Commentary
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Belarus Prepares for War but Hopes to Avoid It

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Summary

Several recent decisions and statements by the leadership of Belarus reflect escalating political-military tensions in Eastern Europe. These developments include a series of Belarusian military drills “in preparation for war” and the intention to discontinue a major arms control agreement. Minsk’s actions are a response to overarching and intensifying regional tensions that will be nearly impossible to reverse while Moscow’s relations with the West continue to deteriorate. Yet, understanding the Belarusian government’s rationale can help reduce some military risks as the situation escalates further.

On 5 April, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka approved the submission of a bill to the lower chamber of parliament, the House of Representatives, that will suspend the country’s participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). Belarus signed the agreement in 1992 and was one of only four countries (with Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Russia) that ratified the CFE’s adapted version in 1999. Even as the demise of the original agreement looked inevitable, Minsk continued to stress the need to preserve the document and ensure its implementation until quite recently. That position even raised some eyebrows in Western diplomatic and military circles, as they failed to grasp “why Minsk is clinging to a dead treaty.”

The decisions of numerous state signatories to leave or suspend the CFE in the last several years made it meaningless for Minsk to keep clinging on to it. Russia announced its complete withdrawal in May 2023, though Moscow has effectively been out of the agreement since it suspended its observation of the treaty in December 2007. In early November 2023, members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) reciprocated

with a statement that they would launch procedures at the national level to halt their participation. Czechia and Poland suspended their CFE obligations specifically toward Belarus in August 2022 and March 2023, respectively.

> Belarus proposed resuming verification activities within the CFE and other arms control agreements on several occasions with little success.

For example, in June 2022, Minsk announced its readiness to receive foreign inspectors on its territory on a reciprocal basis and sent respective notifications to all participating states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Most NATO members, however, either ignored or declined the proposal.

Numerous voices in the West have long suspected that Minsk could be sharing information with Moscow, given their close military alliance within the frameworks of the Union State and Collective Security Treaty Organization. Some NATO members may have decided to halt their participation in the CFE in November 2023 due to their positions on Belarus. Otherwise, it made little sense to discontinue the treaty formally, as they had already suspended implementation toward Russia in 2011. As a result of this, Russia's complete withdrawal in 2023 had little impact on NATO's obligations to Moscow.

In this context, Minsk's recent announcement is hardly surprising and will not change the future of the CFE and arms control in Europe more generally, which appears to have largely collapsed. Technically, the suspension of the treaty removes the numerical ceilings on Belarus's armed forces and main conventional weapons systems. For Belarus, the CFE laid out the following limits: a maximum of 100,000 personnel; 1,800 tanks; 2,600 armoured combat vehicles; 1,615 artillery units; 294 combat aircraft; and 80 attack helicopters. Minsk has declared that it has no plans to go beyond those ceilings.

Lukashenka's suspension of Minsk's official participation in the CFE was accompanied by a statement underscoring that Belarus does not intend to withdraw from the document in practice. The Belarusian leader stated that Minsk would continue "carrying out the internal procedures ... the treaty requires" and maintain "the specified maximum numbers of weapons, military hardware, and personnel of the Armed Forces". The Ministry of Defence made a separate statement explaining why Minsk, in contrast to Moscow, prefers not to leave the CFE altogether. It reads, "One can always withdraw, but creating an agreement from scratch is extremely difficult, especially under the existing conditions".

> In other words, Belarus continues to see value in arms control even when many mechanisms have broken down due to escalating geopolitical tensions.

This episode seems instructive for analysing Belarus's other recent actions and rhetoric relating to defence and security. Military exercises are now taking place continuously throughout the country at various levels, including territorial defence units. For example, on 5 April, a new stage of testing the combat readiness of tank and engineering units of the 6th Separate Mechanized Brigade of the Western Operational Command began. In addition, one of the most comprehensive preparedness checks of Belarus's entire defence apparatus, primarily military commissariats responsible for the draft, is underway across the country.

Against this backdrop, Lukashenka made several recent public statements that have attracted much attention. Perhaps the most noteworthy was on 2 April, when he delivered a speech while visiting Hrodno, a city in north-western Belarus close to the Lithuanian and Polish borders. Numerous international media outlets quoted him as saying, "We are preparing for a war". This is indeed what he stated, but most of his speech, as well as his words during an earlier visit to observe military exercises close to the Lithuanian border on 26 March, was devoted to stressing that Belarus is determined to prevent any possible armed conflict with NATO countries. In a nutshell, Lukashenka's message can be narrowed down to the old Latin saying *Si vis pacem, para bellum* —"If you want peace, prepare for war."

> Minsk's stance reflects the overall escalating dynamics in Europe rather than Belarus's intentions to provoke a military confrontation with NATO.

This is the same policy that many EU member states have taken amid the increasingly fraught security environment. Revealingly, on 19 March, European Council President Charles Michel authored an op-ed titled "If We Want Peace, We Must Prepare for War". Michel's arguments are similar to Lukashenka's and reflect the standard logic of deterrence: hope for the best but prepare for the worst. Amid the prevalent propaganda wars of today, it is crucial to acknowledge the perceptions of the other side to avoid larger military conflicts.

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