

The Belarus Factor in European Security

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ABSTRACT: This article challenges strategists to reconsider long-held assumptions associated with the alliance between Belarus and Russia when planning military support for the Baltic states.

Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in early 2014, security experts have been busy exploring the nature of the current threat environment facing East Central Europe as well as identifying appropriate policy responses that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and its local members could adopt. Much of the existing analysis has focused on so-called hybrid warfare, the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities Russia brings to bear in the region, and gaps in NATO's deterrent capabilities. Yet experts have paid insufficient attention to Russia's only formal ally in the region, Belarus. At best, they assume Belarus will participate in—if not just diplomatically support—any military aggression that its senior ally would undertake in the region. At worst, they neglect to mention it altogether, with the implicit understanding that the Belarusian military would be too weak and the political leadership in Minsk too deferential to the Kremlin to be of any consequence.

Such expectations regarding Belarus might be wrong, however. Military-to-military contacts between Belarus and Russia are not as strong as some analysts assume. More importantly, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Hrygorevich Lukashenka has diverged from Russia on key issues relating to territorial disputes in the former Soviet space. He provided halting diplomatic support to Russia on Georgia and even bucked the Kremlin's approach toward Ukraine. Indeed, because of his country's positioning between NATO and Russia, he is likely to be risk-averse with regards to military conflict. He may even fear entrapment, believing that Russia might drag Belarus into a war he would prefer to avoid. Not only would a war risk Belarusian resources and lives but it could also create the conditions under which Lukashenka loses power.

Analysts are thus mistaken to believe the alliance between Belarus and Russia represents a dynamic whereby the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. Should Belarusian leaders not want conflict with NATO, they can create costs for Russia. Even if Russia tries to impose its will on Belarus, either by withholding economic subsidies or by dislodging Lukashenka from power, then it would do so at potentially great expense. Any effort to undermine the Belarusian regime could spark a backlash among members of society. Since such an effort would suggest Russia is destabilizing Belarus for military purposes, it would also escalate tensions with NATO.

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Whatever the plausibility of a Russian-led regime change in Belarus, the prospect of having to deal with a reluctant and militarily deficient ally could affect Russia's cost-benefit calculations in challenging the territorial and political order in East Central Europe. For its part, NATO should prepare for varying levels of Belarusian involvement. Holding Belarusian assets at risk may not be necessary if Minsk is able to hamper Russian war plans. But if Russia succeeds in eliciting Belarusian cooperation, NATO might feel compelled to target those Belarusian bases that Russian troops could use as staging areas, thereby further escalating a crisis. Belarus presents a complicating factor for both sides with respect to crisis diplomacy and warfighting in the region.

Belarusian Foreign Policy since Independence

Called the last “outpost of tyranny” in Europe, Belarus became an independent state in 1991 amid the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Lukashenka has ruled the country since 1994 thanks to electoral fraud as well as the violent suppression of political opposition and media.¹ With a domestic policy subject to international condemnation for its authoritarianism, Lukashenka has historically pursued a close relationship with Russia, even describing himself as a “most loyal ally” to the Kremlin.² The two countries forged their alliance through agreements—the Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighborhood, and Cooperation of 1995 and the 1997 Union Treaty—that Lukashenka signed with then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin. These treaties have provided the framework for their security cooperation and joint military planning.³

Closeness with Russia served more than just a political-military purpose, however. For Belarusian leaders, it preserved a certain level of welfare despite highly unfavorable structural conditions that characterized the national economy. At least throughout the 1990s, Belarus maintained high living standards relative to other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States—the non-Baltic countries that used to form the Soviet Union.⁴ Integration with Russia has helped Belarus sidestep otherwise difficult questions concerning its lack of independent energy sources and highly militarized, state-managed economy. Moreover, partnering with Russia has allowed Belarus to obtain natural gas at reduced rates, effectively subsidizing the latter's economy. Some Belarusian policymakers recognized that these subsidies would compromise the country's autonomy, but they nevertheless calculated that economic engagement with the West was too risky when the costs of disengagement from Russia were certain to be high.⁵

1 David R. Marples, “Outpost of Tyranny? The Failure of Democratization in Belarus,” *Democratization* 16, no. 4 (August 2009): 756–76, doi:10.1080/13510340903082986.

2 Clelia Rontoyanni, “Union of Belarus and Russia: The Role of NATO and the EU,” in *Security Dynamics in the Former Soviet Bloc*, ed. Graeme P. Herd and Jennifer D. P. Moroney (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 113.

3 Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, “The Politico-Military Alliance of Russia and Belarus: Re-Examining the Role of NATO and the EU in Light of the Intra-Alliance Security Dilemma,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 4 (June 2014): 557–77, doi:10.1080/09668136.2014.899769.

4 Rontoyanni, “Union of Belarus,” 113.

5 Andrew Wilson and Clelia Rontoyanni, “Security or Prosperity? Belarusian and Ukrainian Choices,” in *Swords and Sustenance: The Economics of Security in Belarus and Ukraine*, ed. Robert Legvold and Celeste A. Wallander (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 43–44.

After Vladimir Putin became the Russian president in 2000, relations between the two countries continued to develop. For example, cooperation in air defense deepened, which culminated in an air defense treaty in 2009. Yet distrust and acrimony between the two governments accompanied the growth of such linkages. Lukashenka was lukewarm to Putin's suggestions that the six oblasts making up Belarus should become part of the Russian federation. He rejected other Russian proposals for greater fiscal integration between the two countries.⁶ Moreover, the two countries publicly disputed over how to price surplus natural gas that Belarus had hitherto imported from Russia at a reduced rate and then exported at a higher rate. The negotiations had become so testy between Belarus and the Russian supplier Gazprom that the company cut gas supplies to Belarus in early 2007.⁷

In 2009, Belarus also boycotted a summit it chaired for the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—a regional multilateral security alliance also comprised of Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.⁸ The purpose of this meeting was to decide upon an initiative to create a combat-capable force called the Collective Operational Reaction Forces (CORF) that the CSTO would deploy to any one of its member-states in a crisis situation. Ultimately agreeing on the formation of CORF, Belarus first dragged its feet, exposing the tensions that began to mark its relations with Russia and other CSTO members. These signs of discord were not the only ones, however. Belarus has generally been ambivalent about Russia's pattern of interventionism in the former Soviet space.

Notwithstanding these disagreements, close ties with Russia have influenced Belarus' relations with NATO and the European Union. Lukashenka has criticized NATO expansion and even echoed Putin's disapproval of Ukraine's bid for membership in that alliance. Indeed, in 2002, its declared military doctrine observed the "expansion of military blocs and alliances [were] to the detriment of the military security of the Republic of Belarus."⁹ By contrast, Belarusian diplomacy towards the European Union is predicated more on cynical opportunism than on heightened threat perceptions.¹⁰ Belarus has used its relationship with the European Union as a "bargaining chip"—an outside option that could offer some alternative economic goods if Russia withholds support.¹¹

Yet the European Union has sometimes lost patience with Belarus, and its human rights record, leading to sanctions imposed in 2004. An effort to improve relations between the supranational organization and Belarus stalled when Lukashenka's regime imprisoned political activists and dissidents after the 2010 presidential elections. New sanctions were imposed on Belarus during the ensuing period and Lukashenka

6 Wilson and Rontoyanni, "Security or Prosperity?," 47–49; and Pavel K. Baev, *Russian Energy Policy and Military Power: Putin's Quest for Greatness* (London: Routledge, 2008), 147.

7 Vieira, "Politico-Military Alliance," 567–68.

8 John A. Mowchan, *The Militarization of the Collective Security Treaty Organization*, Issue Paper 6-09 (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Center for Strategic Leadership, 2009), 5.

9 Quoted in Steven J. Main, *The Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus* (Camberley, Surrey: Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2002), 6.

10 Thomas Ambrosio, "The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations: Insulating Minsk from a Color Revolution," *Demokratizatsiya* 14, no. 3 (2006): 417. To be sure, the EU has supported Belarusian pro-democracy groups in the past.

11 Vieira, "Politico-Military Alliance," 575.

was excluded from the Warsaw Summit of the Eastern Partnership initiative.¹² Following the October 2015 presidential elections, a report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe determined very limited progress was made in Belarusian efforts to have elections operate more democratically. The European Union subsequently lifted most permanent sanctions while retaining the arms embargo.¹³

Analytical Neglect of Belarus

Although the Belarus-Russia alliance features greater nuance than commonly presumed, the current literature on security in East Central Europe superficially engages with Belarus. In discussing the A2/AD capabilities that Russia has at its disposal in that region, Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias barely mention Belarus. They note that Belarus represents the rare instance in which Russia has gained “strategic influence” before assuming Belarusian forces might fight alongside their Russian counterparts in exploiting the so-called Suwalki Gap—a corridor that lies between the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus, thereby forming the only mainland connection between Poland and Lithuania.¹⁴ Still, they later imply Belarusian neutrality would improve NATO’s odds of achieving favorable battlefield outcomes.¹⁵ Another analysis of the A2/AD problem neglects Belarus entirely.¹⁶ One think-tank report arguing for improving NATO’s regional deterrent posture only mentions Belarus in reference to Kaliningrad.¹⁷ A major essay, and the subsequent forum it inspired, on how NATO should address Russia never mentions Belarus.¹⁸ Discussions of Russian military doctrinal thinking or regional strategies often exclude Belarus.¹⁹

Some analysts have done better. Luis Simón recognizes the importance of Belarus for NATO defense planning, writing that “although Minsk is politically close to Moscow, it still maintains an important degree of military autonomy in the sense Russian armed forces do not have a significant presence in Belarusian territory; nor

12 Viera, “Politico-Military Alliance,” 558–59.

13 Robin Emmott, “Europe Ends Sanctions on Belarus, Seeks Better Ties,” Reuters, February 15, 2016; and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Republic of Belarus, Parliamentary Elections, 11 September 2016: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report* (Warsaw: OSCE / ODIHR, 2016).

14 Stephan Frühling and Guillaume Lasconjarias, “NATO, A2/AD and the Kaliningrad Challenge,” *Survival* 58, no. 2 (April–May 2016): 103, 105, doi:10.1080/00396338.2016.1161906.

15 Frühling and Lasconjarias, “NATO, A2/AD,” 107.

16 Alexander Lanoszka and Michael A. Hunzeker, “Confronting the Anti-Access/Area Denial and Precision Strike Challenge in the Baltic Region,” *RUSI Journal* 161, no. 5 (November 2016): 12–18, doi:10.1080/03071847.2016.1253367.

17 Edward Lucas and A. Wess Mitchell, *Central European Security after Crimea: The Case for Strengthening NATO’s Eastern Defenses*, Report Number 35 (Washington, DC: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2014), 5.

18 Matthew Kroenig, “Facing Reality: Getting NATO Ready for a New Cold War,” *Survival* 57, no. 1 (February–March 2015): 49–70, doi:10.1080/00396338.2015.1008295; and Steven Pifer et al., “Forum: NATO and Russia,” *Survival* 57, no. 2 (April–May 2015): 119–44, doi:10.1080/00396338.2015.1026090.

19 Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, “Russian Strategic Deterrence,” *Survival* 58, no. 4 (August–September 2016): 7–26, doi:10.1080/00396338.2016.1207945; Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy*, Proliferation Papers 54 (Paris, France: Institut Français des Relations Internationales Security Studies Center, 2015); and Alexander Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe,” *International Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January 2016): 175–95, doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12509.

are they in a position to transit Belarusian territory or airspace freely.”²⁰ Nevertheless, his analysis proceeds to suggest that growing defense ties between these two countries (as of 2014) should lead NATO defense planners to assume that they would cooperate with each other.²¹

Interestingly, a well-cited RAND study on wargames in the Baltic region that found Russia could quickly conquer Baltic territory barely acknowledges Belarus. To the extent that Belarus would play a role, according to these wargames, it would be to “subject [NATO forces] to long-range artillery and flank attacks” from its side of the Suwalki Gap should those forces attempt to enter the Baltic region from Poland.²² Another recent wargame held in Warsaw acknowledged Belarus could be a flashpoint in a future crisis between Russia and NATO. Indeed, it envisioned a scenario where Russia dislodges Lukashenka from power and installs in his place a general who proceeds to invite troops from Russia—a scenario that might have drawn inspiration from reports of Russian plans to send unusually large numbers of railway carriages into Belarus in 2017 ahead of joint military exercises in September.²³

That many expert analyses of regional security relations overlook Belarus might reflect how NATO views non-NATO territory differently because of its interest in defensive operations. But this neglect might also reflect how Belarus has neglected its own military, weakening it so much relative to Russia that experts feel they can make simplistic assumptions about Belarusian behavior in a future crisis. When Belarus achieved independent statehood, it acquired a strong military force that had previously formed the Belarusian Military District in the Soviet Union. Because of its geographical positioning in what would have been the rear of the frontline forces of the Warsaw Pact, the inheritance included an extensive array of heavy weapons, an oversized army of 240,000 military personnel, as well as education facilities and high-tech factories capable of making components for military equipment.²⁴

But the military industry that Belarus inherited from the Cold War was inappropriate for its particular defense needs. As in Ukraine, Belarusian factories did not close the production cycle independently, thus they remained dependent on access to Russian military-industrial enterprises for various weapon components.²⁵ Given these structural problems, Belarus had to downsize the size of its military four-fold. Nevertheless, the government continued subsidizing, and retaining control over, defense production. Doing so helped avoid any social dislocations that would have ensued in a national economy disproportionately centered on military production. To maintain the viability of its defense industry, Belarus oriented its military production

20 Luis Simón, “Assessing NATO’s Eastern European ‘Flank,’” *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 2014): 71.

21 Simón, “Assessing NATO,” 72.

22 David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 4.

23 Arseni Sivitski, “Belarus at the Centre of Russia-NATO Wargame Simulation,” *Belarus Digest*, February 13, 2017; and Arseni Sivitski, “Will Russia Occupy Belarus in 2017?,” *Belarus Digest*, November 29, 2016.

24 Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarusian Army: Its Capacities and Role in the Region*, Analytical Paper 4 (London: Ostrogorski Centre, 2014), 6–7.

25 Hrihorij Perepelitsa, “Military-Industrial Cooperation between Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia: Possibilities, Priorities, Prospects,” in Legvold and Wallander, *Swords and Sustenance*, 132–33.

to Russia more so than to its own army, thereby adding to its reliance on Russia for obtaining financial resources. Consequently, Belarus limited its own possibilities for accessing other technologies from alternative providers.²⁶ The European Union's arms embargo on Belarus since 2011 compounds this problem.²⁷

The Belarusian military thus atrophied since the country gained independence. Defense spending has been low, never taking up more than 1.48 percent of the gross domestic product during the 2000s.²⁸ With badly aging equipment and a military in sore need of a modernization program that the country can ill-afford, one analysis surmises Belarus “would not be capable of repulsing a serious incursion across its border.”²⁹ The Belarusian armed forces have undertaken some restructuring, with the army featuring not only ground forces but also an air force, air defense systems, and special operations forces.³⁰ Yet the combat credibility of that air force is dubious even if about half of the active personnel in the 48,000 strong army are in the air force and air defense.³¹ Nevertheless, Belarus has sought to improve its air defenses and to replace older combat aircraft with Sukhoi Su-30SMs by 2020.³² Whether it will succeed in these efforts remains unclear.

Though this military deficiency might indicate Belarus would have no choice but to follow the Kremlin's lead, it could also be evidence of Belarusian foot-dragging on efforts to enhance interoperability. Lest it would be dragged into an undesirable conflict, Belarus might be trying to limit military integration with Russia. Moreover, that Russian forces may have to traverse Belarusian territory or to use Belarusian bases presents opportunities and challenges for NATO planners—for example, Russian movements within Belarus would allow NATO more time to detect potentially aggressive behavior. Still, Belarusian cooperation is not a given.

Political Discord between Belarus and Russia

Strong reasons exist to be skeptical that Belarusian leadership would kowtow to Russia on foreign policy matters. The best inference one can make regards Lukashenka's primary interest to hold onto power. Though Lukashenka may share Putin's dislike of Western-leaning regimes and prodemocracy movements, he has been reluctant to support Putin's willingness to destabilize other former Soviet republics. Lukashenka withheld full recognition of the two breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Russia—something Russia did following its five-day war with Georgia in August 2008—and continued to respect Georgia's territorial integrity.³³

26 Perepelitsa, “Military-Industrial Cooperation,” 135–41.

27 “Embargoes and Sanctions on Belarus,” GOV.UK, March 3, 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/arms-embargo-on-belarus>.

28 Bohdan, “Belarusian Army,” 10.

29 *The Military Balance 2016* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, Taylor & Francis / International Institute for Strategic Studies [ISS], 2016), 182.

30 Bohdan, “Belarusian Army,” 8.

31 *Military Balance 2016*, 182.

32 *The Military Balance 2017* (London: ISS, 2017), 203.

33 Vieira, “Politico-Military Alliance,” 563; and Oksana Antonenko, “A War with No Winners,” *Survival* 50, no. 5 (October 2008): 26–27.

Belarus and Russia also diverged in their stances towards Kurmanbek Bakiyev's deposal during the second Tulip Revolution (2010) in Kyrgyzstan. Shortly after granting asylum to Bakiyev, Lukashenka implicitly condemned Russia for tolerating the turmoil that unseated the Kyrgyz leader. Russia had supported regime change in Kyrgyzstan, having disliked Bakiyev for accepting large loans from Moscow while allowing the United States to keep using the Manas air base to support its operations in Afghanistan.³⁴ Amid a recent debt dispute with Russia, Lukashenka reportedly said "right now fraternal Ukraine is fighting for its independence. We cannot afford to fight. We are a peace-loving people."³⁵ Indeed, shortly after the Russian annexation of Crimea, Lukashenka carefully maneuvered between Russia and Ukraine. Despite recognizing Russia has de facto control over Crimea, he has cooperated with the post-Maidan government in Kyiv. Lukashenka even attended the inauguration of President Petro Poroshenko in June 2014. He criticized the ousted former President Viktor Yanukovich for having fled from Ukraine.³⁶

Russian access to Belarusian military assets and territory should also not be overstated. Russia used the Baranovichi air base between 2013 and 2016, but Russia wishes to have its own air base partly to compensate for shortcomings in Belarus' own contributions to their joint air defense system. Russia currently uses two other facilities: the Gantsevichi Radar Station and a Russian Navy communications point near the town of Vileyka.³⁷ Yet these facilities are not military bases per se and recent diplomatic tensions have prevented a greater Russian military presence in Belarus.³⁸ Belarus has even renewed efforts to bolster its air defense system so as to obviate further Russian deployments of fighter jets on its own air bases.³⁹ Thus, notwithstanding statements about loyalty to Russia, Belarusian leaders have been unwilling to host forward-deployed Russian forces. This reluctance persists despite how Belarus has seen an expanding NATO presence on its western borders since the 2016 Warsaw Summit.

Lukashenka might wish to forestall a greater Russian political presence for reasons connected to his own political survival. After all, he may not wish for Belarus to be the next Crimea since, as Arkady Moshes notes, some similarities exist between the two former Soviet territories.⁴⁰ To begin with, sections of the Belarusian population have sympathies,

34 Kathleen Collins, "Kyrgyzstan's Latest Revolution," *Democracy* 22, no. 3 (July 2011): 156, doi:10.1353/jod.2011.0040. On the divergence, see Vieira, "Politico-Military Alliance," 563; and "Belarus Ready To Accept Bakiyev—Report," RT, April 18, 2010.

35 "Brother Ukraine Is Fighting for Its Independence—Belarus President," *Moscow Times*, January 27, 2017.

36 Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira, "Ukraine's Crisis and Russia's Closest Allies: A Reinforced Intra-Alliance Security Dilemma at Work," *International Spectator* 49, no. 4 (December 2014): 97–111, doi:10.1080/03932729.2014.964520. See also Andrew Wilson, "Belarus Wants Out," *Foreign Affairs*, March 20, 2014.

37 "Kremlin Pushes for Russian Airbase in Belarus after Presidential Elections," *Belarus in Focus*, April 22, 2016, <http://belarusinfofocus.info/society-and-politics/kremlin-pushes-russian-airbase-belarus-after-presidential-elections>.

38 *Military Balance* 2017, 203.

39 Siarhei Bohdan, "Thwarting Plans for a Russian Airbase, Minsk Strengthens Its Air Force," *Belarus Digest*, October 12, 2016.

40 Arkady Moshes, *Belarus' Renewed Subordination to Russia: Unconditional Surrender or Hard Bargain?*, Policy Memo 329 (Washington, DC: PONARS Eurasia, 2014). According to Moshes, another similarity in 2014 is that Russia had a military presence in Belarus; however, that military presence was limited and inadequate for grabbing territory and seizing strategic assets within Belarus.

if not an affinity, for Moscow. Russian broadcast media also has a large presence in Belarus. Though state censorship can prevent Moscow from exploiting that presence to advance its own preferred narrative in Belarus, Belarusians could still access Russian programming on the internet. Hence some Belarusians were able to view an incendiary documentary about Lukashenka aired in Russia in 2012. This information war erupted between the two governments during a dispute over export duties on the crude oil that Belarus was receiving from Russia.⁴¹ Moreover, just as with the Ukrainian military in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, the integration of Belarusian armed forces with some parts of the Russian military raises questions of loyalty. As one report observes, “unlike the security agencies or police, the army is not [Lukashenka’s] closest ally” and suffers from his mistrust.⁴²

Belarus might thus be exposed to the so-called hybrid warfare that Russia allegedly practiced in Ukraine. Specifically, Belarus may be subject to Russian provocations at the subconventional level, and self-deterred from responding forcefully out of a desire to avoid militarily confronting a superior foe in Russia.⁴³ So in 2016, Belarus unveiled a new military doctrine—its first since 2002—explicitly discussing the concept of hybrid war. This doctrinal innovation reflected fear that adversaries could use subversion to destabilize, if not to unseat, the Belarusian government.

Though the Arab Spring and the Color revolutions in the former Soviet space might have inspired such fears, invocations of hybrid warfare suggest at least some concern of Russian interference.⁴⁴ To be sure, a Crimea-like scenario is far-fetched. Russia probably does not want further political instability on its borders, and an agreement between the two governments in April 2017 to resolve an oil and gas dispute could mean that Putin sees few acceptable alternatives to supporting Lukashenka.⁴⁵ The perceived hybrid threat could also be mostly Western in origin since the Belarusian minister of defense obliquely asserted “all the wars of the past 10–15 years were in effect hybrid wars.”⁴⁶

Yet the European Union’s only media presence in Belarus is through the Polish-funded Belarusian language television channel Belsat. Thus Russia has more opportunities to subvert its ally because of their common language and ties to members of Belarusian society. Still, Ukraine was a much more open society wracked by greater ethnic grievances than Belarus. Because the Belarusian state is repressive and controls media tightly, Russia might have trouble identifying aggrieved individuals willing to revolt against the heavy-handed Belarusian government.

41 Joanna Szostek, “Russian Influence on News Media in Belarus,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 48, no. 2–3 (June–September 2015): 125.

42 Bohdan, “Belarusian Army,” 8.

43 See Lanoszka, “Russian Hybrid Warfare.” For a critique of Western notions of hybrid warfare, see Andrew Monaghan, “The ‘War’ in Russia’s ‘Hybrid Warfare,’” *Parameters* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2015–16): 65–74.

44 On Russian perceptions of Western hybrid war, see Rod Thornton, “The Changing Nature of Modern Warfare,” *RUSI Journal* 160, no. 4 (September 2015): 42.

45 Siarhei Bohdan, “Belarus Has Obtained Gas and Oil Concessions from Russia: But What Did Russia Get in Exchange?,” *Belarus Digest*, April 11, 2017.

46 Andrei Ravkov, “All Wars of the Past 15 Years Can Be Called Hybrid Wars,” *Belarusian Telegraph Agency*, February 24, 2016.

The new Belarusian military doctrine does have a traditional military bent. The language emphasizing increased mobility and readiness throughout the entire country, however, implies some concern about Russia. Minsk may be hedging against multiple threats, whatever their origin.⁴⁷ Moreover, Lukashenka disavowed the use of military force abroad by stating “we will never fight on someone else’s territory because we are committed to a defensive military doctrine.”⁴⁸ Though incentives not to broadcast a desire to mount armed aggression exist, the weak posture of the Belarusian military makes this doctrine credible. Belarus might have trouble participating in Russian military actions against NATO countries, preferring instead to engage those countries’ forces only if NATO were to strike first.

The military deficiency could also reflect a fear of Russian entrapment emerging from the so-called alliance dilemma. Whereas providing too weak of a commitment to an ally might render that ally so insecure as to fear abandonment, too strong of a commitment might embolden an ally to undertake a riskier foreign policy than it would otherwise adopt. Entrapment ensues when such risk-taking behavior provokes an undesirable war, compelling the participation of the committed state.⁴⁹

By limiting its defense ties with Russia, Belarus may be trying to reduce the likelihood of being ensnared in a conflict involving NATO but instigated by Russia. The ramshackle state of the Belarusian military suggests it cannot fight a large-scale war with NATO forces. One analysis concludes Belarus does not have the offensive capabilities to attack NATO forces single-handedly, or even in tandem, with Russia.⁵⁰ From Lukashenka’s perspective, a lost war could weaken his power. This fear is well-founded: political science research has found the tenure of nondemocratic warfighting leaders greatly depends on their victories.⁵¹ Lukashenka’s risk-aversion to anything that might undermine his rule could mean he would prefer to be a bystander than undertake any revisionism of his own.

Strategic Implications

Many security analysts tend to neglect Belarus when assessing the balance between NATO and Russia. They commonly assume Belarus would assist Russian efforts to close the Suwalki Gap, thus preventing NATO forces in Poland from reinforcing and resupplying the Baltic countries on the ground. Such assumptions may be unwarranted. Belarus has reluctantly supported the Kremlin’s responses to territorial and political disputes within the former Soviet space. Belarus provided halting diplomatic support to Russia in its 2008 war against Georgia, and it expressed sympathy for Ukraine amid its war with Russia. Lastly, given

47 Yauheni Preiherman, “Belarus Prepares to Adopt New Military Doctrine,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 13, no. 40, February 29, 2016.

48 Quoted in Jaroslaw Adamowski, “Belarus Unveils New Military Doctrine amid Armenia’s Criticism,” *Defense News*, April 18, 2016.

49 Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). See also Vieira, “Politico-Military Alliance.”

50 Bohdan, “Belarusian Army,” 15. To be sure, Belarus has participated in joint military exercises with Russia and will continue to do so, at least through the medium term. Bohdan, “Belarusian Army,” 24–25.

51 Alexandre Debs and H. E. Goemans, “Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War,” *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (August 2010): 430–45, doi:10.1017/S000305541000019.

Lukashenka's strong preference to maintain power, and the poor state of the Belarusian military forces, Belarus might even fear entrapment by Russia in a war with NATO. If so, a militarized crisis between Russia and NATO may not involve Belarus. Belarusian nonparticipation would help NATO to isolate and to hold hostage the enclave of Kaliningrad, while hampering Russian efforts to close the Suwalki Gap.⁵²

For some readers, this policy implication may be an overstatement since they may still ask whether Belarusian foreign and defense policy matters at all. Russia could compel Belarus to accept Russian troops on its territory regardless of Minsk's interests in a war against NATO. Yet consider the hypothetical scenario whereby Belarus does assert its desire for neutrality during a crisis—a plausible course of action given Lukashenka's distaste for territorial revisions in the former Soviet space and the weakness of the Belarusian military—aside from withholding diplomatic support, Belarus could delay efforts to enhance interoperability or provide supporting forces. These actions could frustrate Russian calculations to help NATO. Nevertheless, if Russia responds by undertaking such extreme measures as a direct intervention in Belarusian domestic affairs, then this move could backfire because opponents of both Lukashenka and Putin could mobilize in response. Such a move could also be escalatory if NATO interprets—rightly or wrongly—any effort to curtail Belarusian sovereignty as intending to gain a major military advantage over Poland and the Baltic states.

NATO thus should not assume Belarus would play only a supporting role for Russia. Although Minsk might not derail the Kremlin's regional ambitions, it could still frustrate them to NATO's benefit. Moreover, Belarus is also a complicating factor for NATO: efforts to extract security assurances from Belarus could prove meaningless, if not counterproductive. Indeed, NATO should not try to distance Belarus too far from Russia (if at all possible) because doing so could cause the Kremlin to retaliate lest it loses a treaty ally. With respect to planning war, NATO should think through several contingencies. For one, defense planners need to consider their readiness to fight a Belarus that appears to be a reluctant and hesitant Russian ally. For another, how NATO should prepare defensive operations could differ if it expects Belarus to provide frontline forces fighting alongside Russian forces, frontline forces fighting for uniquely Belarusian objectives, frontline forces mounting a diversionary attack, or supporting forces handling rear-area security or pacification. Rather than take for granted certain notions of the Belarus-Russia alliance, analysts should be more mindful of the various ways Belarus could impact the regional security environment, however subtly.

52 Frühling and Lasconjarias, "NATO, A2/AD," 107.