

The Military and Defence Policy of the Lukashenka Administration: from Exercises to the War on Ukraine

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Introduction

The geopolitical landscape in Europe has witnessed shifts in recent years, with Belarus emerging as one of the focal points in the complex geopolitical interplay. The actions of the Lukashenka regime during the 2020 protests and their repercussions started the process of degradation of Minsk's political and security relations with its closest neighbours, including Ukraine. Coupled with Moscow's geopolitical ambitions, this resulted in an unprecedented deterioration of relations with Ukraine and brought the two states almost to the verge of war.

This analytical paper delves into the transformation of the Belarusian-Ukrainian security relations through the lens of Belarus' sovereignty erosion caused by the crackdown of the 2020 protests and subsequent strengthening ties with Russia. The first part of this paper is dedicated to the retrospective analysis of Belarus' transformation from a constructive regional player that enhanced neutrality and expanded its strategic autonomy within the alliance with Russia into a troublemaker that became a bridgehead for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The second part analyses the role of the Lukashenka regime in the Russo-Ukrainian War through the indirect involvement of the Belarussian Armed Forces aimed at assisting Russia's military and informational operations, as well as activities of the military-industrial complex within a wider context of a material and technical support to the Russian Army.

The third part is built around an analysis of Ukraine's relations with Belarus and its approach to the deterrence of the Lukashenka regime through military and political means. In addition, the Kalinouski Regiment is singled out and analysed as one of the elements of the military-political strategy of Ukraine towards Belarus.

To forecast the developments in the security relations between Minsk and Kyiv in a two-year perspective, a scenario-based approach was adopted. That is an analysis into four possible scenarios built on four variables: (a) developments of the Russo-Ukrainian War, (b) stability of the Lukashenka regime and its ability to oppose the pressure, (c) the electoral cycle in Belarus, and (d) China's stance towards Belarus.

Finally, several policy recommendations are provided for both Ukraine and the Belarusian democratic forces that could prove to be effective in reversing the negative processes in the upcoming two-year period.

1. Transformation Of Belarus From A “Donor Of Regional Security” Into A Threat

1.1. Belarus as a “Security Donor”

The role of Belarus during the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War is usually perceived as a neutral platform for negotiations and even a donor of regional security and stability. The main contribution within the framework of this process was related to the so-called Minsk Agreements formulated in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War and the subsequent Russia-West geopolitical standoff. In parallel, Alyaksandr Lukashenka provided verbal assurances that the Belarusian territory would not be allowed to be used by the Russians to attack Ukraine from the northern direction [1] and reaffirmed his country's international commitments, including compliance with the international arms control and nuclear proliferation regimes.[2]

Even though the official Minsk contributed to the search for a formula for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, this was done due to the geopolitical interests of Belarus and a window of opportunity that opened in 2014. Basically, after the period of tensions in relations with the West caused by the 2010 repressions, the Belarusian officials skilfully sold Belarus' neutrality in return for warming in its relations with the European Union.

Such developments were beneficial for the EU and Ukraine, on the one hand, and Belarus, on the other. Minsk's stance towards the War eliminated any potential threats from the north, allowing Ukraine to concentrate most of its resources on the eastern front. The EU managed to partially get Belarus out of Russia's zone of influence and reduce possible security risks. However, it was Lukashenka's regime that benefited the most. The EU not only de facto recognised the results of the 2015 presidential elections, but also lifted the sanctions [3] imposed after the regime cracked down on the 2010 protests. This allowed Belarus to expand its strategic autonomy within its political and military alliance with the Russian Federation and strengthen its geopolitical positions by conducting a multi-vector foreign policy.

What is more, it was the time when the interests of Belarus as a state and Lukashenka's regime coincided. Lukashenka managed to neutralise threats that came along with the growing Russian influence and ensure that there would be no direct risks to his power in the upcoming years. At the same time, it was possible to witness a strengthening of Belarus' sovereignty and its role on the international arena, which gave hope for the future transformation and democratisation of the state.

However, this model of state functioning did not solve the structural problem, i.e. the fact that all of the developments mentioned above were tailored to the interests of Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Consequently, the system that emerged after 2014 was fragile and dependent on the political needs of the Belarusian president. As the events of 2020 demonstrated, this issue manifested itself to the full extent when Lukashenka sacrificed the interests of Belarus in order to remain in power.

1.2. 2020 and the End of Belarus' Neutrality

Although Belarus was not neutral in a common sense because of its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and integration processes with Russia within the Union State, its efforts aimed at balancing between several centres of power were appreciated in the West. Back in the beginning of 2020, Belarus conducted military drills with the British Armed Forces, [4] which only highlighted the constructive role of Belarus in the region. What is more, for the first time, the American Secretary of State visited Belarus and announced that the Belarusian and American Ambassadors would return to Washington and Minsk, respectively. [5]

But the positive dynamics in the relations with the West were reduced to nothing at the beginning of the political crisis in Belarus that led to unprecedented repressions. As a result, the EU refused to recognise Alyaksandr Lukashenka as a legitimate president, [6] and the latter was forced to strengthen ties with the Kremlin in order to preserve his political power.

Initially, Ukraine tried to refrain from a sharp reaction to the events in Belarus and did not express unambiguous support for the European Union. However, Kyiv's position immediately changed due to Minsk's decision to extradite the Wagner Group fighters to Russia, [7] a decision that was indicative in terms of Lukashenka's choice of his partners. Ukraine did not recognise the results of the presidential election in Belarus, but refrained from an open support of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and did not call for new elections. The Ukrainian officials viewed this as a compromise and a gesture of goodwill, rather than an unfriendly act towards Minsk.

Although Kyiv was trying to implement the provisions of the foreign policy strategy concerning Belarus, using trade as a means to prevent restriction of the state sovereignty of Belarus by the Russian Federation, [8] in 2021 it became even more evident that the Lukashenka regime was getting more dragged in into the Russian orbit. Signs of that could be traced not only in the facilitation of its military cooperation with the Kremlin, [9] but, most importantly, in terms of the reduction of Belarus' role in the security relations with Moscow. The West-2021 military drills only confirmed that Minsk's role narrowed down to Russia's peripheral partner, the importance of which was determined by the specific situation in the region. [10]

This was further proved during the Allied Resolve-2022 military drills, which occurred in the wider context of Russia's unprecedented force massing close to Ukraine's borders. Moscow deployed its forces well beyond the officially designated training locations and it turned out to be a Russian military deception operation aimed at preparation for an actual combat. [11]

Even if Lukashenka knew about the Kremlin's plans, he could not influence Belarus' main ally's decision-making process due to a partial loss of sovereignty, vividly seen in the security realm. This led to the fact that Belarus became a bridgehead for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and raised the issue of Minsk's direct participation in the hostilities.

2. Role Of The Lukashenka Regime In The War

2.1. Indirect Involvement of the Belarusian Armed Forces in Russia's Full-Scale Aggression against Ukraine

Although the Belarusian military was not involved in actual combat en masse, during the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion the Lukashenka regime provided substantial assistance to the Russian army. Thus, during the Kyiv offensive, when the Russian forces were suffering significant losses, the Belarusian infrastructure, including hospitals and field hospitals, was at Moscow's disposal. The Russians also used the morgues, railway stations and air bases for transporting the dead and wounded. [12]

The Russian army actively used the military facilities, primarily, airfields, for conducting the hostilities. Missiles were launched from the vicinity of Mazyr, Kalinkavichy, Khoyniki and other towns. The Russian aviators carried out combat missions from the airfields in Lida, Baranavichy, Machulishchy, etc., [13] and used the airspace of the Republic of Belarus for launching cruise missiles from the Tu-22M3 strategic bombers. [14]

Apart from patrolling the skies, the fighting jets of the Air Force of Belarus covered the Russian Tu-22M3 bombers during their combat missions in the Belarusian airspace. [15] The Belarusian army actively used its electronic warfare equipment near the border with Ukraine, [16] creating serious issues for the Ukrainian Air Force, and the Belarusian air defence systems covered the airfields on the which Russian aircrafts were stationed.

After Russia's withdrawal from the northern part of Ukraine, the Lukashenka regime concentrated mostly on providing its ally with weaponry and munition, as well as training of drafted Russian soldiers. Within the framework of the regional

grouping of troops, several troop trains of the Russian military arrived in Belarus, where the Russian soldiers were trained by the Belarusian instructors. [17]

Besides, more than 200 vehicles were removed from storage bases and transferred to the Russian Federation, including the T-72A tanks, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, as well as Ural trucks. [18] In addition, Belarus provided the Russians with more than 130,000 tonnes of munition. [19]

After most of Russia's contingent left Belarus, the role of the Lukashenka regime in the war gradually became less noticeable. Belarus together with the Kremlin has been creating possible threats from the north in order to force Ukraine to keep part of its units near the border with Belarus and prevent them from being used in more prioritised directions. To achieve this, Minsk has been conducting regular military drills and psychological operations, such as a joint air force training or deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.

2.2. Activities by the Belarusian Military-Industrial Complex Aimed at Assisting the Russian Army

Even though Belarus is not directly involved in the hostilities, it serves as an industrial base for the Russian Federation. The Russian and Belarusian military industries are interdependent and well-integrated. According to the State Committee for Military Industry of the Republic of Belarus, 99 Belarusian enterprises supply 1,880 types of components and weapons elements for 255 enterprises of the Russian military-industrial complex. [20] Since 2020, the importance of the Russian market for the Belarusian defence industry has been growing. Thus, in 2019 the share of the Russian market was 26% (compared to 2015, the numbers were reduced by half which was possible due to the diversification of partnerships), but after the suppression of the protests and a significant weakening of Belarus' sovereignty, the situation has changed. Therefore, in 2022, the share of the Russian market in Belarusian exports reached 60%. [21]

As in the Soviet times, the Belarusian military-industrial complex predominantly specialises in the manufacturing of heavy off-road military trucks, repair and modernisation of vehicles and aircraft, production of optical devices, sighting complexes, fire control systems, radio electronic equipment and software complexes.

Although Belarus is capable of producing a wide range of light armoured vehicles, such as the Kaiman BRDM armoured scout car or the Defender MRAP, these have not been spotted in the Russian Army. The same goes with some modernised pieces of the Soviet-era weaponry, such as the Uragan-M MLRS or the BM-21B BelGrad that could have been pretty useful in the conditions of a conflict of such

scale and intensity. Consequently, Minsk acts not as a direct supplier, but rather as a subcontractor with its share of specialisation and responsibility.

Thus, mobile launchers of the Russian ground-based missile complexes Topol-M and Yars are placed on the wheeled chassis produced by the MZKT. On the chassis of the Belarusian manufacturer are also placed combat assets of the operational-tactical missile complex Iskander, multiple rocket launcher Uragan-1M, self-propelled launchers and mobile radar systems of the air-defence missile complex S-400 Triumf, etc. [22]

Aircraft Repair Plant No. 558 repairs and modernises the Russian aircrafts, such as the Su-25, Su-27, Su-30 and MiG-29, as well as the Mi-8 and Mi-24 helicopters. The Belarusian specialists of the Monitor Service plant are involved in the repair of the Tunguska, Tor and Kvadrat air defence systems at the request of Russia's Ministry of Defence. [23] Damaged Russian vehicles are also periodically repaired by the Belarusian mechanics, whether at the Belarusian enterprises or at the Russian ones, where specialists from Belarus are sent. [24]

However, these are high-tech military products that are of the biggest importance for the Russian Federation, primarily, optical and optical-electronic sighting systems. The JSC Peleng manufactures a multi-channel gunner's sight Sosna-U [25] that is used in the T-72B3 main battle tanks, gunner sight with a thermal channel Essa [26] that is installed on the T-90 tanks, as well as gunner sight Plisa installed on the T-80U tank and its modifications. In addition, the Peleng provides the Russian military with the multi-channel gunner sights Vesna-K and Sozh-TM [27] for the BMP-3 fighting vehicles. The JSC Ekran produces on-board equipment [28] for the MiG-29, Su-27, Su-30 and Su-33 fighting jets, while the JSC Integral is one of the main Belarusian manufacturers of microchips [29] for a wide range of missiles, including strategic ones.

The beginning of Russia's large-scale invasion naturally increased the volume of orders for the military-industrial complex of Belarus. Consequently, some defence enterprises in Belarus work in three shifts. For example, the JSC Peleng was actively recruiting employees, and it received a large order for the production of the Sosna-U gunner sight, [30] almost all of which were transferred to Russia. A significant increase in defence orders and vacancies was spotted at other enterprises, including the plants of the BelOMO Holding, JSC MZKT,[31] Aircraft Repair Plant No. 558 and the Orsha Aircraft Repair Plant. So, it is not surprising that the State Military-Industrial Committee of Belarus reported that the volume of production of industrial products in 2022 had reached a historical maximum. Although there has not been more recent data, it is possible to presume that in 2023 the situation did not undergo drastic changes.

Moreover, the military-industrial cooperation between Belarus and Russia will continue. According to the program of military-technical cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation until 2025, a number of activities are planned. These include joint R&D on some new models of weaponry and military equipment and modernisation of the existing ones, launching of a joint production of some final types of weapons, military equipment and their components, as well as implementation of measures of the common policy in the field of rate setting, standardisation, and cataloguing of military products. [32]

The current formula of defence cooperation between Minsk and Moscow shows that the probability of a direct involvement by the Belarusian military in the war is low. Belarus is not important as a fighting asset, but rather as a quiet harbour where the military equipment and parts can be produced without the risk of being hit by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Although strengthening ties in the security sector is one of the tools used by the Kremlin to absorb Belarus, the Lukashenka regime potentially has interests that go beyond a better preparation of the armed forces or the development of the Belarusian military-industrial complex. There are also political and economic elements in such a line of behaviour. Thus, a successful application of the Belarusian know-how under combat conditions may contribute to the acceleration of military cooperation with China and Iran, which is important in the context of balancing up the Russian influence in Belarus. In addition, this may open a pathway to the extension of military exports to the Asian and African states, providing the Belarusian budget with an additional income.

3. Ukraine's Stance Towards Belarus After 24 February 2022

3.1. Deterrence of the Lukashenka Regime through Military and Political Means

After the Lukashenka regime became a co-aggressor at the very beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, the relations between Ukraine and Belarus deteriorated to the lowest point in history. There is no official political dialogue between Minsk and Kyiv, and both Zelensky and Lukashenka periodically make uncomplimentary statements toward each other. The diplomatic relations are also on hold, especially after the firing of the Belarusian and Ukrainian ambassadors. [33] The remains of former cooperation are being erased by the introduction of sanctions and denunciation of bilateral treaties in the humanitarian, economic and political realms. [34]

Since the second half of 2022, relations between the two states can be characterised as a permanent mutual deterrence. In such conditions, the communication is maintained through the intelligence services or other non-public channels in order to influence the Belarusian military and political leadership

and prevent an emergence of additional threats. [35] Details of the negotiations are unknown, but it seems that certain verbal political assurances between Minsk and Kyiv were exchanged, within the framework of which both parties outlined mutually unacceptable actions.

This may be the reason why the Ukrainian special forces do not conduct sabotage operations deep into the Belarusian territory and do not strike the military facilities as it happens in Russia, while the tone of statements by the Belarusian officials and their actions are getting less and less aggressive. Moreover, there is also some logic in the continuation of diplomatic relations with the Republic of Belarus that goes beyond purely humanitarian reasons. The presence of several Ukrainian diplomats on the territory of Belarus is a guarantee that the official Kyiv will not resort to military force towards Belarus.

However, the stabilisation of the situation does not mean that Ukraine is not preparing for the worst-case scenarios. Thus, Ukraine continues building its defensive lines along the border with Belarus. In the past few months, the quantity of fortifications in the Northern Operational Zone has risen by 63%. [36] In addition, Ukraine's Command conducts a regular military training at the directions of potentially attempted breakthroughs or provocations. [37]

3.2. The Kalinouski Regiment as an Element of the Military-Political Strategy of Ukraine towards Belarus

At the very beginning of the full-scale invasion, Kyiv supported the formation of Belarusian volunteer units, in particular, the Kalinouski Regiment, which later obtained political ambitions and became the second major player within the democratic movement.

As its main goal, the Kalinouski Regiment proclaims liberation of Belarus through the liberation of Ukraine. However, its capabilities in terms of execution of this objective are pretty limited due to several factors. First of all, the Regiment is rather a small combat unit that consists of several hundred volunteers and does not have heavy weaponry at its disposal. Most importantly, there is no clear understanding of how the Belarusian volunteers can operate beyond the Russo-Ukrainian War. Even though the volunteers possess a certain degree of autonomy, they are part of a military hierarchy within the structure of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, and their actions on the battlefield are entirely determined by the Ukrainian Command. [38]

Consequently, Kyiv perceives the Kalinouski Regiment mostly as a political asset that fits into the military-political scheme of deterrence to the Lukashenka regime. There is no doubt that the latter sees the Regiment as a source of potential threats and destabilisation inside the country. That is why the Ministry of Internal Affairs

created several anti-terrorist units [39] against the background of subversive intelligence actions conducted by the Russian Volunteer Corps in Belgorod and Bryansk Regions. Moreover, the Belarusian KGB defined the volunteers as extremists [40] and started criminal proceedings against their family members. [41]

Scenarios For The Belarusian-Ukrainian Security Relations

Scenarios for the future Belarusian-Ukrainian security relations depend not only on internal factors and trends in relations between the two states, but also on the external ones that may significantly change the course of events. Consequently, the following variables that have the potential to influence the scenarios can be highlighted:

- Developments of the Russo-Ukrainian War;
- Stability of the Lukashenka regime and its ability to oppose the pressure;
- The electoral cycle in Belarus which is both a risk and a window of opportunities; and
- China's stance towards the Republic of Belarus.

Scenario 1. United Front

As the war continues, Russia's need in weaponry and manpower increases. This forces the Kremlin to accelerate the integration process with Belarus, especially, in the security realm. Belarus' military-industrial complex is subordinated to the Russian needs, repairing damaged weaponry and producing new products for the Russian Armed Forces. Moscow and Minsk expand the scope of informational operations against Ukraine and the NATO countries.

What is more, the Lukashenka regime is pressured to provide Moscow with weaponry that is at the direct disposal of the Belarusian brigades and secretly send some of its troops to the frontline line, taking into account the fact that the Belarusian professional soldiers are better trained and prepared than the recently conscripted Russians. This fact leads to the violation of the verbal assurances provided by Lukashenka and paves the way for Ukraine's attacks against the refineries, railways and military infrastructure on the Belarusian territory.

Scenario 2. Belarusian "Shield"

Although the Belarusian industry produces parts for the Russian needs, Lukashenka manages to preserve a certain degree of autonomy in alliance with Moscow, appealing to the threats posed by the West. He sells Putin the idea that Belarus is a frontier of the Union State in the geopolitical standoff with the NATO,

which requires from him keeping his military and other resources inside the country in case the West embarks on an escalation strategy.

As there are no major changes on the battlefield, Lukashenka uses the status quo as an opportunity to further strengthen his positions, especially on the eve of the presidential elections. The relations with Ukraine do not undergo drastic changes and Kyiv continues to perceive Belarus as a “grey zone” and the source of potential threats. Some minor provocations are possible, but they will not drag Belarus into the war.

Scenario 3. Balancing Games

Lukashenka remains Russia’s only formal ally in Europe. However, after the election cycle, he tries to get out of the standoff in relations with the Western states and develop closer cooperation with China, including in the security realm. Beijing is interested in the Belarusian military know how and strengthens cooperation in several directions. This helps to reduce the share of the Russian market and to diversify the military exports.

The regime refuses to use aggressive rhetoric toward Ukraine and sends signals about its readiness to conduct a more serious dialogue with the official Kyiv. The period of political gambling without clear prospects begins.

Scenario 4. Transition

Freezing of the war or weakening of the Russian Federation opens a window of opportunity for the pro-sovereignty part of the Belarusian elites, which push for a further de-escalation in relations with the neighbours. Lukashenka decides to support this track being afraid of the possibility of Moscow’s revanche as compensation for the failures in Ukraine. Strengthening of the pro-sovereignty part of the Belarusian establishment leads to an internal delegitimation of Lukashenka and his removal from power. As a result, the Belarusian democratic forces negotiate a framework of coexistence with the above-mentioned group of elites.

Within the framework of this process, Kyiv and Minsk reduce the degree of tension as much as possible. A serious dialogue between the two parties begins, which leads to a partial restoration of trust in relations between the two states, while opening broader perspectives for security cooperation in the medium- and long-term run.

However, it is worth noting that some elements of each scenario are interchangeable, which may create a slightly different set of possible future

developments. In addition, some unexpected events, such as the death of Putin or Lukashenka, are possible, which may lead to even more profound changes in either negative or positive contexts.

Recommendations

Taking into account the situation that has evolved around the Belarusian question, two main objectives common for both Ukraine and the democratic movement can be highlighted.

1. Elimination of the possibility of a direct military confrontation between Ukraine and Belarus and undermining the military cooperation between Minsk and Moscow. This can be achieved through the following actions:

- Ukraine in coordination with Poland, the Baltic states and the democratic forces should slightly change its approach to advocating the implementation of sanctions at the European level, focusing more on the Belarusian military-industrial complex enterprises that cooperate with the Russian ones.
- Ukraine should try to break logistical links between Russia and Belarus, as well as in cooperation with the European states to deprive the Lukashenka regime of its possibilities to circumvent the sanctions and obtain the Western-made parts for its military products.
- Ukraine should inform the Belarusian leadership through non-public channels that the provision of the Russian military with newly produced Belarusian weapons would inevitably lead to reciprocal actions.
- It makes sense for both the democratic forces and the relevant Ukrainian services to establish contacts with the employees of the Belarusian military-industrial enterprises who follow anti-regime positions in order to receive information on the situation in the industry. Thus, formal and informal contacts between the Ukrainian and Belarusian gunsmiths may be useful, taking into account the scale of cooperation in the past.
- The Belarusian cyber partisans, in coordination with the Ukrainian IT specialists, should gather documentation and relevant information related to the activities of the Belarusian military-industrial complex, including in the interests of the Russian Federation.

2. As the pre-protest period has shown, the best tool to prevent Russia from gaining ground in Belarus is through strengthening Belarus' sovereignty. Therefore, the next step would be to ensure that Belarus distances itself from the Russian Federation and expands room for manoeuvring. Such developments may potentially become a prerequisite for possible democratic transformations in Belarus.

- Ukraine should develop a comprehensive strategy towards Belarus that would go beyond the deterrence approach and would include a wider set of tools aimed at developing an infrastructure of influence in Belarus.
- It makes sense to develop and deliver to Lukashenka in coordination with the Lublin Triangle member states a confidential “road map” of possible concessions the regime could make and how Ukraine and its partners would react to such actions.
- The democratic forces should maintain contacts on various levels with a part of the Belarusian officials in Minsk, while assuring that they will not be subject to lustration in the case of democratic transformations and appealing to Belarus’ sovereignty as a common value.
- Ukraine together with the democratic forces should look for ways of influencing parts of the Belarusian elites that are not inherently pro-democratic. Arguments that lay out possible challenges related to economic issues or deepening the demographic crisis may be useful in persuading this part of officials that only an effective and strong Belarusian state is a guarantee of their political future.

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