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Belarus's balancing act continues

Minsk fends off the “Ukraine Option” again

by Keir Giles

Tensions between Belarus and Russia appear to have reduced, after a firm Belarusian response to street demonstrations in late March was followed by talks between Presidents Putin and Lukashenka. But the fundamental problems in the relationship remain and will inevitably resurface. Analysts in Belarus and beyond fear the joint Russian-Belarusian Zapad military exercise in September 2017 may provide an opportunity for Russia to resolve its Belarusian challenge.

Of all Russia's non-NATO neighbours, Belarus appears currently the state most at risk of being subjected to the same treatment by Russia as Ukraine. Just like Ukraine, Belarus's future lies in the balance between West and East; and just like Kiev, if Minsk leans too far toward the West this could be seen as an immediate and severe security challenge to Russia, which demands intervention. There is little doubt that the prospect of 'losing' Belarus to the West would be perceived as just as immediately threatening to Russia as was the case with Ukraine. There are significant differences between the two states, but they fill the same role in Russian perceptions as part of the Slavic heartland and as countries well inside Moscow's desired defensive perimeter.

After a considerable period of simmering where only interested Moscow- and Minsk-watchers were aware that Belarus constitutes a potential flashpoint in eastern Europe, the country's difficulties in its relationship with Russia have recently become much more widely recognised. This goes along with the danger that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's increasing difficulty in managing his balancing act and maintaining his country as an independent state rather than a province of Russia could lead to a tipping point where Moscow feels it needs to take decisive action to safeguard its interests.

Stepping Out

President Lukashenka has built on his consistent position that Belarus is a neutral power with a “multi-vector” foreign policy by setting up Minsk as the site for negotiations on the Ukraine crisis, and by demonstrating political distance from Moscow on controversial issues — among them most notably Russia's conflicts with Georgia, Ukraine and Turkey. Forced by circumstance to constantly seek new opportunities for freedom of movement, after 2014 President Lukashenka embraced Belarusian national culture which he had previously spurned, bolstering his image as the defender of an independent Belarusian state, and one prepared to emphasise the country's differences from Russia.

Small initial steps in the direction of political liberalisation at home have been combined with these demonstrations of neutrality in foreign policy to make Belarus a more acceptable interlocutor for Western partners. But since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Belarus's delicate position has been repeatedly threatened as Moscow has persistently tried to assert control at the same time as Minsk seeks to di-

minish its dependence on Russia and seek friends elsewhere. With relations between the two countries deteriorating, Moscow has taken a number of unfriendly steps. In doing so Russia demonstrates that it cares little for Belarus's notional status as a co-member of the so-called "Union State" of Russia and Belarus as well as of the Eurasian Economic Union, of which both countries are founding members.

Belarus looks at both Russia's and NATO's military preparations with alarm. Unlike Russia, whose claims of being "encircled" by NATO are based on fantasy, for Belarus this is already a fact: the landlocked country is already surrounded by military buildup and conflict on all sides. Being acutely conscious of the historical fact that the area now known as Belarus constituted a traditional battleground for larger powers from East and West, with devastating consequences for the region itself, the primary concern of Belarusian officials is to avoid any repetition of this scenario in a conflict between Russia and NATO.

Outreach

Emerging from international isolation is crucial for Belarus's long-term development, and for mitigating reliance on the volatile Russian economy. Consequently, Belarus has persistently sought opportunities to establish or maintain relations with Western states and organisations. The level of outreach has varied from semi-clandestine cross-border contacts with immediate neighbours at times of increased Russian pressure to a broad campaign of rapprochement during more relaxed periods. A new development since 2014 is a heightened sense of urgency in establishing relationships to counterbalance Russian influence and the risk of Russian assertive action.

But both EU and NATO are constrained in how far they can respond to Belarusian overtures. Shows of liberalisation by Belarus, such as the release of political prisoners, have been recognized with sanctions relief by the EU – however, Brussels has been criticized for doing so while concerns persist over Belarus's human rights record, limiting the scope for cooperation in other areas. Meanwhile in NATO, Turkey continues to block work with "partner nations" including Belarus – conveniently for Russia.

Bilateral relations can also be complicated, in particular with immediate neighbours. The status of minorities is a continuing irritant in relations with Poland. And engagement with Lithuania, which had been developing well, has been derailed by controversy over Belarus developing a nuclear power plant on the Lithuanian border only 50 kilometres from the capital, Vilnius. This deterioration accelerated in March 2017 when President Lukashenka alleged that "armed militants" were attempting to destabilise the internal situation in Belarus, after training in camps in Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine with funds supplied by Warsaw and Vilnius. Belarusian analysts say this implausible scenario is an indication of how President Lukashenka may be influenced by disinformation from his security services, which are among the most Russia-friendly elements of the Belarusian administration.

False Alarms

President Lukashenka also faces the problem of 'Belarus fatigue' in the West. Decades of tacking between Russia-friendly and EU-friendly policy statements, and repeated promises of liberalisation followed by renewed suppression of dissent and accommodation with Moscow, have left Western officials suspicious of any new attempt at rapprochement. At the same time, Belarus's delicate balance means that the fears of imminent Russian hostile action also surface regularly. Repeated peaks of tension and assessments of a possible Russian intervention, which then does not materialise, also dull Western sensitivities to the very real danger that Russia could, at some future point, take assertive action despite Lukashenka's past success in avoiding to push Moscow too far.

The most recent false alarm came in late March 2017. 25 March is the anniversary of a short-lived independent Belarusian state in 1918, and traditionally a day for rallies organized by opposition groups. This year it also entailed a series of smaller protests about a controversial new law penalizing so-called 'social

parasites' who do not work a certain number of days each year. Demonstrations were permitted in a number of provincial towns, but not in the capital; but mass rallies went ahead there regardless.

There were two additional factors which may have made these street protests particularly alarming for Belarus. First, Russian state media had been steadily promoting the narrative of a possible colour revolution, or regime change through popular unrest in Belarus, stoked by alleged US interference and funding. Second, elements of Russia's 98th Airborne Assault Division were at the time already arriving in eastern Belarus for a separate joint exercise.

A firm response by the Belarusian authorities included arrests of over 700 people, with some demonstrators – and apparently a number of bystanders – given heavy fines or short prison sentences. This response may have been sufficient to deprive Russia of any immediate excuses for interfering, by demonstrating that President Lukashenka and his security forces had the situation well in hand.

Defence Cooperation with Russia

In the event of crisis with Russia, the position of Belarus's Armed Forces would be critical. Assessments by Western analysts of where the loyalties of the Belarusian military lie vary widely. It has been suggested that the divisions in the Belarusian authorities as a whole, for example between the westward-leaning Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the solidly Russia-friendly security services, are replicated within the Armed Forces. According to this argument, the perception of Russian and Belarusian armed forces as closely integrated is misleading, despite the fact that the so-called "Union State" of Russia and Belarus has been in existence for 20 years. Even though the great majority of Belarusian officers are Russian-speaking, and many of them have been trained and educated in Russia, there is sufficient consciousness of national identity and sufficient resentment at heavy-handed treatment by Russia that substantial resistance to Russian initiatives could be expected. On the other hand, the consistent official view from Poland and Lithuania in particular is that the Belarusian armed forces should be seen as simply an extension of their Russian counterparts; that integration is complete, and no independent thought or action should be expected.

Belarus does visibly resist Russian attempts to control provision of its military security. When Belarus needed to purchase modern fighter aircraft to upgrade its ageing air force, Moscow announced instead that Belarus would be hosting a Russian airbase to provide for joint defence. President Lukashenka faced down pressure from Russia, and successfully insisted on the aircraft purchase instead. His firm stance challenged Russia's perception of the country as an extension of its own territory. But the standoff over air basing was just part of a consistent pattern of Russia announcing "joint" defence initiatives which are not endorsed by Minsk. In 2016 Russia announced the creation of a "joint military organization of the Union State", including notional unification of the two countries' armed forces. This statement too was made unilaterally by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, with no comment from Belarus. As with other manifestations of the "Union State", this appears to be a Russian idea that could remain largely on paper without Belarusian cooperation.

Other examples include Russia repeatedly stating that it intends to deploy missile systems on Belarusian territory. These statements come as a more or less routine response to a wide range of US and NATO initiatives of which Russia disapproves, most recently the basing of ballistic missile defence capabilities in Redzikowo, Poland. But yet again, despite Russia presenting this move as a joint initiative, it is firmly resisted by Belarus.

A shared Russia-Belarus air defence environment may present a more serious complicating factor in the event of confrontation, depending on the extent to which it is implemented. Where Russian air defence systems are located, and how much their operations are integrated with Belarusian systems, could significantly influence the freedom of movement of NATO air assets across a wide range of alliance territory. If Belarus decided, or was persuaded, to host advanced Russian air defence systems this would greatly extend their range into NATO airspace by adding a substantial forward basing area in addition to Kaliningrad. But even before that, if Russia exercised what it sees as its right to defend Belarusian airspace, for example by

conducting patrols with fighter aircraft, Russia's own air defence zone would be pushed forward by hundreds of kilometres, adding to the Kaliningrad effect by deepening still further the isolation of the Baltic states from the NATO "mainland".

Russia continues to aspire to take over portions of Belarus's capability for self-defence. A key argument against acquiescing to this security outsourcing is Belarus's wish not to involve itself in confrontation. Hosting Russian airbases, air defence systems, or even more so ground troops, would undermine Belarus's aspirations for neutrality by presenting both a potential source of hostile activity against Western neighbours and a target for countermeasures.

But in addition, there are now indications that the possibility of a Russian military operation against Belarus is taken seriously. While major Russian military units are being relocated closer to the Belarusian border, Belarus has notably started to make military preparations which appear more relevant for conflict with Russia. And President Lukashenka noted in 2015 that the Belarusian army needed to be capable of "being thrown from Brest to Vitebsk in half a night", in other words from the Polish border to the other end of the country opposite Russia.

Outlook

Because of simple geography, falling out of favour with Russia will always have far more serious and immediate consequences for Belarus than disappointing the West. Meanwhile Russia will be watching with concern Belarus's improving relations with the West for any sign that this means loosening ties with Russia. Bilateral talks between Lukashenka and Putin shortly after the March 2017 demonstrations, although ostensibly resolving a gas dispute, gave the impression of a normalisation in relations. But this may be only temporary.

Further Belarusian steps towards normalization of relations with EU and NATO countries will need to be handled with caution if they are not to provoke a dangerous reaction from Russia. Moscow will seek means of deterring what it sees as Western encroachment, but judging the point at which it will act remains challenging, as there will almost certainly be more false alarms in the future.

Potentially destabilising events include the Russian-Belarusian Zapad military exercise. This takes place every four years, and past scenarios have closely resembled practice for conflict with NATO, including combat on the territory of Belarus and including using "colour revolutions" as the trigger for conflict. Zapad 2013, held in Belarus and western Russia, simulated an incursion by foreign-backed "terrorist" groups originating from the Baltic States – a similar scenario to the insurgent groups alleged by President Lukashenka in March 2017.

Specific aspects of preparations for this year's exercise have alarmed analysts in Belarus, who think the military movements could lay the groundwork for Russia taking action against Belarus itself, or remaining in the country at the end of the exercise. Consequently, Belarus is trying to make Zapad 2017 as open and transparent as possible, including an invitation of observers from NATO, as insurance against unexpected departures from the exercise scenario. This transparency is crucial for Belarus in its efforts both to avoid involvement in confrontation between NATO and Russia and to present itself as a source of regional security and stability. NATO nations, especially neighbours Poland and Lithuania, have little to lose and much to gain by taking up these invitations and the repeated opportunities for defence engagement offered by Belarus.

In addition, much has been written in media commentary about the so-called “Suwałki gap”, the narrow strip of Polish-Lithuanian border that separates Russia’s Kaliningrad exclave from Belarus. Many of the scenarios of Russian military adventurism in this area assume a compliant Belarus, and a Belarusian military functioning as merely an extension of the Russian Armed Forces. The real situation may be greatly more nuanced than this – Belarus may not wish to go to war with Russia, but equally it is at present showing no inclination to go to war *for* Russia.

As with a number of other scenarios, the power of action in this region lies in its potential for destabilising NATO and for demonstrating alliance helplessness. It is claimed in Russia that if Poland in 1939 had acquiesced to German demands for a land corridor to Danzig, the Second World War could have been avoided. No matter how remote this may be from the truth, it should be seen as a potential rationale and justification for when the situation permits, Russia demanding – or establishing by subterfuge or “humanitarian convoys” – a land corridor to Kaliningrad. This would only happen when Russia was confident both of full cooperation from Belarus, and that it could predict, or manage, the NATO response or lack of it.

A Russian intervention in Belarus along the lines of Ukraine is considered plausible if Russia considers it necessary to ensure obedience from Minsk, including potentially by removing President Lukashenka and replacing him with another figure more acceptable to Moscow. But Russia will have little interest in destabilising Belarus, resulting in another zone of expensive unrest on Russia’s western border, if more subtle ways of reining in the country’s independence can be found. In fact, the current president may be the least worst option for Russia. After decades of persecution by the Belarusian authorities, the political opposition there is small and marginalised – but it is entirely pro-Western, and there is no recognised figure within the country who would make a credible pro-Russian replacement for Lukashenka.

Nevertheless President Lukashenka's position is far from easy. Maintaining a degree of freedom of movement for his country by attempting to reduce dependence on Russia and build ties with the West runs the constant risk of a damaging Russian reaction. Any tightening of domestic control may buy more time by heading off Russian accusations of dangerous instability, but the likely cost is a setback in Belarus’s efforts to normalise relations with the EU, its neighbours, and partners further afield like the United States. In any case, Belarus will still sooner or later be faced with a decisive choice between East and West; and EU and NATO in particular need to be fully prepared for that moment.

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