Commentary
November 29, 2024

Belarus and Russia Work on New Security Agreements

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

Summary

Russia has already extended its nuclear doctrine to cover Belarus, equating attacks on Belarus with those on Russia. In early December, Minsk and Moscow will sign an agreement on bilateral security guarantees. Belarus seeks those guarantees as a foundation for future multilateral agreements post-Ukraine conflict.

On 22 November, a joint meeting of the Foreign Ministry Collegiums of Russia and Belarus occurred in the Belarusian city of Brest. The two ministers, Maxim Ryzhenkov and Sergey Lavrov, presided over a day of discussions that focused on various spheres of bilateral cooperation and preparations for the 25th anniversary of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, on which Minsk and Moscow intend to sign two new important documents. The delegations also explored coordinated approaches to advancing relations with countries in the so-called Global South and ways of countering Western economic sanctions and political pressure.

Annual joint meetings of the two countries' foreign ministry collegiums have taken place since the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia was signed in 1999. The recent event in Brest was the 25th such gathering, which brought together the ministers, deputy ministers, and the directors of the main departments of both states' foreign ministries. According to the 1999 treaty, foreign policy issues belong to the joint responsibility of the allied states.

> In other words, Minsk and Moscow develop their cooperation in foreign policy related to the treaty's implementation on an inter-state basis, and no authority is delegated to the supranational level.

This requires inter-state coordination within the framework of annual joint meetings of the ministerial collegiums and regular thematic consultations between respective departments of the foreign ministries. Moreover, the countries adopt multi-year programs of coordinated Union State actions in foreign policy. The programs mainly apply to their participation in multilateral international organizations, such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and joint efforts to strengthen the integration groupings they belong to, for example, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. In the past, such programs were normally signed for two-year periods, yet the current one covers three years (2024–2026).

The joint meeting took place for the first time in 25 years, not in the countries' respective capitals but in a regional city. Brest, which is in Western Belarus and borders Poland, was chosen as the venue for a reason. In June 1941, it was the first Soviet city attacked by Nazi Germany, and the heroic defence of the Brest fortress became a legendary episode in the Belarusian history of World War II. By organizing the meeting in Brest, the hosts wanted to mark the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from the Nazis and to underline "the policy of preserving the historical truth" regarding World War II.

In addition to the location, the agenda for the latest gathering also looked somewhat special compared to previous meetings. The usual routine of such joint meetings entails reviewing the results of bilateral cooperation in the preceding year and agreeing on coordination plans and schedules for thematic consultations for the next year. This time, the delegations also covered the traditional agenda and signed bilateral consultations plan for 2025.

They additionally worked on a few other noteworthy agenda items. For example, the two ministers signed a declaration on the need to elevate the role of international law in countering unilateral economic sanctions and other means of political pressure, which Minsk and Moscow qualify as violating the UN Charter. They also issued a statement outlining a joint vision for the Eurasian Charter for Diversity and Multipolarity in the 21st Century, an idea that Belarus put forward two years ago at the Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security. While the idea remains at an abstract stage, Minsk intends to start working on its substance on international platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS.

> Two other draft documents that Belarusian and Russian diplomats discussed in Brest appear of most interest, the Security Concept of the Union State and an agreement between Russia and Belarus on security guarantees.

Both draft documents have now been finalized and are expected to be formally signed by the two countries' presidents on 6 December in Minsk at a summit that will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Union State. While the exact contents of the documents remain non-public, it appears easy to assume what they might contain, especially after Russia publicized the amended version of its nuclear doctrine on 19 November.

According to the updated doctrine, the Russian nuclear umbrella now explicitly covers Belarus. Moscow will now equate armed aggression against Belarus with any type of weapons that can critically threaten its sovereignty and/or territorial integrity with an analogous scenario affecting Russia's own sovereignty and territorial integrity and will consider it as a legitimate condition for a nuclear strike against the perpetrator. This newly added wording is in itself the utmost security guarantee that a nuclear state can offer to a non-nuclear one.

Hence, the bilateral agreement on security guarantees, as well as the Security Concept of the Union State, will likely revolve around this brand new provision, as well as the fact that Russian tactical nuclear weapons have been stationed in Belarus. Presumably, the two documents will also lay out more nuanced mechanisms for how the Union State will arrange other elements of defence cooperation, including in hybrid areas, amid growing geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe and the world in general.

The Belarusian government has insisted on the adoption of the bilateral agreement on security guarantees. The question remains of why Belarus would be interested in such a new treaty, given that formal security guarantees already exist within the Union State's framework, which is similar to the mutual commitments that the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have according to Article 5 of their Treaty. Minsk's logic seems identical to what can be observed in the behaviour of NATO's eastern flank nations, which never miss a chance to insist on new explicitly written commitments by the United States and other allies.

> Minsk appears to view these bilateral guarantees as a prologue to future multilateral guarantees it wants to negotiate for itself after the end of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Whether such calculations prove feasible will depend on a number of factors, including the exact setup that the hypothetical negotiations on peace in Ukraine will take and their exact agenda. It will be crucial for Belarusian interests that the negotiations go beyond the ceasefire only and address some fundamental issues of a future European security arrangement. If they do not, the bilateral security guarantees that Minsk will receive from Russia might further cement the “Iron Curtain” type of military divisions in Europe.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations