Commentary
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European Security, Eurasian Crossroads? Keeping rules-based cooperation afloat on a war-torn continent

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Summary

The pan-European arms control architecture is now in tatters following the American and Russian withdrawals from the Open Skies Treaty, the demise of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Russia's suspension of its participation in New START, and its formal withdrawal from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty.

These regimes will not be resurrected overnight. However, Belarus has remained active in the surviving regimes and will likely retain its membership in the CFE Treaty.

The EU's position on the political legitimacy of Alexander Lukashenko aside, Minsk's continued participation in arms control, combined with the delivery of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, creates a plausible case for certain European officials, beginning at the Member State level, to enter into a dialogue with Minsk as a matter of continental security – even if only quietly at first. This dialogue could serve as a basis for incubating ideas on the extent to which a future continental arms control architecture should be based on existing or new mechanisms. With time, Member States could designate individuals at the European External Action Service to take this process forward if it begins to show signs of progress, ensuring that the perspectives exchanged reflect the security interests of the EU27 as a whole.

Given the degree of closeness between Minsk and Moscow, the ideas discussed could eventually filter into the Russian elite as well, thereby preserving a backchannel through which momentum for renewed arms control can be built, as well as attenuating the lack of information and confirmation bias which currently exacerbate the Russia-West security dilemma. It is worth remembering that while Russia has withdrawn from several

arms control regimes as its relations with the West have deteriorated, Moscow has not rejected the usefulness of arms control in principle. Belarus would relish the opportunity to undertake such a dialogue and minimally restore the East-West bridge status that it held until the 2020 protests. Russia, for its part, would have little to fear, given the current extent of Belarusian dependence on the Kremlin and the fact that EU political recognition of Lukashenko would not necessarily be forthcoming.

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