Commentary
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# Belarus and Ukraine De-Escalate Military Tensions on the Border

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**Summary**

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka recently announced that Minsk had conducted backchannel talks with Kyiv to de-escalate military tensions on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. The arrangement seems to carry some important takeaways that could help manage regional security risks as the war in Ukraine rages on.

On 13 July, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka announced that, as a result of backchannel talks with Kyiv, the two sides had reached an agreement to de-escalate military tensions on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. In particular, he said that both countries agreed to simultaneously withdraw their troops and military equipment from the border area, where they had been amassing in the preceding weeks. The announcement attracted heightened attention in Russian-language media and social networks but was largely ignored in the West. If anything, the arrangement between Minsk and Kyiv highlights important lessons that Western countries could instrumentalize as the situation in Eastern Europe grows more precarious.

In the second half of June, Belarusian officials began to claim that Ukraine was building up its military presence near the two countries' shared border. On 20 June, the State Border Committee of Belarus stated that it observed growing numbers of Ukrainian troops, including special forces and units of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence (GUR). In a later statement, Belarusian border guards added that formations of the Russian Volunteer Corps were also spotted close to the border and that increased reconnaissance activities were underway, including frequent flights of Ukrainian drones. On 29 June, Colonel Vadim Lukashevich, deputy commander of the Belarusian Special Operations Forces, said that Ukraine "was amassing troops, weapons, and military equipment near our border." As a result, "tensions were growing". Major

General Pavel Muraveika, chief of the Belarusian General Staff, stressed that the reasons for Ukrainian special forces' increased presence close to the border looked particularly puzzling for Minsk.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defence announced a surprise readiness inspection of military units in the southern regions bordering on Ukraine, likely in response to the Ukrainian military presence near the border, although there was no mention of this in the Ministry of Defence's reasoning. Moreover, Belarus deployed additional air defence forces to protect areas adjacent to the Ukrainian border, as well as certain objects of Belarusian critical infrastructure. In his speech on the eve of Belarusian Independence Day on 2 July, Lukashenka stated that Minsk had also positioned long-range Polonez and Iskander missile systems closer to the southern border as an extra measure of deterrence. \

> He added that Belarus's key priority was to avoid fighting and that he believed Kyiv was not interested in any further escalation either.

The consecutive statements by Belarusian officials and numerous materials in the Ukrainian media, which accused Minsk of preparing military provocations, appeared worrisome. On 13 July, however, Lukashenka paid an unannounced visit to the 56th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment in Luninets district, which borders Ukraine. With the top brass of the country's defence and security apparatus present, he stated that, due to backchannel talks with Kyiv, "the Ukrainians had withdrawn their armed forces and additional troops from our border." Hence, "the situation has stabilized." He instructed the defence minister to respond in kind by pulling back Belarusian troops and equipment from the border area.

Lukashenka's unexpected announcement became breaking news in Belarus and Russia. In the former, it caused a feeling of relief. In Russia, no official statements followed, yet some "military-patriotic" commentators and Telegram channels directed harsh criticism at Minsk, accusing it of a deal with Ukraine behind Moscow's back. For their part, Ukrainian officials did not comment on the de-escalation on the border with Belarus. When visiting the border area on 30 July, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy only issued a short statement that Ukraine continues to strengthen its borders with Belarus and Russia. Western media largely ignored these developments between Minsk and Kyiv.

> The de-escalation on 13 July seems to carry some important takeaways that could help manage regional security risks as the war in Ukraine rages on.

*First*, it shows why keeping open communication channels with Belarus, especially at the military-to-military level, is important and how such channels can be used in practice.

*Second*, it demonstrates that, at least in some cases, Minsk and Kyiv can effectively find common ground and understanding. This can ultimately lead to mutually beneficial agreements that are reached bilaterally and without any involvement of external powers. The coordinated withdrawal of Belarusian and Ukrainian troops was carried out in the spirit of the treaty on advanced confidence- and security-building measures that Kyiv and Minsk signed in April 2001. Even though Ukraine abandoned the treaty unilaterally in December 2022, the recent developments prove the significance of preserving informal de-escalation mechanisms between the neighbouring countries.

*Third*, it once again points to why the Belarusian-Ukrainian axis remains crucial for averting any further horizontal or vertical escalation on the battlefield in Ukraine. The United States and most other member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) aspire to minimize the risk that the war in Ukraine could transform into a direct military conflict with Russia. The Belarusian-Ukrainian axis remains an integral part in the reduction of military risk.

*Finally*, the successful backchannel dialogue between Minsk and Kyiv invites a reassessment of the West's approach to Belarus. In contrast to the perception among many Western decision-making circles that Belarus lacks sovereign powers in the shadow of Moscow, the bilateral de-escalation suggests that the realities on the ground are not as "black and white" and that engaging Minsk diplomatically can, at least in some cases, yield practical and positive results.

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