

NATO RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP 2001-2003

Final Report

Countering NATO Expansion

A Case Study of Belarus-Russia Rapprochement

PETER SZYSZLO

June 2003

INTRODUCTION

With the opening of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Alliance's eastern boundary now comprises a new line of contiguity with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as well as another geopolitical entity within—the Union of Belarus and Russia. Whereas the former states find greater security and regional stability in their new political-military arrangement, NATO's eastward expansion has led Belarus and Russia to reassess strategic imperatives in their western peripheries, partially stemming from their mutual distrust of the Alliance as a former Cold War adversary. Consequently, security for one is perceived as a threat to the other.

The decision to enlarge NATO eastward triggered a political-military “response” from the two former Soviet states with defence and security cooperation leading the way. While Belarus's military strategy and doctrine remain defensive, there is a tendency of perceiving NATO as a potential enemy, and to view the republic's defensive role as that of protecting the western approaches of the Belarus-Russia Union. Moreover, the Belarusian presidency has not concealed its desire to turn the military alliance with Russia into a powerful and effective deterrent to NATO. While there may not be a threat of a new Cold War on the horizon, there is also little evidence of a consolidated peace.

This case study endeavours to conduct a comprehensive assessment on both Belarusian rhetoric and anticipated effects of NATO expansion by examining governmental discourse and official proposals associated with political and military “countermeasures” by analysing the manifestations of Belarus's rapprochement with the Russian Federation in the spheres of foreign policy and military doctrine. Security issues surrounding the *post factum* of NATO expansion have received little attention in the West, but remain closely linked to Belarus-Russia relations. Driven in part by the realities of post-communism, Belarus and Russia have felt the need to define and strengthen their “sphere of influence” as well as construct joint defence, security and foreign policy models that reflect contemporary security challenges.

NATURE OF PROJECT

Too easily dismissed in the West as a *bête noire*, and often taken for granted in the East as an obedient vassal, Belarus has fallen between the proverbial cracks of mainstream political discourse. Although interest in close military cooperation between Minsk and Moscow predate any serious prospects for NATO expansion, evidence indicates that a widening and deepening union between the two states was precipitated by the projection of the Alliance's new eastern boundary. Whereas the Kremlin has been more capable of coming to terms with the reality of NATO expansion and compromise with the Alliance, Belarus has not. Minsk's relations with the West have waned and show no particular signs of improvement. The adoption of rigid out-and-out rejection of NATO expansion has left the republic in an ambiguous, and at times, hostile relationship with Brussels.

Prospects for a constructive dialogue have been seriously eroded by the Belarusian leadership's rigid anti-NATO rhetoric and anti-Western views, which often accuse NATO and the United States of harbouring intentions to invade Belarus. NATO hopes for accommodation with Russia, but is unwilling to ameliorate relations with the Lukashenko administration, considering Minsk's poor human rights record and US claims of alleged Belarusian weapons sales to states that support terrorism. Conversely, NATO's expansion to the borders of Belarus and Russia has given the Kremlin an incentive for "reabsorbing" its western flank. Although Russia is often accused of harbouring imperial ambitions, in the case of Belarus it has been Minsk and not Moscow, that is the main initiator behind integration, or more accurately, *reintegration* of the two former Soviet republics. Yet, the area with real momentum is defence.

The dual projects of NATO expansion and Belarus-Russia rapprochement have fundamentally influenced contemporary security aspects of the region. Bearing this in mind, the level of political-military integration that Belarus will undertake with the Russian Federation may ultimately have a significant impact on the geopolitical map of Eastern and Central Europe. As a vital conduit in the western periphery of the CIS, Belarus remains an area of key geostrategic and military importance to Russian national security. Belarus provides tactical leverage within the Eastern European sub-region by

providing Russia with a forward axis on its western flank, direct access to the borders of Central Europe, as well as a channel to project Russian influence over a region which is increasingly looking towards NATO for its security. In addition, Belarus brings Russia within closer proximity to its non-contiguous enclave of Kaliningrad. For these reasons, Belarus maintains a high profile in Russian strategic planning.

In addition to operating joint air defence forces [PVO], Russia has acquired long-term basing rights to Belarusian military infrastructure, including access to newly upgraded early warning radar sites, Soviet-era airfields and communication centres. Accordingly, these former Soviet early warning radar and communication bases have become integral parts of Russia's defence system. These facilities fill gaps in Russia's defence system left by the loss of Soviet military bases in the Baltic States. Other evidence points to coordinated military activities such as the Zapad-99 [West-99] manoeuvres held in European Russia and Belarus. Subsequently dubbed a "response in the event of NATO aggression," the exercises were the largest of its kind in post-Soviet history.¹ Belarus played a tactical role as the forward "wedge" in a counter-offensive to a hypothetical NATO attack, as well as the staging ground for a series of simulated retaliatory nuclear and conventional strikes on undisclosed new NATO members.² A collective weapons procurement programme is also well under way, in addition to a joint military corps encompassing the Belarusian Army and Russia's Moscow Military District—all under the framework of a projected Belarus-Russia military doctrine.

In the highly charged atmosphere that prevails in the Belarusian political arena, rhetoric has tended to complicate objective developments and analysis. Analysis is obstructed further still by Soviet habits of secrecy and a general lack of government transparency. Reality lies somewhere between the rhetorical statements and the more mundane details of circumstance. Considering the high stakes and the new security challenges the region faces—the manipulation of information is itself a subject worthy of study.

¹ Vladimir Georgiev, "S sovetskim razmakhom" [With Soviet grandeur] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 19 June 1999.

² Yuri Golotyuk, "Voyennye ne priznayutsya, po komu oni nanesli uchebnyi yadernyi udar" [The military will not admit who it hit with a simulated nuclear strike] *Izvestia*. 29 June 1999.

C O N C E N T R I C S P H E R E S O F I N F L U E N C E

One of the greatest strategic impediments facing Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union was the disappearance of the defensive shield built up by the USSR in its western periphery to protect the Russian heartland from the Western powers. NATO expansion caused Russia to reassess strategic imperatives and rethink security alliances in areas of traditional interest. Belarus was central to that reassessment, as both states regard close military cooperation as a major element of their national security. As the contemporary European security architecture took shape, a new battle began to brew between an expanding NATO and a Russia increasingly concerned over the compression of its western security space—an area which it has held long-standing hegemony.

Belarus borders upon a rapidly expanding Europe that is increasingly defined by the institutions in which it partakes. Analysts define the republic's significance in its ability to either effectively join or divide these regions, depending on its geopolitical orientation—not because of the republic's size or economic potential.³ Given its eastern orientation and western geographic position, Belarus's plays an important role in establishing balanced relations within the East-West tandem. For these reasons, the advancement of NATO has increasingly turned the republic into an object of military and political interest in neighbouring countries and of key European states. Underscoring these factors are the significant challenges Belarus represents to its immediate neighbours, particularly when confronted with internal issues of deteriorating human rights, reversals of political and market reforms, the entrenchment of authoritarian rule and the prospects of reconstituted Russian power in Central Europe. Yet, it is the advancement of military cooperation and the subsequent labelling of those relations as “countermeasures” to NATO expansion that are the primary focus of this study.

Belarus remains enigmatic to the region for several reasons. A quick profile of the republic's foreign policy reveals it to be strongly supportive of integration with Russia

³ Grigory Perepelitsa, “Belorussian-Russian Military-Political Integration and its Impact on the Security of Ukraine” *Belarus at the Crossroads*. Sherman Garnett and Robert Legvold (eds.) Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1998), pp. 87-89.

and the CIS, equally vehement in its rejection of integration with the European Union, compliant to Russian interests, increasingly cordial to regimes odious to the West, and unwavering in its opposition to a NATO-centric security system. Despite official claims of a balanced, “multi-vectored” foreign policy, Belarus’s agenda remains focused on Russia. As the only country in the world willing to maintain an allied relationship with Moscow,⁴ Belarus represents unique geostrategic value for the Kremlin, as it meets Russia’s security interests in its western periphery and bolsters Russian influence beyond its borders.

As a former military stronghold in the western periphery of the USSR, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) played an integral role as the Soviet Union’s western defence shield—a function that the Belarusian president has repeatedly aspired to recast as the defender of Russia’s borders against a hostile West. Official government statements emanating from Minsk have repeatedly characterised the Belarus-Russia Union as providing the basis for an ambitious set of “countermeasures” to contain NATO expansion and a perceived US-led unipolar world. Among other proposals, scenarios included mobilising large concentrations of [Russian] conventional forces, strategic bombers, and nuclear weapons to Belarusian soil—to a wider strategy that envisaged the establishment of a Minsk-Moscow-Beijing axis. Although Belarus’s ability of matching rhetoric with practical action remains questionable at best, there is no denying that residual tensions remain in this traditionally divisive part of East-Central Europe.

⁴ Vyacheslav Nikonov, “Belarus in Russian Foreign Policy” *Belarus at the Crossroads*. Sherman Garnett and Robert Legvold (eds.) Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1998), p. 62.

FROM CORDON SANITAIRE TO STRATEGIC CORRIDOR

Not only did 1994 represent a significant milestone for Belarus in light of its new constitution and first democratically elected president, but also for the subsequent reorganisation of its defence and foreign policies. Insofar as the initial post-Soviet years witnessed a debate on defining the parameters of the republic's role in the emerging European security architecture, 1994 became a turning point for deepening Belarus-Russia security cooperation, which ultimately opened up prospects for a military alliance. Alexander Lukashenko's landslide victory in Belarus's first presidential election initiated a radical shift from the previous interim leadership's pragmatic, even cautious approach to Belarus-Russia relations. Lukashenko's pro-Russian views and blunt, yet charismatic appeal cast his image as a staunch defender of Slavic-Orthodox unity increasingly threatened by the West in the form of an expanding NATO.

It came as no surprise that the Belarusian president's first trip abroad as president was to Moscow in August 1994. Dissatisfied with the economic and defence agreements entered into on behalf of Belarus's interim administration,⁵ Lukashenko met with then Russian President Boris Yeltsin to discuss an alternative framework for Belarus-Russia cooperation—including provisions for joint defence. Despite Yeltsin's claim to have "developed an allergy" to his Belarusian counterpart and Lukashenko's personal disdain for Yeltsin's democratic reforms, a comprehensive set of documents were negotiated and put on the table early the following year.⁶

On 6 January 1995, Belarus and Russia signed a series of accords overseeing a customs union and basing rights granting the Russian Ministry of Defence access to two key strategic facilities at Baranovichi and Vileika for a period of 25 years.⁷ Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, both military bases had been integral components in the USSR's western defences. The Baranovichi site was designed to provide long-range

⁵ "Military Coordination Treaty with Russia Signed" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-94-049, 14 March 1994.

⁶ Yuras Karmanov, "Moskva prinyala Lukashenko" [Moscow accepted Lukashenko] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 9 August 1994.

⁷ Anna Baneva and Svetlana Sukhova, "Moskve—bazy, Minsku—sodeistvie" [Moscow—bases, Minsk—assistance] *Kommersant-daily*. 12 January 1995.

early-warning air defence in the western approaches of the Soviet Union, while the low-frequency communications facility at Vileika is one of the primary control centres for the Russian nuclear submarine fleet in the Baltic Sea and the North Atlantic.⁸ In addition to basing rights, the Memorandum on Expanding and Deepening Belarus-Russia Cooperation was signed. The document outlined the need for both states to coordinate military efforts within a mutual security framework, establish a joint strategic space, devise a collective military supply programme, coordinate defence manufacturing, facilitate weapons standardisation, and grants both armies access to bases and training facilities in either state.⁹

On 21 February 1995, Boris Yeltsin paid a return visit to Minsk to sign a series of accords including the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourliness and the Agreement on Mutual Efforts to Protect the State Borders of Belarus. It was on this occasion that the Belarusian president pledged his country's allegiance to Moscow by asserting that Belarus would remain in "Russia's political sphere of influence."¹⁰ Platitudes notwithstanding, both documents entail tangible security significance for the entire Eastern European sub-region. Not unlike NATO's own fifth provision, Article V of the Friendship Treaty provides exclusive collective security guarantees for both Belarus and Russia in the event of armed attack on either state. Both countries concluded that any act of aggression on the either party would result in coordinated actions in accordance with their commitments under the CIS Treaty on Collective Security [DKB], together with (undisclosed) "other agreements."¹¹

Furthermore, Minsk and Moscow pledged not to support any military actions directed against one another, as well as conclude any treaties or permit its territory to be used to

⁸ "Russia's Bolshakov Arrives to Prepare for Economic Union" *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-95-005, 9 January 1995.

⁹ Aleksandr Koretsky, "Lukashenko mozhnet oboitits' Moskve namnogo dorozhe Kebicha" [Lukashenko can bypass Moscow at a much greater cost than Kebich] *Kommersant-daily*. 26 August 1994.

¹⁰ Anna Baneva, Veronika Kutsyllo, "V 'sfere politicheskogo vliyaniya' vse kak doma" [In the 'sphere of political influence' everyone feels at home] *Kommersant-daily*. 22 February 1995.

¹¹ "Dogovor o druzhbe, dobrososedstve i sotrudnichestve mezhdru Rossiiskoi Federatsiei i Respublikoi Belarus" [Treaty on friendship, cooperation and good neighbourliness between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. 5 May 1995.

the security detriment of the other.¹² In retrospect, the agreement on mutual border protection offers significant geostrategic leverage for the Kremlin, since it allows Russian border troops access to the “external frontier” of the CIS—namely Belarus’s border with Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.¹³ A subsequent security agreement was reached in November 1995 between the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Belarusian KGB. The agreement provides security for Russian military formations dislocated in Belarus, military transport, additional protection to Belarus’s borders, and joint cooperation on opposing intelligence services from third countries.¹⁴

Evidence of the earliest manifestation of practical action taken against the perceived threat of NATO expansion resulted in Minsk’s non-compliance to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in February 1995.¹⁵ Citing the desire of some former socialist states’ bid to join NATO, overtures were tempered by accommodating practice when Alexander Lukashenko order a halt to the dismantling of Belarus’s superfluous conventional arms.¹⁶ It should be noted that Belarus inherited a vast arsenal following the collapse of the USSR. As part of the Soviet Union’s first echelon, the Byelorussian Military District was comprised of ten Army divisions—a 250,000-member force outfitted with some of the best units and equipment the USSR had to offer—including chemical weapons, tactical nuclear weapons and 81 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). The Military District was buttressed by 12 tank divisions—comprised of late generation main battle tanks,¹⁷ totalling 4,411 units—roughly equal to NATO’s 4,425 in France, Great Britain, Italy and Spain combined.¹⁸

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sherman W. Garnett, *Keystone in the Arch: Ukraine in the Emerging Security Environment of Central and Eastern Europe*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (1997), p. 116.

¹⁴ “Russia, Belarus Sign Accord on Security Cooperation” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-95-28, 27 November 1995.

¹⁵ “Lukashenka Concerned Over NATO’s Possible Expansion” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-95-034, 20 February 1995.

¹⁶ “Lukashenka Order Halt to Destruction” *Interfax*. JPRS-TAC-95-006-L, 17 February 1995.

¹⁷ Richard Woff, *The Armed Forces of the Former Soviet Union*. Vol. 2. Hampshire: Carmichael and Sweet (1996), p. E2-18.

¹⁸ Yuri Portnov, “Voennoe sotrudnichestvo Belarus-Rossiya” [Belarus-Russia military cooperation] *Belarus v mire*. Vol. 1, Issue 2, October 1996, p. 65.

In reality, however, Belarus faced more rudimentary problems in meeting its CFE quotas. As early as August 1994, reports from the Borisov tank repair factory—contracted to destroy armoured vehicles under the CFE—claimed that it had been overstocked with several hundred thousand tonnes of scrap metal.¹⁹ The plant had already decommissioned more than 1,900 tanks and armoured vehicles out of the 3,605 units slated for destruction; however, Belarusian steel mills could no longer accept armour plating scrap due to the absence of base components to melt reinforced steel.²⁰ Although economic factors were later blamed for CFE non-compliance—rather than NATO expansion²¹—Minsk eventually acquiesced and met its ceiling quotas.²² Yet in spite of deep cuts, Belarus continues to maintain a formidable conventional force, relative to its geographical size and population.²³

The militarisation debate surrounding NATO expansion began to heat up by August 1995, when then Polish Defence Minister Zbigniew Okonski announced that Poland was prepared, if it became a NATO member, to support the stationing of foreign combat troops and nuclear weapons on Polish soil.²⁴ By September of the same year, a series of reported leaks—allegedly authorised by then Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev—discussed possible Russian retaliatory nuclear countermeasures to NATO expansion, including deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in western Russia, Belarus and aboard ships in the Baltic Fleet.²⁵

The war of words over conventional and nuclear deployments escalated by early October 1995, when *Nezavisimaya gazeta* published a map—allegedly originating from the Russian Ministry of Defence—depicting a Russian nuclear strike on the Czech Republic and Poland, coupled with a joint conventional offensive on the Baltic States.

¹⁹ “Tank Destruction Program Continues” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-94-153, 8 August 1994.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “Suspension of Conventional Arms Elimination Confirmed” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-95-039, 27 February 1995.

²² “Minsk to Honour All Obligations Under CFE Treaty” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-95-241, 14 December 1995.

²³ For current holdings and CFE national ceilings, see *The Military Balance 2001-2002*. London: Oxford University Press (2001), p. 305.

²⁴ Cited in Sherman W. Garnett, “Poland: Bulwark or Bridge?” *Foreign Policy*. Spring 1996, p. 71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.



Source: Igor Korotchenko and Mikhail Karpov, "Rossiiskie yadernye rakety budut perenatseleny na Chexiyu i Pol'shu" [Russian nuclear missiles will be retargeted at the Czech Republic and Poland] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 7 October 1995.

The accompanying article quoted sources in the Main Operations Directorate of the Russian General Staff as stating that, in the event NATO expands to the Czech Republic and Poland and nuclear weapons are deployed in those states, Russia would target them with nuclear weapons and redeploy large-scale conventional forces to Belarus. This sobering map clearly illustrates the influence of NATO expansion on Russian strategic planning and the potential strategic role for Belarus in a hypothetical combat scenario. Although the risk of armed conflict between NATO and the Russian Federation should not be exaggerated, the war of words had left its mark.

In December 1995, Defence Minister Grachev met with his Belarusian counterpart, General Leonid Maltsev "to discuss the current state of affairs and the prospects for military and military-technological cooperation between the two states, [and] ways of

solving outstanding problems.”²⁶ A further 18 military documents on expanding military cooperation were signed at the conclusion of the visit, including the preparation of joint air defence patrols.²⁷ The perceived threat posed by NATO expansion, even if regarded by some as merely symbolic added a legitimising stimulus to Belarus-Russia military cooperation. By the end of 1995 a strategic corridor had been struck. Belarus and Russia had drawn closer militarily and NATO had been their excuse.

NUCLEAR BLUFFING

After being paid scant notice by the international community in its first few years of independence, Belarus quickly became the focus of much attention in 1996 as it rapidly evolved toward greater political and military integration with Russia. The Belarusian presidency began to voice strong initiatives on containing and countering NATO expansion, including speculation over the redeployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus. “Nuclear bluffing” had become an almost regular, albeit ineffective tactic of articulating Belarus’s staunch opposition to NATO expansion. Although such comments were, for the most part, quickly met by official disavowals,²⁸ they nevertheless left a distinct impact on the NATO expansion debate.

Speaking at the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, Alexander Lukashenko threatened to redeploy Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus should any Central European nation join NATO.²⁹ Despite Lukashenko’s proclaimed readiness to defend the interests of both countries in Belarus’s western approaches, it was an idle threat at best. Then Commander-in-Chief of Russian Strategic Forces, Igor Sergeev quickly negated

²⁶ Richard Woff, *The Armed Forces of the Former Soviet Union*. Vol. 2. Hampshire: Carmichael and Sweet (1996), p. E2-34.

²⁷ “Russian Defense Minister Grachev Pays Visit—Air Defense Troops to Patrol Jointly” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-95-237, 9 December 1995.

²⁸ “Lukashenka’s Statement on Missiles Not an ‘Instruction’” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-96-020, 29 January 1996.

²⁹ Chrystia Freeland, “Belarus Warning Over Arms” *Financial Times*. 19 January 1996.

Lukashenko's warning by confirming that all nuclear missiles would be returned to Russia by the end of 1996—leaving the Belarusian leader's threat hollow.³⁰

An unforeseen shift in strategy was announced in mid-1996 when the Belarusian presidency raised an earlier Soviet concept of creating a nuclear-free zone in East and Central Europe.³¹ NATO Headquarters rejected the proposal outright, however, it underscored that the Alliance had no “intention, plan or reason” to station nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states.³² Brussels also made clear that it saw no need to change any aspects of its nuclear policy in the foreseeable future.³³ Furthermore, the Belarusian president was diplomatically informed that relations with NATO would depend upon “progress in the area of democratic reforms” in Belarus.³⁴

It is worth noting that less than a month prior to the unveiling of the nuclear weapons-free zone proposal, the Russian press reported that Minsk had again ordered a stop to the delivery of Belarus's remaining nuclear missiles.³⁵ The process only resumed after a series of high-level negotiations and direct interventions by Defence Minister Pavel Grachev and then Commander of Strategic Missile Forces, Igor Sergeyev.³⁶ Despite the Belarusian president's repeated threats to stop the nuclear withdrawal,³⁷ the final missile left for Russia in late November 1996, making Belarus the last former Soviet republic (save Russia) to become nuclear-free. A single missile was retained for the symbolic

³⁰ “Belarus Threatens to Deploy Nuclear Weapons...” *Jamestown Monitor*. Vol. 2, Issue 13, 19 January 1996.

³¹ Aleksandr Lyushkevich, “Initsiativa Belarusi uprochit evropeiskuyu bezopasnost” [Belarus's initiative strengthens European security] *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. 5 July 1996.

³² “NATO's Solana Rejects Lukashenka's Non-nuclear Zone Idea” *Interfax*. FBIS-TAC-97-006, 30 January 1997.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Yuras Karmanov, “NATO ignoruet initsiativy Minska” [NATO ignores Minsk's initiatives] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 15 February 1997.

³⁵ Viktor Litovkin, “Lukashenko ne otpuskaet rossiiskie ‘Topolya’” [Lukashenko not relinquishing Russian ‘Topols’] *Izvestia*. 13 June 1996.

³⁶ “Official Says Belarus has Disrupted Nuclear Withdrawal” *Interfax*. FBIS-TAC-96-008, 5 June 1996.

³⁷ Viktor Litovkin, “Prezident Lukashenko priostanovil vyvod rossiiskikh strategicheskikh sil iz Belorussii” [President Lukashenko stops pullout of Russian strategic forces from Belarus] *Izvestia*. 6 July 1995; “NATO Guarantees to be Demanded if Nuke Withdrawal Continues” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-TAC-97-001, 13 November 1996.

withdrawal ceremony held near Lida, in north-western Belarus. The Russian Minister of Defence attended the ceremony, Lukashenko however, did not.³⁸

Although the Kremlin later confirmed that nuclear weapons would “never and under no circumstances” return to Belarus in peacetime,³⁹ President Lukashenko continued to lament over Belarus’s relinquished nuclear arsenal. Lukashenko argued that the presence of nuclear missiles in the republic was a serious restraining factor which NATO would have had to take into account before expanding eastward.⁴⁰ He assessed the pullout as a “major political miscalculation” that weakened the Kremlin’s position in its relationship with NATO and called the decision to remove nuclear weapons from Belarus “a crude mistake, if not a crime.”⁴¹ Moot grumblings continued to erupt, ranging from retaliatory measures in the event nuclear weapons found their way to new NATO members,⁴² to speculation over covert Russian missile deliveries to Belarusian airbases.⁴³ Despite claims to the contrary, Belarus’s non-nuclear status remains irreversible.⁴⁴

³⁸ Ian Kemp, “Russia: NATO Expansion May Prompt Retargeting” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 4 December 1996, p. 5. The withdrawal ceremony in Belarus coincided with the test firing of an SS-24 “Scafel” ICBM in Northern Russia. Given the timing and nature of the test, there can be little doubt that the exercise was carried out to demonstrate Russia’s continued nuclear capabilities despite the pullout from Belarus.

³⁹ “Primakov Says Nuclear Arms Not to be Deployed in Belarus” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-UMA-97-144, 24 May 1997.

⁴⁰ “Lukashenka Cites Unity with Russia in Opposing NATO” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-97-070, 11 March 1997.

⁴¹ “Lukashenka: Withdrawal of Belarus Nuclear Weapons a Mistake” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-98-266, 23 September 1998.

⁴² “Belarus Invites Russian Nuclear Weapons Back” *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 4 January 2000.

⁴³ Aleksandr Starikov, “Yaderny marsh” [Nuclear march] *Novye Izvestia*, 7 March 2000.

⁴⁴ Yuri Golotyuk, “Obratnoi dorogi net” [No way back] *Izvestia*, 9 October 1999.

MILITARY RAPPROCHEMENT

Ever since NATO enlargement emerged as a reality, Belarus and Russia have increased calls to enhance military integration, and in some instances, turn their military cooperation into a powerful and effective counterbalance to NATO. The subsequent labelling of those relations as “countermeasures,” together with a significant body of military agreements, which reach beyond the rudimentary stages of cooperation clearly illustrates an organised attempt to foster an alternative to the emerging European security architecture.

Significant military cooperation grew apace on the eve of the signing of the Treaty on the Creation of the Community of Belarus and Russia (1 April 1996) when the air defence forces of both states began operating jointly.⁴⁵ Aside from its highly symbolic timing, this particular aspect of military cooperation demonstrated the efficacy with which measures could be implemented into practical action in the field. Only days prior to the signing of the treaty, the Belarusian president made an explicit tie between NATO expansion and Russia’s security, reiterating the important role the republic played in upholding its eastern neighbour’s defences by ensuring that no threat would cross Belarusian territory.⁴⁶ By the same token, Moscow cited the NATO question as the primary reason behind deepening Belarus-Russia military ties.⁴⁷

A subsequent ten military accords were signed on defining and strengthening bilateral military cooperation within the framework of the Community Treaty and outlining common defence policy concepts on 14 May 1996, at a joint collegium of the Belarus and Russian defence ministries in Moscow.⁴⁸ Discussions centred on the general principles of military coordination, joint activities in the sphere of regional security, preserving

⁴⁵ Aleksandr Ivanov, “Sily PVO dvukh stran okhranyayut nebo vmeste” [PVO forces of both countries defend the sky together] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 3 April 1996.

⁴⁶ Aleksandr Lukashenko, “Dogovor s Rossiei predpolagaet usilenie druzhby i ukreplenie suvereniteta” [Treaty with Russia implies strengthening friendship and fortifying sovereignty] *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. 28 March 1996.

⁴⁷ Vladimir Berezko, “Integratsiya v voennoi oblasti prodolzhaetsya” [Integration in the military sphere continues] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 28 March 1996.

⁴⁸ “Ten Military Agreements Signed with Belarus” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-96-094, 14 May 1996.

cooperation in the military-industrial complex and training personnel in their respective higher military schools.⁴⁹

The notion of a revived Western threat in the form of an expanding NATO resonated throughout official policy statements by the Belarusian presidency and senior officials alike who articulated a strong message for unified defence against a common threat.⁵⁰ Although many of these carefully scripted comments lack a sense of realism or consequence, they nevertheless act as a strong rallying cry for action, and in some cases, an excuse to reconstruct a semblance of bygone Soviet military might. As the CIS leader most consistent with Russia's position on NATO expansion, Lukashenko, for his part, maintains the view that the security of Belarus and Russia is indivisible. Early on in the NATO expansion debate, the Belarusian president made a strong connection between discourse and countermeasures.

According to Lukashenko, Belarus was the first former Soviet republic to openly object to NATO enlargement, emphasising: "Russia still did not know what position to take, Ukraine just kept silent, but Belarus spoke out."⁵¹ Although his use of emotive language often exaggerates the existing military threat, the underlying message nonetheless, clearly conveys the idea of action against a perceived danger. Nowhere was this more pronounced than during a speech on the eve of Victory Day in 1996, when Lukashenko forewarned: "...we cannot calmly watch as that horrible monster [NATO] encroaches upon the borders of our blue-eyed Belarus..."⁵²

Remaining consistent with these comments, the issue of countering NATO expansion was raised in a speech to the Russian State Duma in November 1996. The Belarusian president took aim at the "dangerous policy of Western double standards" by questioning

⁴⁹ "Russia, Belarus Defense Ministry Boards Begin Joint Forum" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-96-094, 13 May 1996.

⁵⁰ "Lukashenka Proposes Joint Opposition to NATO Expansion" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-96-220, 13 November 1996.

⁵¹ "Aleksandr Lukashenko: 'Khochu, chtoby my vsegda byli vmeste!'" [Alexander Lukashenko: 'I want us to be together forever!'] *Belorusskaya gazeta*. 12 May 1997.

⁵² Cited in Pavlyuk Bykovsky, "Khochesh' mira—gotov' VPK" [Want peace—prepare the military-industrial complex] *Belorusskii rynok*. 13-19 May 1996.

why, on one hand, the West perceived NATO expansion positively, and on the other, regarded Belarus-Russia military cooperation negatively.⁵³ He argued that NATO had not only survived, but began to advance its military infrastructure eastward towards the Belarusian border. Furthermore, he questioned why the West supported military rapprochement with former Warsaw Pact states, yet, by the same token, condemned any organised attempt from “eastern states” to oppose those plans. Referring to his earlier proposal for a joint Belarus-Russia response to NATO expansion as the “only sensible decision,” Lukashenko confirmed that military cooperation between the two former Soviet states would be strengthened as a countermeasure.⁵⁴

Resistance to NATO expansion and its subsequent “ripple effects” caused Russia to reassess its strategic imperatives. Belarus became central to that reassessment, considering its geographical position, military significance, common security views and the relative ease of translating those perceptions into practical action. As J.L. Black argues: “...there can be no doubt that NATO expansion hastened, indeed ensured, the Russian-Belarus Union. Of all the regions in the world where NATO activity shaped Russian political and strategic planning, the Belarus case is the clearest.”⁵⁵

The geopolitical and strategic significance that Belarus represents was highlighted in a set of theses authored by Russia’s Council for Foreign and Defence Policy, and will be quoted here at length:

In light of Russia’s difficult geopolitical situation resulting from NATO expansion and the potential appearance of threats in close proximity to its borders, coordinated efforts in the area of defence will allow Russia to secure its strategic interests in the Western direction. As a result of full integration with Belarus, Russia will acquire a number of incontestable geopolitical privileges: direct access to the borders of the Central European region [other than Russia, Belarus borders Poland, Ukraine, Latvia and Lithuania]; removal of the potential threat of the so-called Baltic-Black Sea belt isolating Russia; strengthening of Russia’s position

⁵³ Igor Lensky and Oleg Stepaneko, “Aleksandr Lukashenko: ‘Budu delat’ vso, chto otvechaet vole naroda” [Alexander Lukashenko: I will do everything that corresponds to the will of the people] *Pravda-5*. 22-29 November 1996.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ J.L. Black, *Russia Faces NATO Expansion: Bearing Gifts or Bearing Arms?* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers (2000), p. 119.

with states, blocs, and allies, first of all in Europe; increase in the military resources of the state in conventional forces due to integration with the Belarusian Army; development of the new perspectives for manoeuvre in the framework of the CFE Treaty; elimination of the military strategic isolation of the Kaliningrad special defence region.⁵⁶

Despite some reluctance in certain Russian political circles over rapprochement with Belarus,⁵⁷ NATO enlargement both legitimised and accelerated the process. On the whole, the Russian State Duma was supportive of the union, despite reservations expressed by some members over its actual effectiveness in limiting a larger NATO.⁵⁸ Others, like then Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Shakhrai, remained more convinced, referring to the unification of Russia and Belarus as “the most effective response to NATO expansion.”⁵⁹

Further coordinated steps were taken in March 1997, when the leaders of Belarus and Russia issued a joint communiqué expressing their opposition to NATO’s planned expansion.⁶⁰ Similarly, the NATO question was cited as the key factor for the advancement of the integration process and a major impetus for pooling resources and forging closer links in foreign policy.⁶¹ Later that month, practical steps surrounding the consolidation of Belarus-Russia air defences were discussed at a meeting between then Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Air Force, General Piotr Deinekin and his Belarusian counterpart, General Sergei Sedov. Both sides highlighted that they had long been prepared for the inevitability of NATO expansion.⁶² Deinekin underscored this point, making it clear that, “undoubtedly, we cannot help but think about

⁵⁶ “O Rossiisko-Beloruskoi integratsii. Tezisy Soveta po vneshnei i oboronnoi politike” [On Russian-Belarusian integration. Theses of the Council on foreign and defence policy] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 1 October 1999.

⁵⁷ Yelena Tregubova, “Gennady Seleznev: soyuz s Belorussei—mostik k SSSR” [Gennady Seleznev: union with Belarus—small bridge to the USSR] *Kommersant-daily*. 2 April 1997.

⁵⁸ “Duma Supports Yeltsin’s Initiative on Union with Belarus” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-97-010, 14 January 1997.

⁵⁹ “Yeltsin Envoy Urges Belarus Unification to Counter NATO” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-97-008, 13 January 1997.

⁶⁰ “Yeltsin, Lukashenka United in Opposition to NATO Expansion” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-97-066, 7 March 1997.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Ilya Bulavinov, “Russia Makes Final Drive to the West” *Kommersant-daily*. 13 March 1997. *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*. Vol. XLIX, No. 11, 16 April 1997, p. 22.

countermeasures. From a military point of view, NATO's advancement eastward is aggression, but so far without the use of arms.⁶³

On 2 April 1997 the Belarus-Russia "Community" was transformed into a "Union."⁶⁴ Despite enhanced security provisions in the Union Charter,⁶⁵ the Belarusian president sought deeper military integration with Russia, maintaining: "it would be logical to assume that we need a military alliance to guarantee our joint policies."⁶⁶ To further enhance the security of both nations, then Russian Minister of Defence Marshal Igor Sergeyev met his Belarusian counterpart, Colonel-General Alexander Chumakov in Minsk for an official one day working visit on 19 December 1997. The high-level meeting concluded with the signing of a comprehensive package of defence agreements, including a formal military treaty and an agreement on joint regional security.⁶⁷ Despite official denials that increased military cooperation was directed at NATO expansion,⁶⁸ the timing of the agreements were hardly coincidental. Marshal Sergeyev referred to NATO expansion as "a destabilising process, threatening our states' security."⁶⁹ Whereas Chumakov made the realistic assessment that defence, first and foremost, took priority in bilateral relations, referring to military cooperation as "the vanguard of all integration processes between Belarus and Russia."⁷⁰

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Dogovor o Soyuze Belarusi i Rossii" [Union Treaty of Belarus and Russia] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 1 April 1997.

⁶⁵ See "Ustav Soyuz Belarusi i Rossii" [Union Charter of the Union of Belarus and Russia] *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. 27 May 1997.

⁶⁶ "Lukashenka Comments on Military Alliance, Integration" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-97-142, 22 May 1997.

⁶⁷ Oleg Falichev, "Oboronny soyuz Rossii i Belorussii ne protivorechit Dogovoru o kollektivnoi bezopasnosti SNG" [Military union of Russia and Belarus will not contradict the CIS Treaty on collective security] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 23 December 1997; Aleksei Bezveselny, "Sdelan vazhny shag v oblasti voennoi integratsii Belarusi i Rossiei" [An important step was taken in the area of Belarus-Russia military integration] *Vo slavu Rodiny*. 23 December 1997.

⁶⁸ "Ministers Say Military Accords Must Not Worry NATO" *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-97-353, 19 December 1997.

⁶⁹ "Russian-Belarusian Military Accord Signed" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-97-353, 19 December 1997.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

There was an almost immediate reference made to the Minsk-Moscow accords, revealed by Marshal Sergeyev during an official visit to Germany in late January 1998. Sergeyev delivered a curt anti-expansion message, stating that NATO threatened only Russia and as a result, increased military cooperation with Belarus and deployment of joint Belarusian and Russian “military structures” in western Belarus could not be ruled out.⁷¹ By the same token, he forewarned in no uncertain terms of a potential “stand-off between the two military unions.”⁷² Marshal Sergeyev’s outburst was in reaction to the planned multi-national Danish-German-Polish North-East Corps based in Szczecin, which was envisaged as strategic defence for the western approaches of the Baltic Sea.⁷³ According to Sergeyev, the move was tantamount to NATO “advancing toward the Russian border with weapons in hand.”⁷⁴ Aside from the fact that Sergeyev’s statement represented one of the strongest made by a senior Russian military official, his referral to a “stand-off” was in clear reference to the Slavic union acting as a counterbalance to NATO.

Further evidence of how seriously the perceived NATO threat influenced strategic planning emerged on 16 October 1998, at a joint session of the Belarus-Russia Defence Ministries in Moscow. The main item on the agenda centred specifically on coordinating efforts of both military establishments following the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland into NATO.⁷⁵ A number of military accords were signed, including a document on the foreign political activities of their departments following the decision to enlarge the Alliance.⁷⁶ The ministers also approved a comprehensive cooperation programme governing the joint use of military infrastructure, intelligence exchanges, as well as a weapons and munitions procurement programme,⁷⁷ followed shortly thereafter

⁷¹ “Russian Minister: NATO Expansion Threatens Only Russia” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-98-028, 29 January 1998.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ “Sergeyev Worried by German, Danish, Polish Military Corps” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-98-028, 29 January 1998.

⁷⁴ Cited in Jan de Weydenthal, “Russia Criticizes Plan to Create North-East Corps” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. 4 February 1998.

⁷⁵ Vladimir Berezko, “V interesakh yedinogo oboronnogo prostranstva” [In the interests of a single defence space] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 17 October 1998.

⁷⁶ “Na zapadnom ‘fronte’ gryadut peremeny” [Coming changes on the western ‘front’] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 16 October 1998.

⁷⁷ “Russia, Belarus Sign Defense Accords” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-98-289, 16 October 1998.

by two consecutive upgrade packages for Belarus's air defences.⁷⁸ Marshal Sergeyev announced that the defence ministries of both countries had worked out specific measures to resist NATO expansion, but refused to elaborate on account of "secrecy."⁷⁹ He would only say that following the Visegrad trio's accession into NATO, the Belarusian Armed Forces would become the Belarus-Russia Union's "first line of defence."⁸⁰ For his part, Chumakov hinted that Moscow could—for all intents and purposes—consider the republic as Russia's own "Belarusian Military District."⁸¹

Subsequent confirmation of increased military cooperation became apparent on 4 November 1998, when a delegation of Belarusian and Russian generals met in Moscow to discuss the adjustment of their operational plans in light of NATO expansion and the cooling of relations with Brussels over the situation in Kosovo.⁸² The Russian Ministry of Defence announced that it was creating a joint defence structure with Belarus, in addition to making adjustments to the tactical planning of its groupings on its western flank.⁸³ Accordingly, the Russian press reported that the generals were creating a joint military structure specifically to defend against NATO.⁸⁴ In the final analysis, the military agreements provide Belarus and Russia with solid strategic footing in the Eastern European sub-region by facilitating a highly integrated forward outpost alongside NATO's eastern border. At any rate, the NATO variable provided both states a reason to ensure that at least some military provisions end up becoming more than just rhetoric.

⁷⁸ "Russia Modernizing Belarusian Anti-Aircraft System" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-98-292, 19 October 1998; Aleksei Lyashchenko, "...I nebo odno na dvoikh" [...And one sky for both] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 31 October 1998; "Russia Improves Air Defense Systems Deployed in Belarus" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-98-357, 23 December 1998.

⁷⁹ "Russia's Sergeyev: Irreversible Settlement Begins in FRY" *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-98-289, 16 October 1998.

⁸⁰ "Voennye vedomstva ozabocheny aktivnost'yu NATO" [Military departments concerned over NATO activity] *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. 17 October 1998.

⁸¹ Ilya Bulavinov, "Armii Rossii i Belorussii gotovy dat' otpor NATO" [The armies of Russia and Belarus are ready to rebuff NATO] *Kommersant-daily*. 17 October 1998.

⁸² "Russia and Belarus Coordinate Responses to NATO" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-98-308, 4 November 1998.

⁸³ "Russia Adjusts Tactical Troop Deployment to Counter NATO" *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-98-308, 4 November 1998.

⁸⁴ Viktor Litovkin, "General'y Rossii i Belorussii vystraivayut oboronu protiv NATO" [Russian and Belarusian generals build defence against NATO] *Izvestia*. 5 November 1998.

ANTI-NATO OUTPOST OR POTEKIN VILLAGE?

By 1999, the Belarusian president began to voice a strong interest in transforming the Belarus-Russia Union into a viable counterweight to NATO.⁸⁵ At the core of repeated government policy statements was the desire to foster an alternative to a unipolar, NATO-centric security system. Insofar as the year witnessed a sharp increase in political and military rapprochement corresponding closely with NATO activity, it also fostered discourse that went beyond the realm of military cooperation.

In a speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union of Belarus and Russia in January 1999, Alexander Lukashenko focused on the strategic aims of the union and the need to counter perceived hegemonic threats, arguing: “the Union of Belarus and Russia should become a real counterweight to the unipolar world that has currently developed, a powerful driving force in breaking the aggressive transatlantic monopoly, [and] an international core for the new unification of states.”⁸⁶ The following month, the Belarusian president reiterated a proposal to form an anti-NATO coalition, despite an earlier call to create a Minsk-Moscow-Beijing axis for similar purposes.⁸⁷ Lukashenko’s subsequent proposal called for an alliance encompassing Russia, Iran, India, and China which “could create a counterbalance to the NATO and US block.”⁸⁸

Minsk’s reaction to the formal accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland into NATO on 12 March 1999 was ostensibly sombre. Belarusian Defence Minister Alexander Chumakov repeated his government’s concerns over NATO’s eastward expansion and the approach of its military infrastructure to Belarus’s western border. Chumakov asserted that Minsk did not want Poland to possess any new military units,

⁸⁵ “Lukashenka Speaks in Favor of ‘New Superpower’” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-1999-0403, 2 April 1999.

⁸⁶ “Nastupil kachestvenno novyi etap v yedinenii bratskikh narodov Belarusi i Rossii” [A qualitatively new stage has emerged in unifying the fraternal peoples of Belarus and Russia] *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. 23 January 1999.

⁸⁷ Marina Volkova and Yuras Karmanov, “Belorusskii lider predlozhl v tselyakh protivodeistviya rasshireniyu NATO sozdat’ os’ ‘Minsk-Moskva-Pekin’” [Belarus leader proposed creating a Minsk-Moscow-Beijing axis with the aim of countering NATO expansion] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 13 March 1997.

⁸⁸ “Lukashenka Advocates Union with Russia, Iran, Others” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-1999-0222, 22 February 1999; Svetlana Karpekova, “Belorusskii prezident khochet spasti planetu” [Belarusian president wants to save the planet] *Izvestia*. 24 February 1999.

nuclear arms, large-scale conventional weapons, [or] new military infrastructure on its territory.⁸⁹ Senior Belarusian defence and national security officials voiced specific concerns over Poland's entry into NATO, calling attention to the size of the country's Armed Forces and the fact that many senior Polish officers received their formal military training in the Soviet Union.⁹⁰ The later point was cited as a significant security threat in itself, since most senior Polish officers retain extensive knowledge of Belarusian and Russian operational art and tactical doctrine, which remain largely unchanged from Soviet times.⁹¹

Furthermore, Minsk's failure to negotiate an individual security accord with NATO threw into sharp contrast its complete security reliance on Russia, which blindsided any diplomatic efforts at manoeuvring with Brussels. Whereas Russia and Ukraine obtained explicit charters with the Alliance, Belarus preferred instead to have its interests brokered by Moscow.⁹² Despite repeated attempts at a separate NATO-Belarus treaty,⁹³ it seems unlikely that such an agreement will be negotiated any time in the foreseeable future, given Belarus's censure in most European institutions and President Lukashenko's dubious legitimacy in the eyes of the West.

NATO's military campaign against Yugoslavia over Kosovo threw Belarus-Russia relations into sharp focus. Both countries spoke as one against the hostilities and coordinated their respective foreign and military policies towards the Alliance, including Moscow's initiation of a freeze in the NATO-Russia Founding Act. Although musings ranged from lending military assistance to Belgrade,⁹⁴ and admitting Yugoslavia into the

⁸⁹ "Belarus Defense Minister Concerned by NATO Expansion" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-1999-0316, 16 March 1999.

⁹⁰ Vasily Krupsky, "Voiska NATO uzhe pod Brestom" [NATO forces already near Brest] *Belorusskaya delovaya gazeta*. 15 March 1999.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² "Belarus Interests Protected During NATO Talks" *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-97-140, 20 May 1997.

⁹³ "Lukashenka: Belarus for Direct Talks, Bilateral NATO Accord" *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-97-063, 4 March 1997; "Defense Minister: Belarus Wants Security Treaty with NATO" *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-2001-0707, 7 July 2001.

⁹⁴ "Lukashenka: Belarus Can Provide Military Aid to Yugoslavia" *Interfax*. FBIS-UMA-98-282, 9 October 1998.

Belarus-Russia Union,⁹⁵ to speculation over whether NATO would set its sights on Belarus next,⁹⁶ notable steps in military rapprochement were rapidly gaining pace.⁹⁷

To this end, Belarus and Russia formally declared that plans were underway to establish a joint regional military group—the same day as NATO’s fiftieth anniversary celebrations in Washington.⁹⁸ It was announced that an evaluation of military infrastructure in both states had been undertaken to determine the optimal variants for the logistical formation of the contingent,⁹⁹ including feasibility studies on the redeployment of Russian fighters to Belarusian airfields, including tactical Tu-22, strategic Tu-160 (Blackjack), and Tu-95MS (Bear) bombers.¹⁰⁰ Further consolidation of Belarus-Russia military infrastructure was announced in August 1999. The former Soviet early warning radar base at Baranovichy was recommissioned to restore the “hole” in the single radar field over the western and north-western sectors of the CIS left by the closure of the Skundra radar base in Latvia.¹⁰¹

On 28 April 1999, Presidents Lukashenko and Yeltsin signed a series of subsequent bilateral military agreements in Moscow, together with a joint security concept, a joint weapons production programme and an accord on border security.¹⁰² Shortly thereafter, a comprehensive package of Belarus-Russia military agreements on defence coordination (signed in October 1998) was ratified in the Russian State Duma.¹⁰³ These strategies were put through its paces during large-scale military exercises the following month. The Zapad-99 manoeuvres were held in European Russia and Belarus on 21-26 June 1999 and

⁹⁵ “Belarus Seeks Slav Unity to Counter US Influence” *Reuters*. 21 January 1999.

⁹⁶ “Ilykhin Fears NATO Attack on Belarus” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-99-0711, 11 July 1999.

⁹⁷ Nikolai Kuchin, Algerd Neverovsky, “Rossiya i Belorussiya vooruzhayutsya” [Russia and Belarus are arming themselves] *Kommersant*. 23 April 1999.

⁹⁸ Yuri Golotyuk, “Belorussiya stala zapadnym antinativskim forpostom” [Belarus became a western anti-NATO outpost] *Izvestia*. 24 April 1999.

⁹⁹ Vitaly Strugovets, “Oboronnaya gran’ Soyuza” [The Union’s defence boundaries] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 30 April 1999.

¹⁰⁰ “More on Possible Transfer of Russian Bombers” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-1999-0326, 26 March 1999.

¹⁰¹ Vera Rich, “Russia, Belarus Join Forces on Radar Defence” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*. 11 August 1999, p. 6.

¹⁰² Semyon Novoprudsky, “Rossiya i Belorussiya budut vmeste protivostoyat’ NATO” [Russia and Belarus will counteract NATO together] *Izvestia*. 29 April 1999.

¹⁰³ Vladimir Kuznechevsky and Aleksei Chichkin, “Strategichesky otvet” [Strategic response] *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. 7 May 1999.

were the largest joint military exercise of its kind in post-Soviet history.¹⁰⁴ Dubbed a “response in the event of NATO aggression,” Belarus played a tactical role as the forward wedge in a simulated counter-offensive against a mock NATO attack.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, it became the staging ground for simulated retaliatory conventional and nuclear strikes against undisclosed new NATO members from whose territory the attacks originated.¹⁰⁶ In retrospect, the timing, role and name of the manoeuvres had been carefully orchestrated to demonstrate a united front against NATO action in Yugoslavia, in addition to activating the armed forces of both states in a simulated combat scenario.

On 6 October 1999, Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev and his Belarusian counterpart, Colonel-General Alexander Chumakov, signed nine documents on Belarus-Russia military cooperation, including a resolution on the establishment of a western regional military coalition.¹⁰⁷ The agreements encompass a common air defence system, a draft joint armaments programme, a plan for operational and strategic development, and a framework for the collective use of military infrastructure in both states. In a carefully worded statement, Marshal Sergeyev insisted that the joint military coalition would not target a specific adversary, but would nevertheless “be ready for action if [the enemy] did appear.”¹⁰⁸ Similar remarks were made by Chumakov, who deemed that a regional army group would provide defence for both states in the Eastern European region “should it become necessary;” a task which he believed either state would find difficult to accomplish if attempted individually.¹⁰⁹ Semantics notwithstanding, the inference to NATO was clear. Weeks later, Sergeyev received a directive from Boris Yeltsin to “reconsider” Russia’s military doctrine in light of NATO’s new strategic concept and the “changing international situation.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Vladimir Georgiev, “S sovetskim razmakhom” [With Soviet grandeur] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 19 June 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Sergei Babichev, “I prikrytie, i karayushchy mech” [And cover, and a punishing sword] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 25 June 1999; Oleg Falichev and Feliks Semyanovsky, “‘Zapad-99’: zadachi resheny, tseli dostignuty” [‘West-99’: tasks determined, goals achieved] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 29 June 1999.

¹⁰⁶ Yuri Golotyuk, “Voennye ne priznayutsya, po komu oni nanesli uchebnyi yaderny udar” [The military will not admit who it hit with a simulated nuclear strike] *Izvestia*. 29 June 1999.

¹⁰⁷ “Documents on Russo-Belarus Military Cooperation Signed” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-1999-1006, 6 October 1999.

¹⁰⁸ “Russia, Belarus Set up Military Group” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-1999-1006, 6 October 1999.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ “Sergeyev: Russia Reconsidering Military Doctrine” *Snark*. FBIS-SOV-1999-1020, 20 October 1999.

By year's end, Minsk and the Kremlin enshrined military cooperation within the Union Treaty of Russia and Belarus.¹¹¹ To ensure that goals would be achieved, a detailed and somewhat verbose programme outlining each step was published in both countries alongside the Treaty.¹¹² The agreement requires both states to adopt a wide array of joint military reforms, coordinate activities in the spheres of defence, engage in cooperative military research and development, create a regional military coalition, a joint arms procurement programme, and establish a joint military doctrine.¹¹³ No reference was made to the stationing or storage of nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil under the Treaty's security clauses, however, the Kremlin confirmed that the republic would remain under the protection of Russia's nuclear umbrella.¹¹⁴

As the Visegrad trio embarked on their first year as full NATO members, 2000 was markedly less jubilant for the Belarusian presidency. Boris Yeltsin's sudden resignation on 31 December 1999 came as an unexpected setback to the Lukashenko administration, which had originally hoped for a speedy merger of the two states.¹¹⁵ With the changing of the Kremlin guard, Minsk was presented with a new set of variables. Restraint towards NATO was one of them. Unlike his predecessor, Russian President Vladimir Putin subscribes to a tough but friendly approach by openly expressing his desire for a more amicable relationship with Brussels. Correspondingly, the Putin administration fosters close relations with Belarus by actively maintaining cooperation in the military sphere, on the one hand, while on the other, approaching sensitive aspects of the union in a more pragmatic manner.

¹¹¹ "Dogovor o sozdanii Soyuznogo gosudarstva" [Treaty on the creation of a Union state] *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. 11 December 1999; *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. 29 January 2000.

¹¹² "Programma deistvii Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Respubliki Belarus po realizatsii polozhenii Dogovora o sozdanii Soyuznogo gosudarstva" [Action programme of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the realisation of the Treaty on the creation of a Union State] *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*. 11 December 1999; *Rossiiskaya gazeta*. 29 January 2000.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ "Belarus Still Under Russian Umbrella" *Jane's Defence Weekly*. 15 December 1999, p. 5.

¹¹⁵ "Belarus Leader Says Yeltsin Resignation a Big Loss" *Reuters*. 1 January 2000.

With the NATO question clearly not laid to rest, Alexander Lukashenko tabled a proposal to counter the Alliance in his annual state of the nation address on 11 April 2000. It was then that he announced plans concerning the formation of a 300,000-strong joint regional military coalition envisaged as the Belarus-Russia Union's "first strategic echelon of defence."¹¹⁶ Lukashenko underscored that the group's conception was prompted by "the complicated military and political situation in the world, NATO's expansion to the Belarusian border, [and] the escalation of regional conflicts."¹¹⁷ The envisaged coalition would be set up around the Moscow Military District and the Belarusian Armed Forces, which would be augmented by Russian troops dislocated in the country's western regions, including those based in Kaliningrad.¹¹⁸

During the course of an interview with *Krasnaya zvezda*,¹¹⁹ and later with Russia's Mayak radio, Lukashenko bemoaned the loss of the Soviet military presence in East-Central Europe and voiced traditional concerns over encirclement, arguing:

Now that the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact have collapsed, there is no group of Soviet troops in Germany, there are no troops in Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic. [Russia] no longer has Ukraine, and as for the Baltic States, as you know they have one foot in NATO. What is left in the west? Only the Belarusian Army, which is willing to guarantee the security of its own territory and that of the Russian Federation.¹²⁰

In spite of these remarks, Lukashenko later backtracked on his statement, stressing that Western governments had misunderstood his announcement of plans with Russia for a joint military group to be deployed on Belarus's western border.¹²¹ He contended that the contingent would only be mobilised in self-defence and would not constitute a standing

¹¹⁶ Kristina Shimanskaya, Algerd Neverovsky, "Lukashenko zashchitit Rossiyu ot NATO" [Lukashenko will defend Russia from NATO] *Kommersant*. 12 April 2000.

¹¹⁷ "Belarus and Russia to Establish Joint Military Grouping" *BelaPAN*. 11 April 2000.

¹¹⁸ Oleg Falichev, "Voyennaya integratsiya Rossii i Belorusii..." [Military integration Russian and Belarus] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 19 April 2001.

¹¹⁹ Vadim Markushin, "Aleksandr Lukashenko: My budem grud'yu zashchishchat' matushku Rossiyu" [Alexander Lukashenko: We will defend mother Russia with our (bare) chests] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 5 May 2000.

¹²⁰ Cited in Vera Rich, "Russia-Belarus Force Plans Flounder" *Jane's Intelligence Review*. October 2000, p. 20.

¹²¹ "Belarus Says No Plans to Maintain New Force" *Reuters*. 17 May 2000.

army.¹²² In subsequent articles published in 2001, senior military officials emphasised that, insofar as the command and control structures appear to be in place, the joint regional coalition would only assemble in the face of a clear and present military danger to either Belarus or Russia.¹²³

THE SECOND WAVE OF EXPANSION

While Belarus and Russia ultimately had to contend with the first tier of NATO enlargement, the continued expansion of the Alliance seemed to represent yet another round of conflict, particularly where Baltic membership was concerned. Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated this long-standing caveat, stating that “the expansion of NATO behind the former Soviet borders would create a completely new situation for Russia and Europe. It would have extremely serious consequences for the whole security system of the continent.”¹²⁴

In April 2001, the newly appointed Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov visited his opposite number, General Leonid Maltsev, in Minsk to “fill with concrete substance the military component of the Union State Treaty.”¹²⁵ Aside from the highly symbolic value of Ivanov’s first foreign trip as a Minister of Defence, the prospect of a second wave of NATO expansion caused the Kremlin to take a harder look at its military relationship with Belarus. This factor partially explained the need for additional military cooperation between the two states. According to one Russian analyst, the predominant threat to the Union State remained:

...the powerful military potential of the NATO bloc and [its] constant endeavour at enlargement by enlisting additional Eastern European and Baltic states in its ranks. Tens of divisions, equipped with the most sophisticated armaments, hundreds of NATO warships and fighter planes,

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Vladimir Mokhov, “Po yedinyim zakonom” [Along single legislation] *Krasnaya zvezda*. 2 February 2001; Vladimir Marzalyuk, “Soyuznoe gosudarstvo u voennoi integratsii net al’ternativy” [Union state: no alternative to military integration] *Vo slavu Rodiny*. 12 June 2001.

¹²⁴ “Putin Warns Against Eastward Expansion of NATO” *Reuters*. 11 June 2000.

¹²⁵ Mikhail Khodarenok, “Rossiya i Belorussiya ob’edinyayut voennuyu moshch” [Russia and Belarus joint military might] *Nezavisimaya gazeta*. 18 April 2001.

which maintain a high level of combat readiness, essentially represent a hair-trigger, which can be pulled at any moment.¹²⁶

It should be noted that early in 2001, allegations surfaced regarding the Kremlin's movement of tactical nuclear weapons to its military bases in Kaliningrad.¹²⁷ The move was attributed as an attempt to compensate for Russia's weakened conventional forces and its need to maintain deterrence capabilities in light of NATO enlargement.¹²⁸ However, this move, coupled with military rapprochement with Belarus may be indicative of a wider security strategy within the geographical locale of Russia's western periphery. This rationale seems to offer a partial explanation for Russian Defence Minister Ivanov's announcement in April 2002, that Minsk and Moscow will, "in the long term," merge their armed forces under the framework of the Belarus-Russia Union.¹²⁹

A further indication of how serious plans were being made in light of further NATO expansion emerged in early May 2001, when the Belarusian president announced his decision to amend the national security blueprint and adopt a new military doctrine. President Lukashenko attributed this to "significant changes which took place in Belarus and all over the world," as well as the fact that several Central European countries joined NATO.¹³⁰

Accordingly, the NATO variable had been factored into Belarus's largest military exercise—Neman-2001.¹³¹ Lukashenko specifically identified increased defence expenditures in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, and the rearming of their militaries along "NATO standards" as a direct threat to Belarus's security, arguing: "We must

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Walter Pincus, "Russia Moving Warheads: Tactical Nuclear Arms Going to Kaliningrad Base" *The Washington Post*. 4 January 2001.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Robin Hughes, "Belarus, Russian Armed Forces to Merge" *Jane's Defence Weekly*. 1 May 2002, p. 15.

¹³⁰ "Belarus Adopts New National Security Blueprint, Military Doctrine" *BBC Monitoring*. 14 May 2001. For analysis of the doctrine, see Stephen J. Main, "The Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus"

Surrey: Conflict Studies Research Centre (April 2002).

¹³¹ "Lukashenka Says Belarusian Armed Forces Can Repulse Aggression" *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-2001-0831, 31 August 2001.

demonstrate to our friends, partners, especially Russia, and enemies, that the Belarusian Armed Forces has an adequate level of military preparedness and is able to defend its state sovereignty and independence.”¹³² Berezina-2002, a subsequent, albeit smaller-scale military exercise was held the following year. Despite the high financial costs associated with the drills, the Belarusian president announced that tactical manoeuvres would be held annually.¹³³

The significant warming in NATO-US-Russia relations following the events of 11 September 2001, coupled with the formation of a new NATO-Russia Council in May 2002,¹³⁴ threw Belarus’s strained relations with the Alliance into sharp contrast. Alexander Lukashenko downplayed any gains, insisting that Moscow’s relations with Brussels and Washington were “now at the same level as the development of relations between NATO and the US and Belarus.”¹³⁵ Nevertheless, the Belarusian leadership tested the political waters by sending mixed reconciliatory signals to Brussels that Minsk could change its attitude toward the Alliance.¹³⁶ On the one hand, Lukashenko did not rule out that Belarus might move closer towards NATO some day, on the other, he argued that it made sense to “keep one’s gunpowder dry and [to] take care of the armed forces.”¹³⁷ For the most part, these announcements were interpreted as a thinly veiled attempt to catch up with Moscow.¹³⁸

The Prague Summit in November 2002 opened the Alliance to an additional seven members from East-Central Europe, including three former Soviet republics—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. By the same token, it also marked the failure of Belarus-Russia

¹³² Yuri Cvirko, “Aleksandr Lukashenko nuzhdaetsya v zashchite” [Alexander Lukashenko is in need of protection] *Kommersant*. 7 August 2001.

¹³³ “Belarusian President Praises Armed Forces at Conclusion of Tactical Exercises” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-2002-0602, 1 June 2002.

¹³⁴ Colleen Barry, “NATO Links Itself with Russia” *The Washington Post*. 15 May 2002.

¹³⁵ “Belarus: Lukashenka Acknowledges Russia’s Level of Relations with NATO” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-2002-0426, 26 April 2002.

¹³⁶ “Belarus: President Says Belarus May Change Attitude Toward NATO” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-2002-0710, 10 July 2002; “Official Says Belarus Not to ‘Radically’ Alter Stance on Ties with NATO” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-2002-0711, 11 July 2002.

¹³⁷ “Ukraine: Belarus’ Lukashenka Says Belarus May Take Step Toward NATO” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-2002-0529, 29 May 2002.

¹³⁸ Yelena Daneiko, “Dogonyalki s Lukashenko” [Catching up with Lukashenko] *Izvestia*. 13 July 2002.

military cooperation to prevent a second wave of NATO expansion eastward. Insofar as Belarus and Russia both expressed their dissatisfaction with NATO's further enlargement in earlier venues,¹³⁹ Lukashenko's escalated rhetoric had more to do with the Alliance's refusal to invite him to the summit than any conceivable countermeasures.¹⁴⁰

C O N C L U S I O N

The evolution of Belarus-Russia security relations observed under the NATO expansion lens offers an intriguing view of contemporary post-Soviet geopolitics. Minsk and Moscow have concurred on a wide range of European security issues, but none so closely as the undesirability of NATO's eastward expansion. Having established that, the major methods examined have been military reintegration, mobilising large-scale concentrations of conventional forces in Belarus and invitations to reintroduce nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil. Although such measures are widely supported by the Lukashenko administration and some conservative elements of the Russian military, two successive waves of NATO expansion passed without such a demonstration. Neither Belarus nor Russia could seriously contemplate a large-scale military response—both for financial reasons and the international alarm such actions would invariably raise. Nevertheless, a significant element of the Belarusian *nomenklatura* continues to perceive the need to rekindle a traditional “Western threat” to regain lost resources and strategic leverage in a region increasingly linking its security interests with NATO. In this regard, NATO expansion became an effective vehicle for channelling joint perceptions and formulating an according response.

The Kremlin's interest in Belarus remains predominantly geopolitical. To this end, Russia's generals openly acknowledge the republic as a key ally and bridgehead for the Russian Armed Forces in Eastern Europe, as well as a forward platform for early warning radar and communications. Russia—geographically separated from the rest of Central

¹³⁹ “Belarus, Russia have Common Stances on NATO Expansion” *ITAR-TASS*. FBIS-SOV-2002-0710, 10 July 2002; “Military Official Says Belarus to Take ‘Pragmatic Approach’ to Ties with NATO” *Interfax*. FBIS-SOV-2002-0715, 15 July 2002.

¹⁴⁰ Susan B. Glasser, “Czech Republic Refuses Visa for Belarus President” *The Washington Post*. 15 November 2002.

Europe—requires Belarus as a secure conduit within a region whose political and military institutions continue to expand eastward and directly challenge Moscow’s traditional “sphere of influence.” In turn, Belarus has been central to the Kremlin’s security reassessment in light of NATO expansion. Even though the republic no longer plays the role of a forward garrison for large concentrations of conventional and nuclear forces as it did during the Soviet era, Belarus nevertheless, remains an integral component of Russia’s western defences. Although the Belarusian and Russian Armed Forces mesh seamlessly and function much as they did prior to the collapse of the USSR, what has emerged is but a shadow of their former Soviet military strength. In spite of this, Minsk’s economic dependence on Russia and Moscow’s heightened regional interests following two successive waves of NATO expansion will invariably keep both states close.

Moscow continues to look upon Belarus as a security conduit in the Eastern European sub-region and as its traditional “western shield.” Practical defence and security projects continue to develop as both militaries actively engage in (re)creating a single security system. However, close military cooperation has not come without its share of controversy. Despite Lukashenko’s grumblings over the loss of Belarus’s nuclear arsenal and repeated invitations to redeploy Russian nuclear weapons and large-scale conventional forces on Belarusian soil to counterbalance NATO expansion, such rhetoric emphasises intentions over actual capabilities. As is the case with most aspects of integration, key military decisions will continue to be determined by the Kremlin, not Minsk.

In spite of this, each arbitrary outburst further undermines any prospect at building a constructive relationship with NATO, while at the same time, perpetuating Belarus’s international isolation and exacerbating geopolitical fault lines. By actively fostering East-West antagonisms, Minsk is assuring itself a place on the outer periphery of an expanding Europe. Despite cardinal changes to the European security architecture, the Belarusian leadership has failed to fundamentally rethink security by maintaining a rigid “zero sum” approach to defence policy and advancing military rapprochement with the Russian Federation as the primary solution to what it perceives as a threat from NATO.

Thus, by default and an overwhelming focus on military issues, the definition and scope of security reverts back to narrow, traditional concepts of deterrence, power politics and bipolar confrontation, characteristic of the Cold War. Although the risk of confrontation has been significantly reduced, residual tensions remain evident in the form of suspicious competition and even wary cooperation. Despite the odd reconciliatory gesture, Belarus's policy toward NATO will remain predictably the same.

During the limited discussion surrounding the Belarus-Russia Union, it was repeatedly pointed out that the most successful aspects of integration have been in the spheres of defence and security. Military cooperation in light of NATO expansion has not been lacking. To this end, the rapid pace and scope of military rapprochement can be attributed directly to Belarus's security policies which provide the Russian Ministry of Defence with a virtual *carte blanche* to the republic's extensive military infrastructure. Clearly, rhetoric has played a distinctive role in the advancement of military cooperation and in many regards, fashioned as a weapon in itself. Evidence of this resonates throughout official policy statements and the state-controlled media, which articulate a strong message for unified defence against a common threat. Although Lukashenko's remarks have recently decreased in tone and frequency, regular anti-NATO statements will undoubtedly continue in varying degrees of hostility.

Based on recent events, it appears that the Kremlin is concentrating on rebuilding its relations with NATO. If this succeeds, even Minsk's best attempts at convincing Moscow of an imminent showdown with the Alliance will invariably fall on deaf ears. The reality is even more pronounced by the gap between Belarusian anti-NATO policy pronouncements and Moscow's lack of will to match it with practical action. Considering Russia's difficult security choices on its southern flank, the Kremlin may choose to focus on more immediate defence issues. Nevertheless, the military aspects of Belarus-Russia rapprochement clearly demonstrate that Moscow has the power to take steps to defend its national security. At any rate, Belarus has already made its geostrategic presence felt. Given current political-military trends and perceptions, it will undoubtedly continue to present complex challenges to a rapidly expanding Europe.