Commentary
November 16, 2022

Minsk Triggers Joint Deployment of Troops with Russia

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

Summary

On 31 October, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka approved the draft agreement with Russia on the establishment and functioning of combat centres for the joint training of Belarusian and Russian servicemen. As such, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence has now been tasked with conducting negotiations with Russian military officials to finalize and sign the agreement.

This is the latest development in a series of recent bilateral moves between Belarus and Russia in the military realm. The most resonant of them was the decision to deploy the Regional Grouping of Forces of the Union State of Belarus and Russia (RGF) announced on 10 October. This declaration immediately made headlines in the West, as it was perceived by numerous observers as a possible indication that Minsk and Moscow might be preparing an impending offensive against Ukraine's north. Moreover, the announcement was followed by contradictory information about the launch of a counterterrorist operation and rumours about probable mobilization in Belarus, which further raised the level of public and international concern.

Commenting on the RGF's deployment, Lukashenka stated that the decision had been made in response to the deteriorating security situation along Belarus's western border. In particular, he singled out three primary factors.

First, Minsk worries that the never-ending narrative in the Western media about Belarus's plans to enter the war and send its own troops to Ukraine, in fact, points to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) desire to see hostilities spread into Belarusian territory. The Belarusian authorities draw the very same conclusion from the fact that the opposition-in-exile has declared its willingness to use militarized forms of

resistance against Minsk. In Lukashenka's words, this course receives support in the West, and "radical fighters" are being trained in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine, which now constitutes a "direct threat" to Belarus's national security.

> *Second*, whereas a few months ago, when Minsk reacted positively to the Polish army moving its troops away from the Belarusian border, now, Lukashenka stresses that the troops relocated a mere 100 km away (and can return in only a few hours) and are being reinforced with new weapons systems.

Finally, the Belarusian leader said that he had received information through private channels that Ukraine was considering missile attacks on targets inside Belarus. According to other Belarusian officials, warnings about possible attacks came from Ukrainian business circles with whom Minsk preserves confidential channels of communication.

Overall, it is noteworthy that Lukashenka summed up the rationale behind the RGF's deployment by saying that Belarus's main goal is to ensure that external forces do not drag Minsk directly into the war.

Belarusian officials emphasize that this deployment was triggered in accordance with the military doctrine of the Union State. Indeed, the latter document, in its current November 2021 edition, stipulates that the RGF is to be deployed "in the period when military threats are building up (the period of a direct threat of aggression) upon the decision by the Supreme State Council of the Union State". In other words, it requires a unanimous decision by the Belarusian and Russian presidents and their mutual acknowledgement that military threats to the Union State's security have escalated to a point where a military attack on its territory is highly probable.

Once that decision has been made, the Joint Command of the RGF will be formed to manage the joint forces and adjust the grouping's existing military plans in line with developments on the ground. The Belarusian army forms the core of the RGF, which also includes Russian forces from the Western Military District and the Baltic Fleet. Also, the 2021 military doctrine specifies that the RGF can operate on its own as well as jointly with each country's national armed forces.

On 17 October, the Belarusian Ministry of Defence held a briefing for 19 foreign military attaches, including from NATO member states, devoted to the RGF's deployment. The head of the Department for International Military Cooperation, Colonel Valery Revenka, provided further details on some parameters of the joint grouping. According to

Revenka, up to 9,000 Russian troops, about 170 tanks, 200 combat armoured vehicles and 100 guns and mortars with a calibre exceeding 100 millimetres were expected to arrive in Belarus. Importantly, he stressed that these troops would be stationed in four locations in eastern and central Belarus—that is, not near the Ukrainian and NATO borders. This signals the defensive nature of the deployment.

> In line with this, Revenka emphatically declared that Belarus considers the RGF as purely an instrument of strategic deterrence.

Minsk's signals and statements notwithstanding, on 20 October, the Ukrainian General Staff of the Armed Forces stated that the threat of an invasion in the north was on the rise. The General Staff's representative specified that such a hypothetical invasion might target the western regions of Ukraine, aiming to break the flow of arms supplies coming from Poland. However, just four days later, the chief of Ukrainian Defence Intelligence, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, questioned such assessments, adding that he had not observed any indications of preparations for an offensive in Belarus and, therefore, considered such a development improbable in the coming months. He added that it would take Russia about two weeks to deploy the adequate number of troops to Belarus needed for an offensive—and this would not go unnoticed.

Besides the considerations outlined by Budanov, another factor appears to support the notion that Minsk has zero plans to attack Ukraine from Belarusian territory—that is, the severe lack of appropriate military, medical and engineering infrastructure on the Belarusian side. Unlike the case on Russia's border with Ukraine on the eve of Moscow's invasion, Belarus is doing nothing to actively prepare such infrastructure. On the contrary, as the Ukrainian Defence Ministry reported in the summer, Belarus has laid explosive mines in forests, roads and bridges close to the Ukrainian border, which can hardy signal intensions to launch an offensive.

Thus, the RGF's deployment and the fact that Minsk initiated it do seem to reflect the Belarusian leadership's perceptions of threats and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, these developments evidently amount to Minsk doubling down on the "hypothetical NATO attack" narrative it is spewing to pre-empt pressures from war-mongering circles in Russia who are clamouring for Belarus's direct involvement in the war.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations