Commentary
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Belarus and Ukraine: Fort Trump's Accidental Victims?

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

"Fort Trump" would further the security spiral in eastern Europe, catching Ukraine and Belarus in the crossfire between Russia and the West.

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During a recent visit to Washington, Polish President Andrzej Duda proposed that the United States establish a permanent military base in his country. This was not the first time the Polish government had tried to secure such an American military presence on its soil. This is despite the fact that several NATO battlegroups already operate in Poland and the Baltic states on a rotational basis as part of the Enhanced Forward Presence. With the US leading the Polish battlegroup – as the "framework nation" – there are currently at least 800 American military personnel in Poland at any given time.

Nonetheless, for several months, the Polish authorities have lobbied for the deployment of an entire US armoured division to eastern Poland. They have even said they would provide up to $2 billion to cover the costs of establishing a permanent US base – although President Donald Trump claimed that they "offered us much more than $2 billion to do this, and so we're looking at it". To ensure they had the US president's ear, the Polish authorities suggested naming the base "Fort Trump", as ECFR's Pawel Zerka wrote recently.

Although it has received a great deal of media attention, the plan is far from set in stone. It does not excite everyone in the US. General Ben Hodges, former commander of US Army Europe, laid out a compelling argument against establishing a permanent base in Poland, focusing on the damage it would do to US interests and NATO cohesion. Nonetheless, it is worth assessing the idea through the lens of eastern European

countries' security interests – which great powers often ignore. In particular: what unintended consequences could a Fort Trump have for stability in the region and the security of individual eastern European nations?

Establishing a permanent US base in Poland would inevitably create a classic security dilemma in eastern Europe. Such dilemmas involve "a situation where the actions a state takes to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, which leads to a decrease rather than an increase in the state's security", as political scientist Anders Wivel puts it.

> Indeed, Moscow's immediate reaction to the Fort Trump proposal leaves little doubt that a permanent base would set in motion a security spiral.

For example, Russian General Anatoly Sidorov, chief of the joint staff of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), quickly stated that, in this scenario, Washington and Warsaw would receive "an adequate response".

One might argue that Russia and the West have been locked into a security spiral since Russian forces annexed Crimea and began a war in eastern Donbas. Yet, this hardly changes the fact that a US base in Poland would intensify distrust and hostility between the sides. Moreover, establishing a Fort Trump would mean abandoning the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which stipulates that the Alliance will abstain from "additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces". The act may be irrelevant in today's security environment, but de facto renouncing it would significantly strengthen Moscow's resolve to act.

Russia would continue to militarise its Kaliningrad exclave as a primary countermeasure. Yet, both symbolically and practically, this will not be enough.

> For Moscow, the next logical step would be to exert intense pressure on Belarus to accept a permanent military Russian presence on its territory.

Moscow pushed for just this in 2015, only for Minsk to decline – almost certainly because the proposed airbase would have drawn Belarus into the escalating confrontation between Russia and the West. Hosting a foreign military base is tantamount to placing your country on the adversary's list of primary targets. Mindful of this, Minsk has done its best to play a neutral role in holding Ukraine peace talks rather than becoming a party to the politico-military confrontation in the country.

However, if the US established a permanent military base in Poland, Minsk would find it increasingly difficult to resist Russian pressure. Belarus has defence commitments in its bilateral relations with Russia, as well as within the CSTO's framework. The deployment of an American armoured division on its border would constitute too big a challenge to ignore, especially as Minsk is aware of the West's powerlessness to help it refuse Moscow's demands.

Importantly, Belarus would not be the only accidental victim; a Fort Trump would also have repercussions for Kyiv.

> Were the base to be constructed, Minsk would find it much harder to maintain its guarantee that there will be no military attack on Ukraine originating in Belarusian territory.

President Aleksandr Lukashenko first provided this guarantee in 2014, and he has reiterated it on multiple occasions. The pledge is important because it allows Ukraine to shift its attention and resources away from its northern border and towards the conflict zone in Donbas. Lukashenko's good relationship with his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko, indicates that the guarantee matters.

Thus, one knock-on effect of a Fort Trump could be to increase the risks for Ukraine, forcing the country to spend significantly more on the defence of its northern border. In these circumstances, an escalation of the war between Ukraine and Russia could be even more disastrous for Kyiv than it otherwise would have been, given that the Belarusian-Ukrainian border is 1,084km long and only 150km from Kyiv at one point.

In light of these issues, Washington should carefully consider the eastern European security dilemma before deciding whether to build a Fort Trump. The European Union should also pay greater attention to the plan for the base, as it raises a fundamental issue for its Eastern Neighbourhood Policy. Indeed, a Fort Trump would have major implications for the Eastern Partnership, a project that deteriorating security in eastern Europe could halt, if not destroy.

Yauheni Preiherman
Head, Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative