Commentary
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Lukashenka Explains the Russian Tactical Nukes

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Summary

On March 31, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka delivered his annual address to the Belarusian people and parliament. A week earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin had announced that Moscow would deploy tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory. The announcement quickly eclipsed other developments in and around Belarus and shaped expectations toward Lukashenka's annual address.

Indeed, the nuclear topic became a key item of the address and was closely interwoven with its central thematic thread: "conditions for preserving the country's sovereignty and independence," as Lukashenka declared.

Since Putin made the announcement on March 25, nearly all media and political discussions have focused on the specific aims Russia might be pursuing with this move. Minsk's own thinking and rationale have largely been absent on analytical radars, while a few political statements were addressed to Belarus, which merely demanded that Minsk prevent the deployment plans from materializing. For example, the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated that "Belarus can still stop it," or otherwise the EU "stands ready to respond with further sanctions". Most other statements on the matter, including by NATO and the US State Department, did not appeal to Belarus at all. This approach seems to dismiss Belarus's agency in the situation and reflects dominating Western views that Minsk has now lost its sovereignty to Moscow, at least in the military realm.

Little doubt remains that Belarus's room for foreign and security policy maneuver has shrunk dramatically in recent years. However, limited space for geopolitical maneuver does not necessarily amount to a lack of sovereignty.

> Moreover, any seasoned Belarus-watcher will easily recall somewhat similar discussions about the country's presumably lost agency, which took place on numerous occasions in the past, even during times of Belarusian-Western rapprochement.

For instance, several EU states, as well as representatives of the Belarusian opposition, actively promoted this very narrative in the run-up to the Zapad-2017 military exercises and when Minsk held tough talks with Moscow on deepening bilateral integration within the Union State throughout 2019. Retrospectively, that narrative clearly misrepresented realities on the ground at that time. Therefore, if today Belarusian sovereignty seems once again irrevocably lost, it might still be analytically useful to pay some attention to official Minsk's own reasons for hosting Russian tactical nukes.

In February 2022, Belarus adopted a new constitution, which unlike previous versions, no longer contains a clause about the country's nuclear-free status. In June 2022, Lukashenka suggested that Minsk and Moscow consider a joint response to "increased military activity by NATO countries near Belarusian territory" and, in particular, to the carrying out of drills with NATO nuclear-capable aircraft. However, at the time, it appeared that neither country was enthusiastic about far-reaching plans to station nuclear weapons in Belarus.

In his annual address, Lukashenka laid out the reasons why his government sought the deployment of Russian nukes, which generally reflect Minsk's perceptions of escalating regional tensions and their implications. After he made the case for an immediate ceasefire on the Ukrainian battlefields, Lukashenka asserted that he does not expect it to happen any time soon. Therefore, according to him, threats to Belarus's security will continue to grow, as there are attempts, "especially by our neighbors," to drag Belarus into the war.

In this, the Belarusian president specified a number of threats. First, he referred to the growing threat of Poland's extensive militarization and the strengthening of its offensive potential. Second, Lukashenka mentioned the expansion of NATO's eastward presence. Third, he claimed that Western countries train fighters from among Belarusian opposition circles to be later dispatched in Belarus to overthrow the government. Finally, the Belarusian leader quoted intelligence reports presumably containing non-public discussions by German, Polish and American military officials regarding possible operations in Belarus.

> Given Minsk's rather limited resources, the Belarusian authorities see Russia's "nuclear umbrella" as the only credible deterrence against these threats.

This is how Lukashenka explains why he proactively "insisted on negotiations with Putin on the return of nuclear weapons to Belarus". He then argued that the decision to withdraw nuclear warheads in the early 1990s had been a mistake and that the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on security assurances, which was signed following Belarus's decision to give up its post-Soviet nuclear arsenal, failed to provide real security for the country.

Summarizing Lukashenka's remarks, a parallel can be drawn with NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements, which have facilitated the stationing of US nuclear weapons in Europe since the 1950s. This is possible not only in the sense that Minsk and Moscow refer to NATO's arrangements—to argue that their cooperation will not violate the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty—but also in terms of understanding what really drives Belarus's willingness to host Russian nukes despite the obvious military risks and overall unpopularity within Belarusian society.

Similar to the logic of the European participants in NATO's nuclear sharing (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey), Minsk sems to consider Russian nuclear weapons on its territory as an additional guarantee that Moscow will not backtrack on its "nuclear umbrella" obligations in the case that Belarus is attacked.

> In other words, it intends to ensure that Russia's commitment to protecting Belarusian territory, including by nuclear means, is ironclad and accepted by everyone else, which would strengthen deterrence.

For the same reason, Poland would like to host US nuclear warheads, all associated risks notwithstanding.

Yet, several important questions about the prospects for stationing Russian tactical nukes in Belarus remain unclear. While plans to prepare the respective infrastructure and train Belarusian officers to operate dual-capable aircraft and the Iskander-M systems have been announced, nothing has been said about the timeline for deploying the warheads. At the emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council on March 27, the Belarusian ambassador to the UN, Valentin Rybakov, underlined that deployment of these weapons continues to be probable and contingent on further developments.

Moreover, contradictory messaging continues as to how the decision-making process about using the nuclear weapons in Belarus will function. In the Q&A session after the annual address, Lukashenka refused to share details on this and only said that "we will make decisions about everything that we have [on our territory]". Moscow asserts that the nukes will stay under Russian control, as does Belarus's envoy to the UN. The secretary general of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Sergey Lebedev, a retired Russian general, stated that the "double-button" mechanism will exist—that is, both Minsk and Moscow will need to greenlight the use of a warhead. These statements taken in concert likely imply that, at least formally, Belarusian-Russian arrangements will mirror NATO's nuclear-sharing experience, as no single country will be able to use the weapons unilaterally.

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