Commentary
September 28, 2022

Belarusian-Russian Cooperation Against the Backdrop of the Ukraine War

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Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

In a recent interview, Russian ambassador to Belarus, Boris Gryzlov, noted, “Belarus plays a rather important role in the framework of the special military operation”. Indeed, in the first phase of the war, the Russian military entered Ukraine’s northern regions and advanced in the direction of Kyiv via Belarus and used Belarusian territory as a launchpad for surface-to-surface and air-to-surface missile attacks on Ukrainian territory. In April 2022, Russian troops fully withdrew from northern Ukraine (many did so via Belarus), and no ground troop movements across the Belarusian-Ukrainian border have happened since. Yet, sporadic Russian missile launches from Belarus have continued. Also, Minsk continues to back Moscow diplomatically by voting consistently in Russia’s favor at the United Nations.

These are well-established and widely known facts. Due to its actions, Belarus has been condemned internationally and subjected to unprecedented Western economic sanctions. However, these straight facts notwithstanding, the actual degree and intensity of cooperation between Minsk and Moscow in the war’s context poses numerous questions. Regarding Belarus’s more nuanced role in the war, the media space is largely dominated by rumors and poorly informed stories, which are aggravated by various preconceptions that Western politicians and pundits hold vis-à-vis the Alyaksandr Lukashenka government. Indeed, Lukashenka’s trademark ambiguity in public rhetoric and foreign policy further complicates the picture.

> Moreover, Belarus inevitably finds itself caught in the middle of the crossfire of information and psychological operations coming from the warring parties.

Revealingly, even a Ukrainian diplomat in Minsk admitted in a private conversation that, on a few occasions, statements from representatives of the Ukrainian authorities and army regarding missile attacks coming from Belarusian territory turned out to be false

(Author's interview, July 2022). Thus, understanding Belarus's actual role in the Russian-Ukrainian war beyond media headlines is not as trivial as it may appear.

That Minsk would be unable to continue its policy of situational neutrality in the conflict between Moscow and Kyiv, which had helped reduce regional military risks throughout 2014–2020, was already obvious following the August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus. After the elections, the West started introducing sanctions, which quickly reduced Belarus's room for geopolitical maneuver and ensured that Moscow became the only game in town for the Lukashenka government. Kyiv's decisions to join some of the sanctions and decline Minsk as a venue for peace talks cornered Belarus even further. In the initial weeks of the full-scale war, Minsk attempted to re-establish itself as the primary locale for negotiations and even hosted three rounds of Russian-Ukrainian talks. Yet, ultimately, the endeavor failed and left Belarus without a formal reason for stepping aside from the conflict.

Under those circumstances, expectations grew that Lukashenka would be forced to send Belarusian troops to fight in Ukraine, especially as Moscow was experiencing growing difficulties on the battlefield. However, those expectations have not materialized. On the contrary, the Belarusian authorities keep reiterating their determination to avoid direct military involvement in the conflict.

Whether Belarus has supplied Russian forces with any weapons or ammunition is difficult to surmise at this point. According to a source close to the government, Minsk has not and argues that it "needs them [weapons and ammunition] to remain fully prepared to counter a hypothetical attack by NATO" (Author's interview, September 2022). Yet, such assertions are impossible to corroborate. What has officially been admitted, though, is that some Belarusian hospitals have treated wounded Russian soldiers.

> Minsk appears to be using the "hypothetical NATO attack" argument more broadly to emphasize that it must focus entirely on the defense of the Union State of Belarus and Russia in the Western strategic direction.

In the aforementioned interview, Russian ambassador Gryzlov explained Belarus's "important role in the framework of the special military operation" in the following way: "We have a single air defense system and the joint patrolling of the Union State's borders, including its Western border, takes place".

The Belarusian government is likely trying to achieve at least three specific goals by doubling down on the "hypothetical NATO attack" argument. *First*, Minsk applies it as an argument of last resort against the direct involvement of Belarus's army in the war, at times when other arguments have been ineffective. *Second*, like he has done many times before, Lukashenka is probably appealing to the hawkish segments of Russia's society and political and military elites by raising rhetorical stakes vis-à-vis NATO. *Finally*, the Belarusian leadership is likely attempting to gain access to Russia's military strategic planning, including in the nuclear realm. In this, Minsk appears to be mirroring the long-standing approaches to nuclear sharing enjoyed by several European member states of NATO.

It was in this context that Lukashenka asked Putin in late June 2022 to consider a joint response to "increased military activity by NATO countries near Belarusian territory" and, in particular, to the exercises of US and NATO nuclear-capable airplanes. The two agreed that, in the months ahead, Russia would supply Belarus with Iskander-M operational and tactical missile systems, which can use conventional, as well as nuclear-armed ballistic and cruise missiles.

Additionally, the two leaders announced that Russia would upgrade Belarus's Sukhoi Su-25 aircraft to enable it to carry nuclear warheads. In late August 2022, Lukashenka stated that the conversion of the Belarusian aircraft had been completed, even though he did not specify the number of adapted planes and whether they were indeed Su-25s, or another model.

The Belarusian president also did not provide details as to how nuclear sharing might work within the Union State's framework. Even so, earlier statements by both Putin and Lukashenka indicate that neither side is particularly enthusiastic about fully implementing the idea. Moscow clearly intends to keep full control of its entire nuclear arsenal. Minsk, despite the "hypothetical NATO attack" logic outlined above, is hardly interested in elevating Belarus on NATO's list of priority nuclear targets.

Thus, for the time being, the upgrade of the Belarusian planes should be viewed as a reflection of the current political dynamic between Minsk and Moscow and the former's attempts to utilize the "hypothetical NATO attack" argument for its own broader purposes.

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