signed to purchase South Korean armaments. One thousand *K2* tanks, more than 600 *K9* self-propelled howitzers, and three *FA-50* aircraft squadrons will be procured as well. Deliveries of howitzers and tanks will start this year.

At the same time, efforts have been redoubled to include the U.S. into the expansion of the Polish combat infrastructure. According to the declaration of the NATO Madrid summit (see below), the U.S.' limited military presence in Poland will change from a rotational to permanent basis for the first time. Rotational presence will also continue, including an armoured brigade combat team, a combat aviation (helicopter) brigade element and a division headquarters element. Plans are underway to deploy six *F-22 Raptor* fighters of the 90th U.S. Expeditionary Fighter Squadron to Poland in support of NATO's mission to deter Russia.

Lithuania is preparing to host a brigade of NATO forces. However, the country is already prepared to receive additional NATO forces as reinforcements in case of an urgent escalation of the situation.

The Latvian government is working on the establishment of a new military base; however, its whereabouts are not disclosed (presumably, it will be located in Latgale). The Latvian Defence Ministry has announced plans to introduce universal compulsory military service and specified that with appropriate funding military service may become mandatory for women.

Belarus continues to develop a multi-level system of territorial defence. It has been decided to integrate the Belarusian Society of Hunters and Fishermen into the system. The Ministry of Emergencies has been instructed to set up a paramilitary unit with a strength of several thousand personnel. A resolution has been passed to additionally arm the State Inspectorate for Flora and Fauna Protection and train its personnel to act in wartime conditions.

Moldova has markedly intensified its politico-military cooperation with the EU and the U.S., and once granted the candidate status, Chisinau began to openly condemn Russia's actions. Against this background, attempts to destabilize the situation in

Transnistria have been observed. Tiraspol recalled the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR)'s plans to become part of Russia.

Non-military escalation

Following Moscow's ultimatum "over the transport blockade of Kaliningrad", the European Commission issued a guidance for member states, which allowed resuming the transit of Russian goods by rail to Kaliningrad, although Lithuania had objected. Despite the positive resolution of the rail transit situation then and there, the issue of Kaliningrad transit remains one of the most highly charged themes in the Eastern European region and in the relationship between Russia and the West. It is further aggravated by the military factor of the Suwałki Gap. Moreover, the Russian elites have developed a perception of Lithuania as the "main provocateur" in the region, which additionally increases the risks of future escalation.

Belarus's and Russia's sea transit has turned into another major challenge. Hindrances to Russian logistics in the Baltic Sea have been caused by the closure of the EU's deep-water ports (shallow-water Russian ports on the Baltic Sea cannot accommodate heavy vessels). A report of the Port of Rotterdam, Europe's largest seaport, confirms that virtually no containers are received from Russia or shipped to Russia. The closure of the Russian consulate general in Klaipeda is a symbol of Russia's loss of its Baltic "gateway to the world."

Non-military escalation also includes significant limitations on the capacity of border crossings with Belarus imposed by Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Warsaw, Vilnius and Riga continue to accuse Minsk of supporting illegal migration flows, which they treat as hybrid escalation as well. Poland has completed the construction of the border fence, while Latvia has made an announcement about the start of fence building. The Polish authorities are also planning to extend the state of emergency in the border areas. This will cause, among other things, difficulties with transparency, because the state of emergency prevents media representatives and human rights activists from visiting the border area. A similar decision is expected to be made by Latvia.

Decisions of the NATO Madrid summit

In response to a "new security reality", the "transformative" NATO summit in Madrid dramatically strengthened NATO's presence in South-Eastern Europe. The battalion-size battlegroups in the three Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Bulgaria deployed as part of the "Enhanced Forward Presence" will be reinforced to brigades. Further, an increase in the number of high readiness forces is projected to well over 300,000 from 40,000, and detailed plans will be drawn up for operational reinforcement in the event of hostilities. This implies pre-positioned equipment, and stockpiles of supplies, weapons, and ammunition, new forward-deployed air defence systems, and strengthened command and control. Washington announced the establishment of a permanent headquarters for its 5th Army Corps in Poland (235 soldiers), a new Poland garrison command (35 soldiers and 100 civilians) and a field support battalion (totalling 41 soldiers and civilians) on a permanent assignment.

Significant transformation is also observed at the doctrine level: NATO has adopted a new Strategic Concept, which describes Russia as "the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security" (the previous concept of 2010 declared NATO's aspiration for strategic partnership with Moscow). China was qualified as a "systemic challenge" (previously, China was not mentioned at all in NATO's strategic documents). The main outcome of the Madrid Summit was therefore the Alliance's conceptual and practical contribution to the militarisation of Eastern Europe.

Deepening of military integration between Belarus and Russia

Russia and Belarus are also contributing to the regional security spiral as they pursue military integration within the framework of the Union State. The Kremlin agreed to supply to Belarus *S-400* SAM systems, which Minsk had requested previously to no avail. In response to "increased military activity by NATO countries near Belarusian territory" Russia will supply to Belarus *Iskander-M* operational and tactical missile systems, which can use conventional and nuclear-armed ballistic and cruise missiles, in the months ahead. Russia also offered to upgrade Belarus's SU-25 aircraft to enable them to carry nuclear weapons as well.

Few cautious attempts at de-escalation

Against the overall escalation backdrop, attempts to de-escalate tensions remain few and hardly visible. Nevertheless, we should list them just the same:

1. De-escalation around the issue of rail transit to Kaliningrad.
2. Belarus's decision to resume, on a parity basis, verification activities within the framework of the arms control treaties.
3. Invitation of the Belarusian Defence Ministry for foreign military attachés accredited and based in Belarus (including those from five NATO members) to visit the Belarus–Ukraine border.
4. Continued visa-free regime for citizens of NATO and EU member states bordering Belarus, which, among other things, improves transparency.
5. A reduction of the number of Polish troops on the border with Belarus, which remained unannounced.
6. Ukrainian grain export agreements between Ukraine and Russia mediated by the United Nations and Turkey.
7. Minimal alleviation of Western sanctions against Russia amid understanding that Moscow cannot be completely isolated from the system of international political and economic relations.

The fact that such attempts are made at all is positive, but their outlook is so far modest. At the military and diplomatic levels, there is almost no meaningful communication even within the scope of existing international legal instruments, such as the military transparency and arms control agreements that still remain in force for the countries of the region. In addition to the CFE Treaty, the Vienna Document and the Open Skies Treaty, these include the bilateral agreements on additional confidence-

and security-building measures that Belarus entered into with neighbouring countries in the early 2000s and which played an important role in maintaining regional stability throughout 2014–2020. In this regard, Latvia's rejection of Minsk's proposal to resume mutual military inspections is emblematic. Even at the level of experts, professional communication outside of their respective blocs is virtually non-existent, while the few existing communication attempts are kept in high secrecy.

Ü