Commentary
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Defence Officials Elaborate on Belarus's Military Policies

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Summary

As Belarus finds itself in an increasingly complicated and entangled security situation, it is doubling down on deterrence through asymmetrical means, hoping that its offers of dialogue and military transparency will one day bear fruit.

Every year on 23 February, Belarus celebrates the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland and of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus. The week before the celebrations is usually full of public activities organized by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and this February was no exception. Belarusian Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin gave a lengthy television interview on the Russian channel "Russia-24," presenting Minsk's assessments of the security situation around Belarus and its policies for counteracting numerous military risks. The interview revealed how Belarus, a country caught between Russia and Europe, is evolving its strategies to protect itself and avoid direct military conflict.

Representatives from 21 countries, including the United States, Germany, Italy, and several other member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), participated in the two-day gathering of military diplomats in Belarus. On 20 February, they visited Belarusian border guard facilities on the border with Lithuania and observed the infrastructure and work of the Kamenny Log border crossing checkpoint. The next day, the head of the International Military Cooperation Department, Assistant to the Defence Minister for Foreign Military Policy Colonel Valery Revenko, presented the new draft Military Doctrine and priorities for the development of the Belarusian armed forces.

During the briefing, Revenko stressed several talking points that Belarusian security officials have made in recent years. He emphasized that Minsk pursues the goal of defence sufficiency, ensuring it can deter any potential aggression without engaging in an arms race and the burdensome spending that would come with it. In that endeavour,

Belarus's security policy is not directed against specific foreign states. Revenko underscored that due to the lack of dialogue and cooperation with European countries, Belarus is shifting the focus of military cooperation away from Europe and intensifying ties with partners in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Yet, Minsk continues to highlight its interest in and readiness for "bilateral and multilateral substantive consultations and negotiations on common European security".

Revenko also underscored that Minsk remains committed to complying with the obligations and limitations outlined in surviving arms control agreements, including the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). This is noteworthy for two reasons. *First*, it shows Belarus is emphatically distancing itself from the Russian decision to leave the CFE Treaty and some other arms control instruments entirely, such as the Open Skies Treaty. *Second*, Minsk appears to believe that, once political will starts emerging on all sides, what currently remains of the hardly functioning arms control architecture in Europe could provide a basis for enhanced military-to-military contacts and ultimately lead to substantive talks about the future of European security.

> If that theory proves correct, the Belarusian government hopes that its continued participation in agreements, such as the CFE Treaty, will help prop up its international agency and ensure that Minsk will have a sovereign seat at the hypothetical negotiation table to discuss new European security arrangements.

Khrenin elaborated on the above points in his interview. The minister's responses were primarily directed toward a Russian audience as the interview was given to a Russian television channel. Still, several of his arguments could be noteworthy for Western observers.

Khrenin stressed that an arms race would undermine the country's economy and, therefore, Minsk continues to search for asymmetrical solutions to provide for national security amid expanding regional militarization. Indeed, according to the data from the Stockholm International Peace Institute (SIPRI), Belarus's military expenditure and imports of major arms look modest compared to those of its neighbours. Revealingly, even Lithuania and Latvia, countries with significantly smaller populations, surpassed Belarusian military spending in absolute terms in 2016 and 2018. The situation has not changed since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Under these circumstances and in light of Poland's massive armaments program, Minsk decided to initiate the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons on its territory as a means of ultimate strategic deterrence.

Belarus is also trying to modernize the conventional capabilities of its armed forces within existing budgetary limitations and to make full use of the highly lucrative military-technical contracts that Russia offers. In so doing, according to Khrenin, Minsk is closely following lessons from the Ukrainian battlefields. As a result, the production and implementation of drones and modern electronic warfare have become key priorities.

The Belarusian Defence Minister admitted that the ongoing militarization of Eastern Europe keeps him "wary and tense." Minsk monitors all military activities in the region carefully, including multiple exercises and permanent or temporary deployments of NATO troops and equipment. While it does not register these activities as immediate threats to its territory, the Belarusian MoD perceives them as preparations for creating offensive potentials against Belarus.

> Given the nearly total curtailment of military transparency and risk reduction measures in the region, concern appears to be growing in Minsk that these escalatory developments could easily get out of control and impact Belarus in the future.

Khrenin also assessed the situation on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border. According to him, Ukraine has about 112,000-114,000 troops stationed close to the border, with up to 17,000 involved in protecting the area. He believes that the Belarusian contingent deployed there remains sufficient, as Minsk does not currently see a threat of major fighting erupting. Belarus looks positively at the fact that Ukraine has fortified the border area, as it lowers the risk of sudden attacks. The Minister underlined, however, the problem of small sabotage groups penetrating the border into Belarusian territory. State media recently reported on an anti-terrorist operation by the army and security services where two Ukrainians and one Belarusian national were detained with explosive materials.

The statements from Khrenin and Revenko reflect Belarus's developing strategies to ensure its defence. As it finds itself in an increasingly complicated and entangled security situation, Minsk is doubling down on deterrence through asymmetrical means, hoping that its offers of dialogue and military transparency will one day bear fruit.

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