Commentary
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Between Deterrence and Dialogue: Belarus's dual-track strategy amid border tensions with Ukraine

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Summary

Over the summer months of 2024, developments on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border got wide coverage in the international media due to worrying signs of possible military escalation. While journalistic reports focused on troop build-ups and the amassing of weaponry, intensified reconnaissance activities and other indicators of aggravating security conditions, the de-escalation efforts that both Minsk and Kyiv undertook stayed largely beyond their attention. That was particularly true in the case of Belarus, whose policy rationale often remains poorly understood across the international strategic community.

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If anything, a series of recent decisions by Minsk regarding the deployment, withdrawal and then redeployment of troops close to the border with Ukraine highlight some important nuances of Belarusian security policy thinking. They reveal intentions to combine military deterrence with elements of dialogue and diplomacy. Potentially, this carries strategic implications for broader European security.

Belarusian situational neutrality prior to 2022

The situation on the 1084 km-long border between Belarus and Ukraine has been a key factor of European security since at least 2014, even though until recently, the West paid little heed to it. After Moscow moved to incorporate Crimea in March 2014 and the initial

fighting in the Donbas broke out, any destabilization on Ukraine-Belarus borders could quickly have elevated the conflict to an entirely different level with major implications for the rest of the European continent.

Whereas no bilateral reasons existed for such negative developments, the fact that Belarus and Russia share mutual defence commitments automatically placed the former in the conflict equation. In the framework of the Union State of Belarus and Russia, the two countries have advanced close military cooperation since the mid-1990s. That has included, among other things, the development of a joint regional grouping of forces. Therefore, Moscow expected Minsk to fully take its side in the conflict with Kyiv and, if needed, exert additional military pressure on Ukraine's northern border.

> Yet, prior to 24 February 2022, when Russian troops entered Ukraine, *inter alia*, from the Belarusian territory, Minsk managed to stay away from the confrontation between two of its neighbours and key trading partners.

In fact, in 2014-2022 Belarus adhered to the policy of "situational neutrality" on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It became possible thanks to Belarus's status as the venue for peace talks, where two Minsk agreements were negotiated and the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group convened on a fortnightly basis.

Moreover, for three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Minsk avoided establishing serious military presence on the border with Ukraine. Revealingly, while the Belarusian Armed Forces set up two main operational structures – the West and Northwest Operational Commands – already in 2001, the southern area of the country remained largely demilitarised. Discussions about the need to create the South Operational Command on the borders with Ukraine occurred occasionally, but until mid-2022, the Belarusian authorities emphatically abstained from formalizing such plans.

Arguably, two considerations stood behind that rationale. *First*, Minsk did not see major military threats emanating from Ukraine until 2022. *Second*, it wanted to additionally reassure Kyiv, especially after 2014, that no such threats would originate from Belarus.

The 2022 watershed

Already in early 2020, the basis of Belarusian "situational neutrality" began to erode. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the OSCE Trilateral Contact Group transferred its regular meetings into the online format. Later, it became clear that the negotiation process within the Normandy and Minsk formats was exhausting itself, which was bad news for

Belarus's ability to preserve its neutral status. Additionally, Ukraine, as well as the European Union and the United States, did not recognise the results of the presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020 and effectively stopped normal diplomatic communication with Minsk. Furthermore, the West introduced massive economic sanctions against Belarus, which already at the end of 2021 looked unprecedented and in certain respects amounted to a semi-blockade on the country's western borders.

Leaving normative discussions around those developments aside, their ultimate effect was that the sources of Belarusian neutrality on the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation ceased to exist.

> Besides losing the status of a neutral venue for peace talks, Minsk also could no longer avail itself of at least some room for geopolitical manoeuvre, on which its previous balancing act rested.

It was against that background that Russia launched the military campaign against Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Predictably, Belarus did not manage to stay away from being involved in the conflict this time.

Minsk still tried playing the "neutral venue" card even after the start of the full-scale hostilities with the obvious goal of arresting its further involvement in the conflict. Three rounds of talks between Moscow and Kyiv took place in Belarus in February-March 2022, but then the Ukrainian delegation insisted on relocating them to Istanbul before the process stalled altogether.

In Istanbul, the Russian delegation announced that Moscow would withdraw its troops from around the Kyiv region. As a result, Russian ground forces stopped entering Ukraine from the Belarusian territory. For several more months, though, the Russian Aerospace Forces continued to launch missile strikes against Ukrainian targets from the Belarusian airspace, but even those strikes ended in the autumn of 2022.

Arguably, that became possible because Minsk found arguments to convince the Kremlin that preserving Belarusian stability, which necessitated the end of all attacks from the country's territory, was in Russia's own interest. On top of that, Minsk and Kyiv opened confidential bilateral backchannel talks on reducing security risks on and across their border. They also preserved intact diplomatic relations: until mid-April 2023, the Ukrainian government even kept its ambassador in Minsk. This latter circumstance – that is, the upholding of formal diplomatic ties and backchannel talks – appears particularly noteworthy for explaining the latest developments on Belarus-Ukraine borders.

Rollercoaster developments and Belarusian lessons from the Harmel report

Needless to say, in recent years threat perceptions have changed dramatically on both sides of the border between Ukraine and Belarus. Kyiv is at war with Russia and experienced Russian troops enter its territory from Belarus in the initial weeks of the fighting. Hence, escalation scenarios at the northern frontier no longer appear just hypothetical for Ukrainian decision-makers.

Minsk, on its part, also assesses military threats from Ukraine as significantly more probable than in 2014-2022. Besides various possible eventualities of conventional escalation vis-à-vis the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Belarusian authorities keep in mind that several hundreds or even thousands of Belarusian nationals are fighting as volunteers on the side of Kyiv and openly declare a longer-term ambition to topple the Lukashenko government with military force.

Against such a background, in June 2024, indications of growing tensions on Belarus-Ukraine border started to appear. Minsk stated that Ukraine "was amassing troops, weapons and military equipment near our border" and that increased reconnaissance activities were underway. In response, Belarus deployed long-range missile systems *Polonez* and *Iskander* closer to the southern border, as well as additional special force and air defence units.

Then, unexpectedly, on 13 July, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko visited an anti-aircraft missile regiment stationed close to the border and made a surprise announcement that following confidential backchannel negotiations with Kyiv, a mutual agreement had been reached to jointly de-escalate tensions. Specifically, he said that Ukraine had withdrawn their armed forces and additional troops from the border area and instructed the Belarusian Ministry of Defence to reciprocate with a view to stabilizing the situation.

Thereafter, however, the rollercoaster developments on the border continued. Less than a month later, on 10 August, Lukashenko stated that because Ukrainian attack drones had more than once violated the Belarusian airspace, Minsk would again deploy additional ground and air defence units to better protect its territory and enhance deterrence. The exact levels of the redeployments remained unknown and no further developments in the proximity to the frontier have been reported since August. At the same time, the Belarusian president continued to speak favourably of the behind-the-scenes diplomacy that Minsk and Kyiv appear to maintain.

The above rollercoaster events on the border seem to shed important light on how Minsk is trying to navigate the extremely challenging strategic environment. Whereas its primary objective is to avoid further involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war, while staying in the defence alliance with Moscow, Minsk also needs to find ways of offsetting multiple security risks and counterbalancing military threats emanating from Ukraine.

> The Belarusian method of pursuing those goals simultaneously, in most general terms, is a reminder of the classic dual-track approach that combines enhanced deterrence with dialogue and diplomacy.

On the one hand, Minsk demonstrates resolve to deploy and use all the military capabilities at its disposal to counteract any hypothetical attack, including by appealing to Russia for allied action. In that regard, Belarus shows tactical flexibility in deploying additional forces and capabilities in the proximity of the Ukrainian border and proceeds, even though slowly and cautiously, with plans to establish the South Operational Command. Yet, on the other hand, it constantly seeks opportunities to reduce risk and raise military transparency by diplomatic means. Now such means are limited to back-channel communication with Kyiv, but once other diplomatic avenues become available, the Belarusian government will certainly try to make use of them.

In most general terms, this approach resembles the dual-track philosophy that NATO started to implement following the 1967 "Report of the Council on the Future Tasks of the Alliance". Better known as the Harmel report, the document recommended that NATO should maintain "adequate military strength" and simultaneously engage in substantive diplomatic communication with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Pact. In other words, the report suggested combining deterrence with the policy of détente.

Strategic implications for European security

Equalling the Harmel report with the present-day rationale and conduct of Belarus's policy towards Ukraine might sound as a far-fetched comparison. However, this historical parallel highlights certain commonalities between the two otherwise dissimilar episodes, which can help to assess the latest developments on Belarus-Ukraine border through an unconventional lens. Such an assessment points to at least three strategic implications beyond the bilateral relationship between Minsk and Kyiv.

> *First*, clear Belarusian attempts to combine elements of military deterrence and diplomatic dialogue vis-à-vis Ukraine show that, despite their close defence alliance, a significant policy difference exists between Belarus and Russia.

The latter, especially in recent months, has unequivocally placed all bets on military means of resolving its disagreements with Kyiv.

Second, as I argue elsewhere, the latest Belarusian-Ukrainian experience of de-escalating military tensions demonstrates that under certain conditions the two neighbours can effectively find common ground and manage security risks bilaterally. This underlines the importance and potential of Belarus as a contributor to regional security. It seems particularly noteworthy due to the significance of Ukraine-Belarus border to overall European security: under current conditions, any serious escalation on the border will almost inevitably lead to a further horizontal escalation of the conflict and directly involve NATO members.

Third, if the Harmel-inspired model of combining deterrence and dialogue proves feasible on the Belarusian-Ukrainian frontier, other actors could later consider scaling it up to the all-European level. Interestingly, Minsk already appears to be applying the same combined approach in relation to NATO.

There, in addition to regular manoeuvres of the Belarusian Armed Forces and multiple exercises with Russia aimed at deterring NATO, Minsk has asked Moscow to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus within a framework that resembles NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement.

At the same time, however, Minsk continues to emphasise its interest in a dialogue with NATO and individual Western states. It has put forward some specific proposals for that. For example, in June 2022, Belarus offered to resume verification activities under existing arms control treaties. Even though most Cold War and post-Cold War arms control and military transparency instruments will likely not survive the current turbulence, at some point, a new generation of such instruments will be needed. Discussing them could be a natural pathway to a future détente if and when European security actors are ready for it.

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