Commentary
February 6, 2024

Belarus Updates Key Strategic Documents

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

Summary

New versions of the strategic documents attempt to find a balance between deterrence and dialogue in providing for national security amid heightened regional tensions.

On 16 January, the Belarusian Security Council held a meeting to discuss the drafts of two key strategic documents: the national security concept (NSC) and a revised military doctrine. Official Minsk considers the NSC to be the second-most important document after the Constitution. The concept itself establishes an overall conceptual framework for all other doctrines, including the updated military doctrine. The process of drafting national security concepts has traditionally attracted heightened media attention in Belarus, more than in most other countries. This time around perhaps even more so given the increasing military and political tensions in Eastern Europe.

The new NSC began to be drafted about three years ago. In February 2021, the All-Belarusian People's Assembly—now the country's supreme representative body with the mandate to decide on all strategic matters—announced some major changes to national security policies and instructed the Security Council to update the NSC. The assembly suggested that the neutrality clause be dropped from the Constitution, which took place following the constitutional referendum in February 2022. Additionally, the reformed Constitution renounced the formerly pivotal element of Belarus's security strategy—namely, its nuclear-free status. This allowed Minsk to invite the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons on its territory in 2023.

> The national security concept was updated in light of the constitutional reforms, the war in Ukraine, and expanding Western sanctions against Belarus.

The Security Council considered the first full draft of the NSC in February 2023. At that time, the council members made the draft public and launched a series of open events to discuss it. All interested individuals and legal entities were invited to submit proposals for amendments to the concept. According to the State Secretary of the Security Council, Alyaksandr Valfovich, over 70 public deliberations took place and multiple revisions were suggested. The public calls for amendments did not substantively change the document. The whole process was intended to demonstrate the NSC's grassroot origins.

The finalized draft of the NSC will be presented at the convocation of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly later this year. The representative body will likely adopt the document without any further amendments. If so, the new edition will replace the current one dating back to 2010. Given the dramatic transformation of Belarus's security environment in recent years, it appears natural that, in the words of Valfovich, more than 70 percent of the document has been revised for the new edition. Interestingly, top officials, including Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, still stress on every occasion that the new concept retains some continuity with the 2010 NSC in preserving the defensive nature of Belarusian defence and security policy.

The recent draft of the new NSC appears noteworthy in several respects. First, while many of its provisions typically sound like bureaucratic formalities, others offer rather sharp wording and even a critical assessment of the current situation in Belarus. For example, the Belarusian economy is characterized as too resource-heavy, vulnerable to external shocks, and often lacking modern production facilities. In the financial sphere, the high level of external debt and insufficient foreign currency reserves are singled out as existential threats to economic security.

Second, no individual country or alliance is mentioned as a source of threats or challenges to Belarusian security. Some paragraphs, nonetheless, detail the sources of security concerns, which are easily attributable to specific states. For example, multiple references to regional arms race and militarization quite obviously depict Poland's massive armament program. The risks posed by the expansion of military alliances in Eastern Europe alludes to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). And the omnipresent portrayal of economic sanctions as a key security threat points to the "collective West." The concept also introduces the notions of "friendly" and "unfriendly" states (again, without specifying them), which were not present in the previous editions of the NSC.

Third, several sections contain constructive and forward-looking wording in relation to the West.

> The draft concept confirms Belarus's stake in establishing a "belt of good neighbourliness" along its borders, including on military matters, and in sustaining pragmatic relations with the European Union and the United States.

Minsk stresses its intentions to continue actively working in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which it sees as a critical pillar of regional stability. The Belarusian government also seeks to renew participation in other European regional and subregional organizations "on a non-discriminatory basis." In addition, the document reanimates the "multi-vector" foreign policy concept, naming it as a core measure for minimizing external threats to national security and diversifying economic relations.

Finally, the NSC emphasizes the importance of preserving what is left of the international legal instruments for disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation. The document calls for the development of a new generation of agreements in these areas. It confirms Belarus's interest in providing mediation services for resolving international conflicts and participating in UN peacekeeping operations.

The draft military doctrine reflects the same priorities and approaches, since the two documents have been developed in tandem. Those policymakers drafting the new doctrine argue that its peaceful and defence-oriented nature ensures continuity with the 2016 doctrine. The qualitatively new security challenges are accounted for in extensive revisions of most of the document and the addition of one new chapter and four additional sections. Among the novelties are sections that explain the deterrence logic of deploying Russian tactical nukes in Belarus and that clarify how Minsk views its allied commitments within the Union State with Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

> Belarusian Defence Minister Viktar Khrenin, somewhat unexpectedly, stated that the updated military doctrine will serve as a basis for stabilizing the situation in Europe and launching the peace process.

He declared, *"We have demonstrated in [the new doctrine] Belarus's interest in restoring the influence of international organizations in the realm of security, such as the United Nations, OSCE and others, and in their effectiveness in preventing and resolving armed conflicts"*. According to Khrenin, Belarus remains open to a pragmatic dialogue with NATO.

Overall, both draft documents attempt to find a balance between deterrence and dialogue in providing for national security amid heightened regional tensions. On the one hand, they reflect the qualitatively new security environment Belarus finds itself in, whereby it has a clear place on the strategic radar as Russia's ally. On the other hand, the drafts are full of clauses that indicate Belarus's interest in restoring its role as a peacemaker in Eastern Europe and reflect the basic security needs of any smaller state in international relations, such as the centrality of functioning international law and institutions.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations