Commentary
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Developments on Belarus-Ukraine Border Prompt Roller Coaster of Reactions in Minsk

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Summary

In mid-August Belarus accused Ukraine of violating the country's airspace with attack drones en route to Russia and announced that it would re-deploy additional forces to protect areas close to the Ukrainian border. The developments underscore the delicate position Belarus finds itself in, both politically and geographically, as the war in Ukraine rages on.

In mid-July, Belarus announced that, as a result of backchannel talks with Ukraine, both countries had agreed to de-escalate tensions by withdrawing troops and military equipment from their shared border. However, on August 10, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka made a surprise statement, asserting that a day earlier, "about a dozen" Ukrainian attack drones had entered the country's airspace en route to Russia. According to him, Belarusian air defences had shot down some of the drones while passing information about the rest to the Russian Air Force. Lukashenka called this a major provocation and said that Minsk would again deploy additional air defence and ground forces to protect areas close to the Ukrainian border.

Later, Belarusian Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin held a media briefing and provided a detailed chronology of the incident. He confirmed that Lukashenka had ordered the reinforcement of the groupings of forces in the Homel and Mozyr regions, which border Ukraine, "in order to react to any possible provocations." The Belarusian official added that unspecified numbers of special operations units, ground troops, and missile forces, including *Polonez* multiple-launch rocket systems and *Iskander* missile complexes, were re-deployed to the designated areas in southern Belarus.

This incident underscores the delicate position Belarus finds itself in, both politically and geographically, as the war in Ukraine rages on.

> Minsk aims to avoid becoming directly involved in the fighting to safeguard its own interests while striving to maintain its alliance with Moscow.

On the same day as Lukashenka's announcement, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry issued a special statement calling the incident "a dangerous attempt to expand the zone of the current conflict in our region," which "radically escalates the situation." The statement also warned that "in the event of an expansion of the conflict, fire will spread throughout the region, including to EU countries".

The Foreign Ministry also summoned the Ukrainian charge d'affaires in Belarus, Olga Timush, and presented a diplomatic note strongly protesting the alleged violation of the country's border by drones launched from Ukrainian territory. Minsk demanded that Kyiv take comprehensive measures to prevent similar incidents in the future. Additionally, the Belarusian government emphasized that if the Ukrainian Embassy were "unable to influence the prevention of such provocations," Belarus would "question the necessity of its continued presence in Minsk."

On August 12, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry invited Steen Noerlov, head of the EU delegation to Belarus, and informed him that several elements of the intercepted drones had the markings of EU manufacturers. In connection with that, Belarusian diplomats called on the European Union to "take all possible measures to influence the Ukrainian leadership to prevent such actions in the future."

Commenting on the Belarusian claims, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry stated that it saw no reason to react. The ministry's spokesperson called on Minsk to avoid "stirring up anti-Ukrainian sentiments and creating an impression of some imaginary threats that do not exist." Later, on August 25, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry issued a more formal statement confirming that Belarus was amassing troops and equipment close to the border and urging the Belarusian side to withdraw them to a distance that exceeds the range of the fire systems available to the Belarusian Armed Forces. The statement also stressed that Ukraine had no unfriendly intentions toward Belarus.

> Western capitals left Belarusian claims about August 10 unaddressed.

At least, no official statements followed, and leading Western media largely ignored the news. One likely reason is that the Belarusian accusations against Kyiv surfaced only a few days after Ukraine had launched its surprise offensive in Russia's Kursk oblast. Western officials avoided commenting even on the Kursk developments for a few weeks, trying to figure out exactly what was happening. Arguably, the situation on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, in their assessment, paled in comparison to those developments and was not seen as serious enough.

Another probable reason is the overall attitude toward Minsk held by many Western governments, which do not consider Belarus an important regional actor and question its ability to conduct a sovereign foreign and security policy. Mutual trust between Belarusian and Western governments has been undermined by a series of crises in recent years. As a result, officials in the West often tend to simply disbelieve and disregard statements and messages from Minsk.

However, the Lukashenka government's decision in mid-July to withdraw troops and equipment from the border with Ukraine demonstrated that Minsk is willing and able to act in ways that yield positive results for regional security when its own interests are respected. Even when, as was then the case, such actions are not perceived favourably in Moscow.

> Ukraine and its Western partners may want to explore possibilities of a more cooperative relationship with Belarus, and Minsk could be considered through a different lens.

An integral part of this would be considering developments through the eyes of Belarusian officials, instead of the traditional "we do not believe anything Belarus says". At the very least, such an exercise would help to understand Minsk's actions following the drone incident and other related developments.

After Ukraine launched its surprise attack in Kursk oblast, Russian media and social networks became full of accusations against Belarus for its previous de-escalation agreement with Kyiv. Numerous Russian military bloggers and pundits argued that some of the Ukrainian units that entered Kursk had previously been deployed to the Belarusian border. Thus, they concluded that Lukashenka's talks with Kyiv in effect undermined Russian interests. Several days later, against the backdrop of such media accusations, Minsk had its airspace violated by Ukrainian drones en route to Russia.

If Belarus had abstained from a harsh reaction to the incident, the idea that it acted directly against Russia probably would have become Moscow's official position. Moreover, Belarusian officials interpreted the incident as an attempt to drive a wedge between Minsk and Moscow. Given the degree of Belarusian dependence on Russia in light of Western economic sanctions against Minsk, the Lukashenka government simply could not afford to take a softer reaction to the incident. Revealingly, Lukashenka spent a significant amount of time during a recent interview for a major Russian television channel assuring the Russian audience that Minsk remains a reliable and responsible ally. Yet, he also stressed that Belarus was ready to do everything possible to avoid its own direct involvement in the fighting.

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