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# Could Russia's Reliance on Belarus be its Soft Underbelly?

## Defence, Politics and Logistics

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Alongside Ukraine, Belarus has for centuries been a significant part of Russia's own history, both as part of an ancestral empire and – in Russia's perception – as an extension of Russia's own security space. The political and defence ties between Belarus and Russia have gained new prominence as a result of the war in Ukraine. But a nuanced understanding of this relationship suggests that Russia's dependence on Belarus for logistical support and training could become a weakness.

This paper examines Belarus's military role as the provider of fundamental logistical and practical support for the Russian armed forces, without which the Russian army would struggle to function, particularly during wartime. It identifies some of the ideological, practical and political points of contention in the two countries' security relationship and seeks to challenge prevailing wisdom that casts Belarus as the only dependent party. For now, Russia's and Belarus's occasionally differing threat perceptions may be temporarily consolidated around the Ukraine war, with Western sanctions – including those specifically targeting Belarus for its role as co-aggressor – obliging President Alexander Lukashenko to turn to Russia to guarantee his political future and prop up the economy. But Russia's dependence on Belarus as a defence manufacturer and logistical provider could one day become a critical vulnerability, particularly in the event of significant political or economic change in Belarus.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Analysis of the Belarus–Russia relationship tends to focus on Belarus's political and financial dependence on Russia, but in defence, Russia's reliance on Belarus for military-grade components, as well as logistical services in war and peacetime, could be an area of critical weakness for Russia, particularly in the longer-term event of regime change in Belarus.
- Belarus and Russia cooperate military and politically through several platforms and agreements, of which the Union State and the Regional Group of Forces are the most significant. The Ukraine war may have aligned Lukashenko's and Putin's threat perceptions of NATO for now, but while defence is often framed as their closest area of cooperation, significant frictions remain between the two.
- There is a high degree of interoperability between the armies at a strategic, operational and tactical level, but Belarus is not a mere military district of Russia. Belarus's most important role in the current Ukraine war is acting as the *tyl* (rear) of the Russian army. Belarus performs vital functions as a logistical supplier; hosting and offering medical and practical support to Russian troops stationed on Belarusian territory and facilitating the transfer of troops and hardware around the country and into Ukrainian territory through its rail network. But frictions remain in defence, among them Belarus's frustrations at receiving secondhand Russian weapons, Russian

attempts to take over Belarusian defence–industrial manufacturers, and periodic disagreements over military–ideological training.

- There are links at numerous levels, including between the Belarusian and Russian senior military command, with many officers having received training at Russian institutions, which makes the political loyalties of the Belarusian armed forces difficult to gauge. These close links are particularly stark in the defence–industrial complex. Belarus is one of the few manufacturers of some military-grade components and repair services suitable for Russian army equipment, and Russia has failed to fully replace these industries domestically – hence its decades-long efforts at 'integrating' the Belarusian military–industrial complex into its own, which have been resisted so far. Belarus has long been pigeonholed as a defence exporter of unfinished components, which it sells to a limited range of clients abroad, but mostly to Russia. This mutual dependence also has a great impact on Russia, aspects of which would function less efficiently without Belarus's machine parts.
- Economic pressure on Belarus, including sanctions that are isolating Belarus from the international supply chain, could have implications for Russia's defence industry. Unless Russia gives greater support to the Belarusian economy, particularly its industrial sector, reliable supplies of components will be difficult to acquire, and are likely to impact on Russia's ability to rearm, as well as deliver on its existing contracts as a global weapons supplier.

## INTRODUCTION

When Belarus was used as a launchpad for the offensive on Kyiv in February 2022, the Russia–Belarus relationship was given renewed impetus in the West for research. The war highlighted the importance of understanding Russia's strategic security thinking on Belarus, to determine how Russia perceives its closest military and political ally, unpack the extent of defence coordination between them, and identify what the frictions in this relationship could mean for the West. This paper ultimately seeks to determine whether the Belarusian armed forces are a strategic asset to the Russian armed forces, a key vulnerability, or perhaps both.

To address this issue, the paper seeks to answer two key questions:

1. How does Russia conceive of its security relationship with Belarus, and how has this shifted in the light of major events such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the start of the Ukraine war in 2022?
2. How coordinated are the two countries' military forces, and where are the frictions between them?

This paper is based on a review of public statements from both countries' senior political leadership, official strategic planning documents produced by Russian and Belarusian government bodies, Russian-language media reports, and articles published by Russian think tanks and military journals.

Aside from historical documents required for background notes, this research primarily focused on strategic documents published after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, at which point Belarus was forced into taking a public stance on Russia's annexation. A closed research event featuring experts on Russian and Belarusian politics and defence was organised by RUSI, which aimed to challenge and discuss some of the hypotheses raised during the course of this research. Access to Russian-language military journals has been provided with the assistance of the Russian Military Studies Centre, a research facility based at the UK Defence Academy in Shrivenham. Due to the fast-moving nature of the conflict, important questions, such as the likelihood that Belarus would enter the Ukraine war more actively, are not fully unpacked here, nor is there a comprehensive analysis of the Belarus–Ukraine dynamic, as this still-evolving relationship is beyond the scope of this paper.

The first section of this paper outlines Russia's strategic military and political approach to Belarus. It offers some background on how this has evolved since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, identifying key events that have impacted on the relationship. It also examines Russian conceptions of Belarus to understand why the country is of such significance to President Vladimir Putin. The second section discusses the military, defence–industrial and ideological cooperation between the two countries in more detail, including Belarus's role as the *tyl* (rear) of the Russian armed forces. Given the importance of the Belarus–Russia relationship, the final section highlights some of the potential challenges on the horizon for NATO Allies, and why understanding the dynamics of this relationship can have an important impact on regional security.

## HOW RUSSIA CONCEIVES OF ITS POLITICAL AND SECURITY RELATIONSHIP WITH BELARUS

Russia and Belarus (along with Ukraine) have a shared security, historical, cultural and linguistic heritage dating back centuries. Belarus has variously been called Russia's 'client state', part of Russia's Soviet sphere of influence, and Russia's strategic security partner.[1] But for contemporary Russia, Belarus is more than that. It is, for Putin at least, conceptually an extension of Russia's own strategic security space.[2] Given the geo-economic imbalance between the two countries, and this Russian understanding of Belarus, the relationship can never be one of equal partners.

Many of Putin's most recent statements on the triumvirate of Belarus, Ukraine and Russia epitomise this conceptual approach. In July 2021, amid rising tensions with the West, Putin penned an article in which he rehashed

1. Kathleen Hancock, 'The Semi-Sovereign State: Belarus and the Russian Neo-Empire', *Foreign Policy Analysis* (Vol. 2, No. 2, April 2006), pp. 117–36.
2. Pavel Usov, 'Putin i Lukashenko. Psikhologiya visitov' ['Putin and Lukashenko: The Psychology of their Visits'], *Deutsche Welle*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.dw.com/ru/putin-i-lukashenko-psihologija-vizitov/a-62237447>, accessed 4 July 2022

– with a dose of revanchism – the historical relationship between the three countries.[3] Some months later and a few days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he gave a speech at the Kremlin in which he recognised the independence of the so-called People's Republics of Luhansk and Donetsk and gave his justification for the coming war.[4] Then, in April 2022, during a meeting with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Russia's Far East, Putin maintained that he did not distinguish between where Belarus ended and Russia began, claiming that Ukraine, Belarus and Russia had always been one people.[5] In each of these examples, there is a common refrain in which Belarus, Ukraine and Russia are the 'heirs of Ancient Rus' – historical lands that include the territory of modern-day Belarus and Ukraine, ruled from Moscow.[6]

The Russian leadership's linguistic framing of Belarus is also revealing – the country is often referred to as 'Byelorussia', rather than Belarus.[7] Byelorussia is a historical–empirical term for lands that included parts of Belarus (literally 'White Russia'), and the use of this form suggests a view of Belarus as a district of Russia, rather than a separate country. These linguistic nuances reflect sentiments that have been echoed by important figures sent to Belarus to negotiate on the Kremlin's behalf.

One of the most potentially damaging incidents for the relationship involved Mikhail Babich, Russia's former ambassador to Belarus. He was recalled in 2019 after openly engaging with Belarus's political opposition, which Lukashenko viewed as an attempt to promote regime change.[8] Babich was a former KGB officer, and Ukraine had refused to accept him as ambassador two years before. He overstepped his diplomatic boundaries throughout

3. Vladimir Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>, accessed 10 May 2022.
4. Vladimir Putin, 'Address by the President of the Russian Federation', 21 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>, accessed 10 May 2022.
5. Yuri Drakokhrust, 'Prisoyoedinit li Putin Belarus k Rossii?' ['Will Putin Annexe Belarus to Russia?'], *Zerkalo*, 25 May 2022, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/14920.html>, accessed 10 May 2022.
6. Putin often refers to 'Ancient Rus' in his speeches on Ukraine (and Belarus) as the common source that unites all three countries. He uses 'Rus' to refer to the centuries-old empire that spanned significant territory, including modern-day Belarus and Ukraine, with Orthodox Christianity and a common language at its core, which was ultimately ruled from Muscovy (Moscow).
7. Lilia Pashkova, 'Lavrov zayavil, shto Rossiya predlozhila Belorussiyu kak garanta dlya Ukraina' ['Lavrov Said That Russia had Suggested Belorussia Could Act as a Guarantor for Ukraine'], *RBK*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/04/2022/6250235b9a79473d9d21b6c4>, accessed 15 May 2022.
8. *RIA Novosti*, 'Babich rasskazal belorusskoi oppozitsii o razvitii Soyuznovo gosudarstvo' ['Babich Talked About the Development of the Union State with the Belarusian Opposition'], 15 March 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190315/1551838338.html>, accessed 4 July 2022.

his tenure in Belarus, to Minsk's increasing concern.[9] In comments to the media, Babich described Belarus as a 'district' of Russia, causing a diplomatic incident, and eventually, at Lukashenko's request, he was recalled.[10] This slight concession to Belarus indicated that Russia understood Lukashenko was only to be pushed so far.

Babich was replaced by Dmitry Mezentsev, who is now secretary of the Union State – a loose bilateral framework agreement formulated in 1999 between Belarus and Russia to deepen their political, economic and military integration, which has become increasingly formalised in recent years.[11] Unlike Babich, Mezentsev is a moderate and a career diplomat, who has described Belarus and Russia as unified not by pressure from the West, but by a desire for deeper economic integration and common historical understandings.[12] But while Russia is Belarus's closest ally, the relationship is beset by personal tensions, practical problems and conceptual divergences that make it difficult for true integration to take place.[13] These divergences were particularly seen in Russia's displeasure at Belarus's attempts to court the West over the past eight years, attempts prompted by its desire to ease the sanctions that had been introduced in response to Belarusian human rights abuses.[14]

Belarus is, for Putin at least, conceptually an extension of Russia's own strategic security space

## RUSSIA'S AGENDA

Belarus and Russia work together across several platforms and agreements, but the most relevant for the security relationship is the Union State. It envisages a single economic, social and legal space, a joint budget, and coordinated foreign and defence policies. But until 2018, when Putin resumed the Russian presidency for a fourth term, it was given only scant

9. Emily Ferris, 'The Russian Ambassador Who Overreached: Why Russia's Approach to Belarus Could Change', *RUSI Commentary*, 22 May 2019.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Anna Maria Dyner, 'New Military Doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia', Polish Institute of International Affairs, 15 February 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/new-military-doctrine-of-the-union-state-of-belarus-and-russia>, accessed 20 September 2022.
12. *BelRos*, 'Dmitry Mezentsev: Rossiya i Belarus – primer tovo, kak mozhno na fundamente edinoi istorii vystraivats vzaimovygodniye, iskrenniye i tovarisheskiye otnoshenia' ['Dmitry Mezentsev: Russia and Belarus are an Example of How Mutually Beneficial, Sincere and Comradely Relations can be Built on the Foundation of a Common History'], 20 September 2022, <https://belros.tv/news/obschestvo/dmitriy-mezentsev-rossiya-i-belraus-yavlyayutsya-primerom-kak-mozhno-na-fundamente-edinoy-istorii-vy/>, accessed 20 September 2022.
13. *Ibid*.
14. Benno Zogg, 'Belarus Between East and West: The Art of the Deal', CSS Analyses in Security Policy, No. 231, September 2018, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse231-EN.pdf>, accessed 20 September 2022.

public attention, although the defence relationship that it facilitates was ongoing throughout.

The bilateral security relationship between Belarus and Russia features in numerous official Russian documents including its Military Doctrine (2014), National Security Strategy (NSS 2015, updated in 2021) and Foreign Policy Concept (2016), with the NSS forming the basis around which the most important documents are framed.[15]

However, the updated NSS makes little reference to Belarus. In comparison with the 2015 document, which focused on strategic partnerships with other countries based on a principle of equality, the 2021 NSS removes references to 'equality' or interest in cooperation with the West, instead promoting the importance of protecting Russia's values, politics and sovereignty (although it is unclear what makes these values unique to Russia).[16] Indeed, there is more focus on concerns about Russian traditional values than on the Eurasian Economic Union (of which Belarus is a founding member too), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-led security alliance established formally in 2002, or the Union State, vehicles through which Russia cooperates with Belarus. Belarus is not mentioned as a strategic partner, whereas China and India are specifically.[17] This could suggest that Belarus is not a priority, although it is more likely that Russia considers Belarus to be already so well integrated that plans for a deeper relationship need not be rehashed.

But there have been disagreements in the bilateral relationship for years, including over the prices of milk and oil, new tax laws, and Lukashenko's longstanding resistance to the construction of a permanent Russian military base in Belarus.[18] Lukashenko and Putin's poor personal relationship is well documented, and while they meet frequently, Putin has never considered

15. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 'Voennaya Doktrina Rossiskoi Federatsii' ['Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation'], 30 December 2014, <https://rg.ru/documents/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>, accessed 14 April 2022.
16. President of the Russian Federation, 'O strategii natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii' ['On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation'], 31 December 2015, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/l8iXkR8XLAtxeilX7JK3XXy6Y0AsHD5v.pdf>, accessed 4 July 2022; President of the Russian Federation, 'O strategii natsionalnoi bezopastnosti Rossiskoi Federatsii' ['On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation'], 2 July 2021, <http://scrf.gov.ru/media/files/file/l4wGRPqJvETSkUTYmhepzRochb1j1jqh.pdf>, accessed 21 May 2022.
17. President of the Russian Federation, 'O strategii natsionalnoi bezopastnosti Rossiskoi Federatsii' ['On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation'], 2 July 2021.
18. Artyom Shraibman, 'Voina i manevri. Smozhet li Lukasenko snova distantsirovatsa ot Rossii?' ['War and Manoeuvre: Can Lukashenko Distance Himself From Russia Once Again?'], Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19 May 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/eurasiainsight/87158>, accessed 4 July 2022.

him a personal confidante.[19] There are also frictions between Lukashenko and former Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev – an important figure as deputy leader of Russia's Security Council. Medvedev has in the past publicly called for the 'modernisation' of Belarus's election processes, much to Lukashenko's chagrin.[20]

The concept of the Union State was only publicly resurrected in 2018, when Putin resumed the presidency. Numerous meetings in 2018 between Putin and Lukashenko manifested little, while conversations in Russia increasingly framed Belarus as a drain on Russia's financial resources, until then-prime minister Medvedev issued an ultimatum that integration should go ahead in earnest,[21] and that any significant cooperation between Belarus and Western security and economic structures such as the EU, the US and NATO would not be tolerated.

Putin's intention to rein in Belarus's forays into the West were clear. At the meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State in June 2018, he pointedly remarked that common approaches to foreign policy were to be a priority.[22] These sentiments were echoed and amplified by Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who was that same month forced to deny intense media speculation that Putin intended to unify Belarus and Russia, perhaps with the presidency of the Union State as a possible retirement option.[23] But this did not mean that Belarus and Russia's understandings of security were the same. While the Ukraine war may have temporarily forced Lukashenko into paying lip service to aspects of Putin's worldview, this is a fickle alignment, predicated on Moscow's continued economic support for Belarus, and political support for Lukashenko's leadership.

19. Will Nicoll, 'Putin and Lukashenko are Using Each Other'*, Moscow Times*, 2 December 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/12/02/putin-and-lukashenko-are-using-each-other-a41921>, accessed 20 September 2022.
20. Alexander Vladiko, 'Alexander Lukashenko i "zakoreneli drug" Dmitry Medvedev. Vspominayem samiye yarkiy momenti druzhbi' ['Alexander Lukashenko and His "Inveterate Friend" Dmitry Medvedev: We Remember the Best Moments of Their Friendship'], *Onliner*, 15 January 2020, <https://people.onliner.by/2020/01/15/medvedev-9>, accessed 14 May 2022.
21. Anais Marin, *The Union State of Belarus and Russia: Myths and Realities of Political–Military Integration* (Vilnius: Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020).
22. President of Russia, 'Zasedaniye vyshevo gossoveta soyuznovo gosudartsvo' ['Meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State'], 19 June 2018, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57811>, accessed 10 May 2022.
23. Alexander Atasuntsev and Polina Khimshiashvili, 'Lavrov otvetil na spekulatsii o prezidentskom trone soyuznovo gosudarstvo' ['Lavrov Responded to Speculation About the Presidential Throne of the Union State'], *RBK*, 6 June 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/06/06/2019/5cf7aab29a794745d14094ed>, accessed 10 May 2022.

## DIVERGENT THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Prior to 2022, Russia's security doctrines and official statements made it clear that it viewed NATO as its main strategic threat, while Belarus took a more measured view.[24] Belarus's long-serving minister of foreign affairs Vladimir Makei, who died unexpectedly in late 2022, often stated that he did not view NATO deployments on its eastern flank as threatening Belarus's security environment.[25] In 2020 the Belarusian military even conducted a small-scale exercise with NATO Allies – a group of UK Marines – although at a strategic and operational level its forces only train with Russia.[26]

Belarus had taken an ostensibly neutral stance over Crimea, going as far as criticising the annexation as a bad precedent and hosting the Minsk peace agreements, to Russia's irritation. This diplomatic manoeuvring had the aim (successful at the time) of removing Western sanctions on Belarus, introduced in 2010 following the Belarusian security services' crackdown on protesters. Russia's concerns that Belarus might drift closer to Western political structures was a major factor in propelling the Union State forward.

Joint military exercises have increased in frequency and coordination over the past few years, but the Zapad (West) 2017 exercises demonstrated Russia and Belarus's divergent threat perceptions most clearly. Zapad is their largest joint military exercise, held quadrennially in Russia's Western Military District since 1999. This alternates with Union Shield *(Shchit Soyuza*), which also takes place every four years in Russia. One of the Zapad 2017 scenarios was to test how Belarus could host Russia's military forces, should a foreign-sponsored attack require it. At the time, Belarus was keen to maintain cordial relations with NATO, as part of its security and political balancing act with the West, while ensuring its allyship with Russia.[27] Russia's actions, such as suggesting that the test launch of a tactical ballistic Iskander-M missile was part of the exercises, when they were unconnected, undermined Belarus's diplomatic efforts.[28]

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24. *Ibid*.
25. Denis Lavnikevich, 'Russia and Belarus: Friendship on the Brink of War', *New Times*, 13 February 2017, in *Current Digest of the Russian Press* (Vol. 68, No. 7).
26. Ministry of Defence, 'Royal Marines Travel to Belarus for Winter Warfare Exercise', 29 February 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/royal-marines-travel-to-belarus-for-winter-warfare-exercise>, accessed 4 May 2022.
27. Belarusian Government, 'Belarus napravlayet priglasheniye predstavitelyam zarubezhnikh stran dlya nabludeniya za ucheniyam Zapad-2017' ['Belarus Sends Invitations to Representatives of Foreign Countries to Observe Zapad 2017 Exercises'], 13 July 2017, <https://www.belarus.by/ru/government/events/belarus-napravljaet-priglashenija-predstaviteljam-zarubezhnyx-stran-dlja-nabljudenija-za-uchenijami-zapad-2017_i_60689.html>, accessed 4 July 2022.
28. Warsaw Institute Foundation, 'Zapad 2017 – Lessons Learned', 16 October 2017, <https://warsawinstitute.org/zapad-2017-lessons-learned/>, accessed 1 May 2022.

The exercise was beset by problems. Russia attempted to increase the agreed-upon number of soldiers, which Lukashenko refused, mindful of how this would be received in the West. Belarus offered Western media access to the exercises (Russia did not) and invited Western observers, including the OSCE, NATO, the Helsinki Commission and the International Red Cross, to observe parts of Zapad, as well as providing briefings at NATO headquarters, in an attempt at transparency and to assuage Western concerns that the exercises were a foil for a Russian incursion into Belarus.[29] Against this backdrop, such were their differing views of security that Lukashenko and Putin did not undertake a joint tour of the battlefield, as is traditional, and went their separate ways.

## TURNING POINTS

Two events – the domestic turmoil of 2020 in Belarus, and the Ukraine war – did, however, shift Lukashenko's priorities. The 2020 protests against Lukashenko's re-election to the presidency – in a vote that had been viewed as a foregone conclusion – and the resultant violent repression, with allegations of torture perpetrated by the Belarusian security services, turned Belarus into an international pariah.[30] Greater security cooperation with Russia followed, including mutual training for the security services to maintain public order, likely aimed at suppressing future demonstrations, particularly against the Ukraine war and Lukashenko personally.[31]

Lukashenko's signature on a joint security doctrine with Russia sealed his public commitment to security alignment

As the prospects of a political relationship and accompanying economic investment from the West dwindled to nil, Lukashenko recalibrated, and a flurry of meetings with Putin took place throughout 2021, with promises of significant loans from Russia to prop up the ailing Belarusian economy.[32]

As Lukashenko's resistance crumbled, so too did his political resolve. In a November 2021 Russian television interview, he abruptly recognised

29. Helsinki Commission, 'In Brief: Witness to Zapad', 2 October 2017, <https://www.csce.gov/sites/helsinkicommission.house.gov/files/Report%20-%20Zapad%20-%20Design%20FINAL.pdf>, accessed 2 May 2022.
30. Amnesty International, 'Belarus: Mounting Evidence of a Campaign of Widespread Torture of Peaceful Protesters', 13 August 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/belarus-mounting-evidence-of-a-campaign-of-widespread-torture-of-peaceful-protesters/>, accessed 15 May 2022.
31. Anton Kostsov, 'Zachem Rosgvardii Belarus?' ['Why Does Belarus Need Rosgvardiya?'], Region Expert, 25 December 2020, <http://www.region.expert/rg-belarus/>, accessed 12 May 2022.
32. *TASS*, 'Shto izvestno o visitakh prezidenta Belorussii Alexandera Lukashenko v Rossii' ['What is Known about President Alexander Lukashenko's Visits to Russia'], 28 May 2021, <https://tass.ru/info/11489649?utm_source=yandex.ru&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=yandex.ru&utm_referrer=yandex.ru>, accessed 4 July 2022.

Crimea's annexation for the first time.[33] While in a sense this meant little, as he has yet to visit the peninsula, it was a political manoeuvre, aligning him with Putin's view of the world.[34] Lukashenko's signature in that same month on a joint security doctrine with Russia sealed his public commitment to security alignment. Although the full text of the new doctrine was not published until February 2022, its removal of language on Belarus's neutrality that had prevented Russia from moving nuclear weapons onto its territory sparked concern among NATO Allies.[35] This, and Belarus's February 2022 constitutional referendum that allowed the country to break its neutrality pledge and non-nuclear status, were viewed as concessions to Putin, in exchange for ongoing support to Belarus amid its international isolation.[36] The new doctrine laid some of the groundwork for Russia to use Belarus as a launchpad for the offensive on Kyiv, with Belarus cast by the West as the 'co-aggressor' in the war.[37]

Attempts amid the Ukraine war by Makei to urge the West, in particular the EU, to engage in dialogue, preventing Belarus's complete diplomatic isolation, and suggesting a foreign policy course for Belarus not entirely aligned with Russia's, came to naught and his suggestions were rebuffed.[38] The regime is now under wide-ranging international sanctions, cut off from most international supply chains and reliant on Russia for deeper economic cooperation, including significant loans and the restructuring of its existing debt repayments to Moscow, to prevent economic collapse.

Lukashenko's accompanying rhetoric has also changed. In an apparent about face, in October 2021 he remarked that Belarus should establish a joint military base with Russia in case of attack – in contrast to his years of resistance to hosting Russian military infrastructure.[39] He has also parroted

33. *Belta*, 'Lukashenko: Krim de facto i de jure stal rossiskim posle referenduma' ['Lukashenko: Crimea is De Facto and De Jure Russian After the Annexation'], 30 November 2021, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-krym-de-fakto-i-de-jure-stal-rossijskim-posle-referenduma-472352-2021/>, accessed 17 May 2022.
34. *Ibid*.
35. *Nasha Niva*, 'Stalo izvestno soderzhaniye soyuznoi voennoi doktrini Rossii i Belarusi' ['The Content of Belarus and Russia's Military Doctrine has been Revealed'], 9 February 2022, <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=284424&lang=ru>, accessed 12 May 2022.
36. Ryhor Astapenia, 'Belarus' New Dubious Constitution', *IPS Journal*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/belarus-new-dubious-constitution-5760/>, accessed 23 September 2022.
37. *Ibid*.
38. Grigory Ioffe, 'Leaked Makei Letter Suggests Belarusian Efforts to Reach Out to the West', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* (Vol. 19, No. 59, 25 April 2022), <https://jamestown.org/program/leaked-makei-letter-suggests-belarusian-efforts-to-reach-out-to-the-west/>, accessed 7 December 2022.
39. *RBK*, 'Lukashenko prigrozil soyuzom s Rossiyei v sluchaye napadeniye na Belorussiyu' ['Lukashenko Threatens an Alliance with Russia Should There be an

conspiracy theories asserting that NATO was attempting to annex parts of western Ukraine.[40]

This change of official rhetoric has been accompanied by greater defence cooperation with Russia. However, much of this has been confined to symbolic gestures, rather than investment. Following a request from Lukashenko in November 2021, Russian strategic bombers escorted by Belarusian fighter jets conducted exercises over Belarus for the first time. Here Lukashenko emphasised the importance of joint air patrols to protect Belarus's borders, indicating that he was framing NATO as a threat to the country – in accordance with Russia's official views and increasingly hardline approach to the West.[41] By May 2022, Belarus's defence minister Viktor Khrenin was talking in terms of a possible war against Belarus, and the need to upgrade its special forces to counter NATO reconnaissance planes.[42]

But while it appeared the transformation of Belarus's defence community's rhetoric was complete, as the war has continued, officials such as Khrenin have made clear that alongside their staunch anti-Western rhetoric remains an apparently sincere desire for some engagement with the West, in the interests of Belarus's own national security.[43] Although Belarus's role in the Ukraine war has cemented the Western view of Belarus as a co-aggressor whose worldview entirely aligns with Russia's, it appears that some parts of the Belarusian defence and foreign policy community remain hopeful that Belarus can continue its balancing act between Russia and the West, however unlikely this may be in reality.

## MILITARY INTEGRATION AND THE *TYL*

This section does not attempt to determine whether Belarusian forces will officially enter the war in Ukraine, as there are many factors that could influence this that are beyond the scope of this paper. It looks at

Attack on Belarus'], 2 October 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/10/2021/61578a3e9a7947a855083319>, accessed 19 May 2022.

40. Valery Karbalevich, 'Sostoyaniye razdvoeniya' ['The State of the Split'], *Svobodnye Novosti Plyus*, 28 May 2022, <https://www.sn-plus.com/2022/05/28/valerij-karbalevich-sostoyanie-razdvoeniya/>, accessed 4 May 2022.
41. *Military Watch*, 'Russia's Most Capable Nuclear Bombers Fly Over Belarus Amid NATO Troops Buildup on Borders', 13 November 2021, <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/russia-s-most-capable-nuclear-bombers-fly-over-belarus-amid-nato-troop-buildup-on-borders>, accessed 15 May 2022.
42. Zerkalo, 'Khrenin: Razvedivatelnaya aviatsiya NATO izuchayet territoriyu Belarusi' ['Khrenin: NATO Reconnaissance is Studying Belarus'], 26 May 2022, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/14988.html>, accessed 20 May 2022.
43. *Sb.by*, 'Ministr oboroni: nasha glavnaya zadacha – ne dopustit agressii I voini v Belarusi' ['Defence Minister: Our Main Task is to Prevent Aggression and War in Belarus'], 30 November 2022, <https://www.sb.by/articles/v-interesakh-natsionalnoy-bezopasnosti-khrenin.html>, accessed 7 December 2022.

the integration between the Russian and Belarusian armed forces and determines whether this could be a key weakness for Russia.

Strategically and operationally, the two forces are well integrated; there is a high degree of educational and ideological exchanges, and their special operations and airborne forces are closely linked across all levels.[44] Belarus does not unilaterally conduct large exercises, always operating within the framework of joint exercises. There is a high degree of interoperability between them, supported by longstanding legislation, but underlying frictions mean full integration remains elusive.

This closeness has led the neighbouring Baltic states and Poland to refer to Belarus as Russia's 'Belarus Military District' – a reference to Russia's division of its armed forces into geographically focused military districts.[45] But although this framing is consistent with the Russian leadership's framing of Belarus as a mere Russian backwater, calling Belarus a military district of Russia is something of a misnomer.

Ultimately, for political purposes, this might not matter: since the Ukraine war escalated, Belarus and Russia have been viewed by the West as one and the same militarily. In a practical sense, Belarus has always played and is increasingly playing an important role as the *tyl* of Russia's armed forces, providing logistical support, without which some of the Russian military's key functions would be impeded.[46] Much analysis has focused on Belarus's political and economic dependence on Russia, but Russia's own reliance on Belarus for military-grade components and logistical services in both war and peacetime could turn out to be a critical weakness for Russia.

Although it has made some attempts to improve, and reduce its reliance on Moscow for training, the Belarusian army is small, under-equipped and under-trained.[47] Despite pledges from Lukashenko to conduct joint deployments with Russian soldiers, the Belarusian armed forces also appear

44. Konrad Muzyka, *The Belarusian Armed Forces: Structures, Capabilities and Defence Relations with Russia* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2021).
45. Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, *International Security and Estonia* (Tallinn: Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2021).
46. *Lepelski Krai*, 'Hadyozhniy til Vooruzhennikh cil Respublikii Belarus' ['The Reliable Rear of the Belarusian Armed Forces'], 28 March 2022, <http://www.lepel-kraj.by/nadyozhnyj-tyl-vooruzhennyx-sil-respubliki-belarus/>, accessed 11 May 2022.
47. Siarhei Bohdan, 'The Belarusian Army: Scaled Down But Better Trained and Autonomous', *Belarus Digest*, 23 December 2017, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/the-belarusian-army-scaled-down-but-better-trained-and-autonomous/>, accessed 20 September 2022.

to lack any motivation to fight Ukraine, presenting a challenge for Russia, which may not be able to call on them if needed.[48]

## MILITARY COOPERATION

Belarus and Russia have cooperated militarily in some form since Lukashenko came to power in 1994. This includes field and combat training, regular live-fire exercises in Russia, and cooperation through the CSTO.[49] Central to bilateral cooperation are the Unified Regional Air Defence System and the Regional Group of Forces (RGF), an agreement established in the late 1990s.

The RGF consists mainly of Belarusian armed forces and a few Russian units, such as the 1st Guards Tank Army. The written agreement now appears rather outdated. It emphasises defence coordination without naming a specific adversary and underscores the need for a balanced approach to NATO and Europe, as well as resolution through diplomatic means – much of which appears unthinkable in the current political climate.[50] This document will likely be revised in the coming years to reflect a more unified view of emerging security threats.

The CSTO's Eastern European Group of Forces also comprises Russian and Belarusian units but, as the May 2022 CSTO summit highlighted, these forces have never been deployed in a unified manner to a combat zone, mostly due to reluctance of other member states to allow Russia-led CSTO forces to be deployed for fighting civil unrest. It was only during the 2022 protests in Kazakhstan that the alliance, fearing regime change, agreed to a limited mobilisation of peacekeepers.[51]

Initially the Russian and Belarusian armies operated separately, but changes to Belarus's command-and-control structure and the dissolution of the Ground Forces Command in 2011–12, alongside numerous joint exercises,

48. Zoya Sheftalovich, 'Putin Doesn't Trust Lukashenko's Army to Fight in Ukraine, Belarus's Leader in Exile Says', *Politico*, 14 October 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-doesnt-trust-lukashenkos-army-belarus-leader-in-exile-says/>, accessed 18 September 2022.
49. *Ibid*.
50. Conventions.ru, 'Decision No. 4 of the Supreme Council of the Union of Belarus and Russia on the Concept of Joint Defence Policy of Belarus and Russia, Adopted 22 January 1998', <https://conventions.ru/convention/id/?id=16792>, accessed 1 May 2022.
51. Collective Security Treaty Organization, 'Zayavleniy Soveta kollektivnoi bezopastnosti Organizatsii Dogovora o kollektivnoi bezopastnosti v svyazi s 30-letiyem Dogovora o kolletkivnoi bezopastnosti i20-letiyem Organizatsii Dogovora o kollektivnoi bezopastnosti' ['Statement by the CSTO on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the 20th Anniversary of the CSTO'], 16 May 2022, <https://odkb-csto.org/documents/statements/zayavlenie-soveta-kollektivnoy-bezopasnosti-organizatsii-dogovora-o-kollektivnoy-bezopasnosti-v-svya/#loaded>, accessed 17 May 2022.

meant that over time, the Belarusian forces were subsumed into the RGF. On paper, both Moscow and Minsk have veto power over ground operations.[52] But it is clear who has ultimate control over the joint operations. Indeed, there is a practical reason for this – the two countries have been conducting joint combat alert duty through their regional air defence systems since 2016, but it is likely that in the event of a conflict, Russia would assume control over Belarus's air defence systems, as Belarus does not have modern air defence systems of its own.[53]

Before the war, the security debate centred around whether Belarus would host a permanent Russian military base, an argument that may now be less pressing. Russia currently leases two military installations in Belarus from the government, a Soviet hangover: a naval communication transmission station near the town of Vileyka, used to link up with submarines, and a long-range radar station near Baranovichi, which Russia leases for free. The installations are mostly symbolic – the radar station is not of particular significance to the Russian military – as the more modern Pionersky early-warning station constructed in Kaliningrad in 2019 is much closer to NATO borders.[54] Neither government understands these installations as military bases (*voennaya baza*), instead referring to them as military objects (*voenniy obyekt*). 'Objects' do not have the same status as bases, which offer a military advantage in a conflict through their use or destruction. Russia argues that the objects in Belarus do not offer such an advantage.[55] The legal status of the objects has in the past allowed Belarus, insisting upon its neutrality, to assert that Russia does not have a permanent military presence in its country.

Construction of an airbase is far less important than consistent cooperation in defence through the exchange of weapons and infrastructure. As the war in Ukraine since February 2022 has demonstrated, Russia is able to deploy troops to Belarus quickly when required, a smooth relationship facilitated by years of cooperation and Lukashenko's reduced room for manoeuvre. As Russian military stationing in Belarus has been a fait accompli since the last joint exercises in February, with Russian fighter jets using both military and civilian airfields in Belarus to conduct strikes on Ukraine, the signing of

52. Belarusian Government, 'Zakon Respubliki Belarus ot 05.05.1998 N143-3: O ratifikatsii Soglasheniye mezhdu Respublikoi Belarus I Rossiskoi Federatsii o sovmestnom obespechenii regionalnoi bezopasnosti v voennoi sfere' ['Law of the Republic of Belarus on 05.05.1998 N143-3: On the Ratification of the Agreement Between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on the Joint Provision of Regional Security in the Military Sphere'], 5 May 1998, <http://pravo.levonevsky.org/bazaby11/republic51/text655.htm>, accessed 15 May 2022.
53. *Ibid*.
54. *TASS*, 'Russia's Advanced Radar in Kaliningrad to Monitor Entire Territory of Europe – Source', 19 March 2020, <https://tass.com/defense/1132191>, accessed 1 June 2022.
55. Mezhdunarodny gumanitarnoye pravo [International Human Rights Law], <https://isfic.info/mgp/gumprav18.htm>, accessed 15 April 2022.

a formal agreement regarding the construction of a physical base may no longer be a necessity.

## THE *TYL*

Belarus's most important function for the Russian armed forces is not as a belligerent – low defence spending has meant that the capabilities of the country's armed forces have waned over the last 30 years and would make little material difference on the battlefield – but as the '*tyl*', providing the logistical, operational and technical support that Russian armed forces receive during both peace and wartime. The Russian phrase '*bez tyla, net pobedi*' ('there is no victory without the rear') was commonly used during the Second World War, highlighting the behind-the-scenes importance of the logistical corps.[56] Having a trustworthy logistical base is vital for Russia to ensure its own deterrence, and the *tyl,* as provided by the Belarusian army in the current Ukraine war, is a fundamental part of Russia's military logistics to ensure that its forces can deploy to the operational theatre.[57]

Belarusian territory has been used in the Ukraine war for three key purposes. First, as a stationing point for Russian troops, of which around 30,000 remained in Belarus following joint exercises held in 2021.[58] Second, as a launch for air and missile strikes on Ukraine, and third, as a logistical base, not only using Belarus's road and rail transport, but also providing important public services for Russian soldiers such as medical facilities, food supplies and morgues.[59] Russia has also been reliant on Belarus's railway network to launch the assault on Kyiv, and earlier in the war there were several reports of sabotage of these tracks, which caused trains to run slowly, delaying important freight deliveries.

The Belarusian army's role has always been to transport Russia's military formations and provide storage facilities, particularly during exercises in Belarusian territory. In one of the first of its kind between countries, an agreement on joint logistical support was signed in 2004 as part of the RGF, giving the Russian army the right to use Belarus's infrastructure and resources during a 'threat' or war. That agreement is the basis on which joint

56. *RIA Birobidzhan*, '"Bez tyla net pobedi!" – medal General armii Khrulev vruchena slesariyu-santekhniku v EAO' ['"Without the Rear There is No Victory!" – The General Khrulev Medal was Awarded to a Plumber from the Jewish Autonomous Region'], 8 October 2022, <https://riabir.ru/354965/>, accessed 18 November 2022.
57. Per Skoglund et al., 'Russian Logistics in the Ukrainian War: Can Operational Failures be Attributed to Logistics?', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* (Vol. 5, No. 1), pp. 99–110.
58. *BBC News*, 'Ukraine Crisis: Russia Keeps Troops in Belarus Amid Ukraine Fears', 20 February 2022.
59. *Radio Free Europe* and *Radio Liberty*, 'In Belarusian Morgues and Hospitals, Clues to Russian Military Losses in Ukraine', 18 March 2022.

exercises and Belarus's support to Russia in the current Ukraine war have been conducted.[60]

The Union State has a specific budget for military–technological cooperation to upgrade military facilities and infrastructure that the RGF uses, including financing regional railway systems.[61] Just before Zapad 2017 began, exercises on the RGF's *tyl* were held to deploy pipelines and fuel to war theatres, as well as establishing rail crossings for Russian units in Belarusian territory.[62] Speed of mobilisation is vital for the Russian military, given the ground forces' reliance on rail, and the Belarusian and Russian defence ministries have improved Belarus's rail network to this end: in 2020, around 260 km of track were upgraded.[63]

The Belarusian Transport Troops (part of the Ministry of Defence) have a tight relationship with the Russian Railway Troops: they transport military units and materiel within Belarus, as well as maintaining facilities and constructing rail lines and crossings within the country. The Railway Troops are a vital part of the Russian armed forces, as road and rail remain the most effective ways of mobilising Russian military units, which facilitated their fast deployment to the front during the initial stages of the Ukraine war.[64]

By the time of the 2021 Zapad exercises, it was clear that the military interdependence between the two countries was approaching its zenith. Zapad 2021 featured around 200,000 personnel, focused on Kaliningrad and the Ukraine border, and involved all Russian military districts.[65] This training scenario, in which NATO states attempted to conduct regime change

Low popular support within Belarus for greater involvement in Ukraine could risk internal destabilisation

60. Belarusian Government, 'Soglasheniye mezhu Pravitelstom Respubliki Belarus i Pravitelstvo Rossiyskoi Federatsii o sovmestnom tilovom obespechenii regionalnoi gruppirovki voisk (sil) vooruzhenikh sil respubliki Belarus i vooruzhenikh cil Rossiyskoi Federatsii' ['Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the Russian Federation on Joint Logistics Support for the Regional Grouping of Troops (Forces) of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation'], 21 December 2004, <http://www.levonevski.net/pravo/razdel3/num1/3d1837.html>, accessed 14 May 2022.
61. *Ibid*.
62. *Ibid*.
63. *Belta*, 'BZhD v 2020 godu otremontirovala bolee 260km puti' ['Belarus Railways in 2020 Repaired More than 260 km of Track'], 6 January 2021, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/bzhd-v-2020-godu-otremontirovala-bolee-260-km-puti-423156-2021/>, accessed 21 May 2022.
64. Emily Ferris, 'Problems of Geography: Military and Economic Transport Logistics in Russia's Far East', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (October 2020).
65. Andrzej Wilk and Piotr Żochowski, 'The Zapad 2021 Exercises: Russian Strategy in Practice', OSW Commentary No. 405, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 3 September 2021, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2021-09-03/zapad-2021-exercises-russian-strategy-practice>, accessed 3 January 2022.

in Belarus, including strikes against Russia, highlighted the two countries' political and military alignment and mutual threat perceptions.[66] The size of the exercises, in comparison with previous years, demonstrated Minsk's abandonment of previous decisions to refuse to host such large exercises. It also showed Russia's willingness to defend its political interests in Belarus, including assisting Lukashenko in the event of a threat to his authority, which offered him some reassurance.

But while Belarus's own low military prowess might suggest that in any given conflict – such as the Ukraine war – it would automatically follow Russia's lead, this has not proven the case thus far. Indeed, Lukashenko's reluctance to send Belarusian troops to Ukraine and his public comments indicate a desire to keep a distance from a protracted war.[67] There may be other issues at play – Lukashenko could be intentionally delaying military improvements to his own forces to avoid deeper integration with Russia, which would bring Belarus more actively into the Ukraine war.[68] Thus far, Lukashenko has been able to be evasive on Belarus's deeper practical involvement, as the Belarusian army's participation in the war would be of little battlefield use. Low popular support within Belarus for greater involvement in Ukraine could also risk internal destabilisation – and Russia is not prepared to run the risk of a politically unstable Belarus on its borders. Delays of full interoperability between Russia and Belarus could frustrate not only Russia's goals in the Ukraine war, but also Russia's more strategic military goals.

## IDEOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Shared military training and ideological propaganda with Russia has over the years helped to engender a mutual threat perception, particularly among senior officers, but gauging the Belarusian military's loyalty is a challenge.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia remained the main training destination for senior Belarusian military specialists, particularly for missile, infantry and air defence troops. Many senior Belarusian officers received their military education and training through the Soviet and then Russian system.[69] This is reflected in Belarus's senior military command: Alexander Volfovich, Chief of General Staff until 2021 and now State Secretary of the Security Council, studied at the Moscow Higher Combined Arms Command School and the Russian General Staff Military Academy.[70] Andrei Burdyko,

66. *Ibid*.
67. Artyom Shraibman, 'Won't Get Fooled Again: Is Lukashenko Trying to Distance Himself from Russia?', Carnegie Moscow Center, 17 May 2022.
68. Alexander Lanoszka, 'The Belarus Factor in European Security', *Parameters: Journal of the US Army War College* (Vol. 47, No. 4, November 2017), pp. 75–84.
69. Andrzej Wilk, *Russia's Belarusian Army: The Practical Aspects of Belarus and Russia's Military Integration* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2021).
70. *Belta*, 'Volfovich Named State Secretary of Belarus's Security Council', 26 January 2021, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/volfovich-named-state-secretary-of-belarus-security-council-136879-2021/>, accessed 20 May 2022.

Deputy Minister of Defence for Logistics since 2017, studied at the Military Academy of Logistics and Transport of the Russian Ministry of Defence.[71] However, it should not be presumed that Belarusian soldiers automatically assume the political positions of Moscow.

Lukashenko has over the years attempted to improve Belarus's own military education offer to reduce its reliance on Russia, with more junior officers training domestically, but Russia is still the main destination for specialised training.[72] These links make it challenging to determine the loyalties of the Belarusian forces – although Lukashenko has occasionally deliberately purged them of their most pro-Russian elements in the past. The top-down nature of both militaries, disempowering junior officers from making decisions or taking initiative, means that senior officers continue to dictate the ideological and political culture of the armed forces, as well as key decisions in battle.

The Minsk Suvorov Military School is one of the main military education programmes for cadets, named after Russian General Alexander Suvorov, a renowned military commander. The Suvorov schools were set up in Russia and Belarus in the 1940s to train young cadets across the USSR and were designed to instil ideas among school-age children about the honour of defending the 'motherland', modelling Suvorov's early experiences with battle.[73] Suvorov's methods and philosophical ideas about patriotism emphasised the importance of education, maintaining that tactics and good morale among soldiers is only part of the picture for victory, and that good training is paramount.[74]

It is telling that the Minsk school, set up in 1952, retains Suvorov's name, indicating a common military mindset, even though one of Suvorov's key achievements was his contribution to Russia's seizure of Belarusian lands. Many senior Belarusian officers are graduates of the Suvorov institution, including Stanislav Zas, a former secretary of the Security Council and current chair of the CSTO, and Andrey Ravkov, minister for defence from 2014 to 2020, and current secretary of the Security Council. The Suvorov school does not name a specific adversary in its training manuals, but it is evident from the description of its ideologies and guiding ethos that they

71. Ministry of Defence of Belarus, 'Vyshii komandovaniy vooruzhennikj sil' ['Senior Command of the Armed Forces'], <https://archive.ph/ePkGZ>, accessed 20 May 2022.
72. Pavel Usov, 'Military Education in the Republic of Belarus', International Strategic Action Network for Security, December 2020, <https://isans.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/militaryeducation_belarus.pdf>, accessed 10 May 2022.
73. Ekaterina Polguev, '"Mi russkiye, mi vsyo odoleyem" – AV Suvorov' ['"We're Russians, We Can Overcome Anything" – AV Suvorov'], *Soviet Russia Independent National Newspaper*, 26 November 2009, <https://www.sovross.ru/articles/401/6593>, accessed 12 May 2022.
74. Alexander Vasilyevich Suvorov, *Nauka pobezhat* [*The Science of Winning*] (St Petersburg: Military Publication of V. Zhukov, 2019 [1913]).

are pitted against the West. Even where training is localised in Belarus, it remains heavily influenced by Russia's concept of threat and war.[75]

Political tensions between Russia and Belarus are reflected in changes to Belarus's military staff. After the annexation of Crimea and Belarus's criticism of Russia, the Belarusian Security Council was thought to have held back promotions for Russia-born and Russia-trained officers.[76] Officially, Russia remained Belarus's key ally, but the fissures in the relationship had a top-down effect.[77] Before, Russia-trained senior officers had been favoured, and played a significant role in military policy. Nevertheless, although Crimea may have had an impact, the most senior positions are still occupied by officers who trained in Russia. In the event of a Russian victory in Ukraine – whatever that may look like – this effect could be inverted, with Belarusian officers who distinguish themselves as part of the *tyl* being accorded with honours.

The emphasis on joint military education goes beyond the armed forces into academia. Belarus has a regional branch of Russia's Academy of Military Science (FAS), a research organisation that teaches on war and strategy, and deepens military research ties and technical expertise with Russia.[78] This is psychologically important, as it contributes to common understandings of concepts of war and the enemy. While its actual impact on the broader psychology of the Belarusian military is difficult to determine, one of the academy's tasks is to work with all other military institutions in Belarus on research and ideology.[79] No other post-Soviet country has a branch of FAS that functions in this manner.

## DEFENCE–INDUSTRIAL TIES

Defence is often cited as the area of deepest coordination between Belarus and Russia, but the Ukraine war could exacerbate existing practical problems.

Since Soviet times, Belarus has depended on Russia as a supplier of military hardware and as the main market for Belarusian manufacturing. Its products are cheaper and of better quality than their Russian counterparts, and when ties between Russian and Ukrainian defence–industrial contracts were severed after Russia annexed Crimea, Belarusian manufacturers moved into the vacuum to fulfil these defence contracts.[80] This has further entrenched

75. Usov, 'Military Education in the Republic of Belarus'.
76. *Ibid*.
77. *Ibid*.
78. Russian Academy of Military Sciences, 'Obshiye svedeniya o Belorusskom otdeleniya' ['General Information About the Belarusian Branch'], 2022, <https://www.avnrf.ru/index.php/regionalnye-otdeleniya/belorusskoe/obshchie-svedeniya>, accessed 12 May 2022.
79. *Ibid*.
80. The best-known example of this was Motor Sich, a Ukrainian manufacturer that builds engines for aeroplanes and helicopters. In 2014, the Ukrainian Security Services investigated the firm and found that the company had provided both

Belarus's longstanding role as defence supplier to Russia – Belarus exports around US$250–300 million of military products to Russia each year.[81] While financially beneficial to Belarus, this interdependence between Russia and Belarus's military–industrial complexes could complicate Russia's military activities and ability to rearm in Ukraine, as Belarusian plants maintain and repair Soviet- and Russia-made equipment such as tanks and aircraft.

The Orsha Aircraft Repair Plant (in which Motor Sich, a Ukrainian manufacturer that builds engines for aeroplanes and helicopters, previously held a controlling stake) services Russia's helicopters, and the 140 Repair Plant in Borisov produces transport and armoured vehicles both for Russia and for internal use in Belarus.[82] The 558 Aircraft Repair Plant in Baranovichi is used to repair Russia's aircraft and train personnel to operate complex aviation materiel for the war in Ukraine. All these entities are currently on the international sanctions lists.[83] Companies such as KB Radar, which supplies radar systems and electronic warfare equipment, and the 558 Aircraft Repair Plant, also supply parts and offer repairs to aircraft to numerous countries, particularly in Africa (Nigeria and Kenya) and Latin America – clients include Venezuela and Colombia.[84] It remains to be seen whether these countries will prefer to take their business elsewhere out of concern over falling foul of these sanctions.[85]

Russia's attempts to 'de-industrialise' by reducing the number of Soviet-era heavy industry plants, alongside a series of bankruptcies and corruption scandals in its own defence production companies, have meant that Belarus is one of the few producers of military-grade components still exporting to

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military and dual-use products to Russia and continued to fulfil orders even after it was ordered to cease. The president of Motor Sich has since been charged with treason in Ukraine.

81. Export.by, '$250–300 m Worth of Belarus Military Products Exported to Russia Every Year', 24 June 2021, <https://export.by/en/news/250-300m-worth-of-belarusian-military-products-exported-to-russia-every-year>, accessed 2 September 2022.
82. Andrei Porotnikov, 'Another Bad Year for National Defence: Relative Successes of the Military–Industrial Complex', in Anatoly Pankovsky and Valeria Kostyugova (eds), *Belarusian Yearbook 2013: A Survey and Analysis of Developments in the Republic of Belarus in 2013* (Minsk: IP Logvinov, 2014).
83. *Federal Register: The Daily Journal of the United States Government*, 'Export Administration Regulations: Revisions to Russia and Belarus Sanctions and Related Provisions, Other Revisions, Corrections and Clarifications', 6 June 2022, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/06/06/2022-11885/export-administration-regulations-revisions-to-russia-and-belarus-sanctions-and-related-provisions>, accessed 13 September 2022.
84. Gavia, 'Today JSC "558 Aircraft Repair Plant"', 2 June 2020, <https://558gavia.com/blog/2020/06/02/today-jsc-558-aircraft-repair-plant/>, accessed 12 September 2022.
85. US Department of the Treasury, 'US Treasury Targets Belarusian Support for Russian Invasion of Ukraine', 24 February 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0607>, accessed 29 August 2022.

Russia.[86] The Russian army is reliant on sensors and the wheeled chassis produced by the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant (MZKT), which is used as a transport and launching platform for missiles such as the Topol-M.[87] The Minsk Automobile Plant produces trucks and tractor trailers used for towing and installing Russian systems such as the Iskander-M missiles and S-400 air defence systems. Russia has struggled to identify a replacement for these services domestically; there are two factories that can potentially construct the chassis – one in Bryansk and another in Naberezhnye Chelny – but their products are much more expensive and have been criticised for their poor quality, so are rarely used by the military.[88] While some of this low-tech material is unlikely to fundamentally frustrate Russia's overall military aims, the provision of aviation training, as well as transportation vehicles, could slow down Russia's efforts in Ukraine.

Belarus's defence–industrial complexes are heavily export-oriented: of the 25 companies that are controlled by the State Committee on Military Industry (Goskomvoenprom), only 10 are designed to fulfil Belarus's domestic defence procurement.[89] Although there are plans to increase it, Minsk's own defence spending is around 1% of its GDP: lower than its internal security spend, revealing Lukashenko's perception of threat sources.[90] The Belarusian army is underfunded, mostly using Russian cast-offs for equipment (a common complaint of Lukashenko's) that are more than 20 years old.[91] Russia is also frustrated by this outsourcing of manpower and production to Belarus, and has long attempted to persuade Belarus to allow its dual use and key defence factories to be opened to Russian investors, which Minsk has successfully resisted, charging exorbitant prices for controlling stakes.[92] This form of

Without the *tyl* (rear), Russia may not be able to achieve some of its strategic security goals

86. Vladimir Tuchkov, 'Yars – s belorusskim aksentom' ['Yars – With a Belarusian Accent'], *Voenno-Promishlenniy Kuryer*, 4 August 2020, <https://vpk.name/news/427794_yars_s_belorusskim_akcentom.html>, accessed 19 May 2022.
87. *Ibid*.
88. Alexander Privalov, 'Mnogostradalniye tyagachi: ob importozameshenii shassi dlya Raketnikh voisk strategicheskovo naznacheniya' ['Longsuffering Tractors: On the Import Substitution of the Chassis for the Strategic Missile Forces'], *Voenno-Promishlenniy Kurier*, 25 August 2020, <https://vpk.name/news/438370_mnogostradalnye_tyagachi.html>, accessed 19 May 2022.
89. Belarus Security Blog, 'The Belarusian Military–Industrial Complex is at Risk', 30 March 2021, <https://bsblog.info/the-belarusian-military-industrial-complex-is-at-risk/>, accessed 5 May 2022.
90. Privalov, 'Mnogostradalniye tyagachi: ob importozameshenii shassi dlya Raketnikh voisk strategicheskovo naznacheniya' ['Longsuffering Tractors: On the Import Substitution of the Chassis for the Strategic Missile Forces'].
91. Sergei Ostrina, 'Voenniy budzhet Belarusi: vneshniye ugrozi poka ne v prioritat' ['Belarus's Military Budget: External Threats are Not Yet a Priority'], *Voenno–Politischeskoye Obozreniye* [*Military–Political Review*], 12 November 2019, <https://vpk.name/news/345314_voennyi_byudzhet_belarusi_vneshnie_ugrozy_poka_ne_v_prioritete.html>, accessed 14 May 2022.
92. Siarhei Bohdan, 'Belarus Strengthens Defence Sector Cooperation with Ukraine', *Belarus Digest*, 23 December 2014, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-strengthens-defense-sector-cooperation-with-ukraine/>, accessed 5 May 2022.

integration does not portray two armies operating seamlessly together, but rather a producer–exporter and client relationship.

Belarus's struggling economy, under pressure from Western sanctions, may cause problems for Russia's military supply chain down the line. MZKT (a manufacturer of military trucks) and its senior management have been under UK and European sanctions, including asset freezes and travel bans, since December 2020, for their role in supporting the repression of civil society in Belarus by providing equipment to the police and security services, and they were sanctioned by the US in February 2022 for contributing to Russia's defence and transport sectors.[93] In 2021, MZKT published its financial results, which showed its revenue shrinking from US$152 million in 2019 to US$115 million in 2020, a fall of almost a quarter.[94] Other international sanctions, including from Norway and Japan, are isolating Belarus from the international supply chain, and most major Belarusian banks are also under restrictions, which could put pressure on Belarus's ability to finance the manufacturing of these products.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has adopted a critical approach in examining whether Russia's framing of its defence relationship with Belarus can be cast as one of its potential vulnerabilities. As the paper has highlighted, the deep integration between the Belarusian and Russian armies and Moscow's ultimate command of the strategic level firmly casts Belarus as the junior and subservient partner.

Russia's understanding of Belarus – and the military functions it provides – as an extension of Russian territory, an idea reinforced by analysis that describes Belarus as a mere Russian military district – may mean that the Kremlin does not yet recognise the dependent relationship as a problem. The Russian security community may not view the outsourcing of its provision of important military functions as a fundamental weakness, but it is increasingly clear that without the *tyl,* Russia may not be able to achieve some of its strategic security goals. It cannot be assumed that the Belarusian military would unquestioningly fight – or supply – the Russian military in pursuit of Russia's political goals, particularly if attaining those goals would weaken Lukashenko's personal power.[95]

Belarus's deepening involvement in the Ukraine war, and a potentially unfavourable outcome for Russia and Belarus, could seriously impact Lukashenko's domestic stability. The relationship may be stable for now, but economic issues in Belarus that could delay supplies, or instigate political

93. US Department of the Treasury, 'US Treasury Targets Belarusian Support for Russian Invasion of Ukraine'.
94. Belarus Security Blog, 'The Belarusian Military–Industrial Complex is at Risk'.
95. US Department of the Treasury, 'US Treasury Targets Belarusian Support for Russian Invasion of Ukraine'.

changes in the country – especially regime change – could impact on Russia's practical ability to rearm. NATO Allies should not overlook Belarus's role as an important regional player, whether Lukashenko is disrupting Russia's actions intentionally or unintentionally.

This means that an understanding of the potential frictions between Belarus and Russia should be informing NATO's defence planning. While the two countries' close links make it challenging to decouple them, determining where disagreements are would be useful when attempting to plan future scenarios, particularly relating to the outcome of the Ukraine war. Notwithstanding that the Ukraine war may have temporarily aligned their rhetoric, the bilateral relationship is not immune to change, and there are already numerous divergences in their threat perceptions and prioritisation of interests. There are also several risks on the horizon that could impact on the relationship.

For Russia to ensure a smooth supply chain in future, it would have to apportion finances, domestic training and practical expertise to replace its reliance on Belarus for military-grade components. Economic issues in Belarus will mean that unless Russia continues to prop up the Belarusian economy, reliable supplies of military-grade components could be difficult to acquire. Reluctant to return to heavy manufacturing, Russia will be forced to offer Belarus significant loans, a challenge for a Russia under economic pressure itself. Although it may not be decisive, this could have implications for the course of the Ukraine war, as well as impacting on Russia's supply chain delivery of its existing contracts as a weapons exporter.

Although unlikely at this stage, this risk would be exacerbated by any regime change in Belarus in the coming years that may seek to revise those defence contracts. Many of Russia's defence relationships, such as with India, Latin America and Africa, depend on its ability to fulfil contracts, which it partly outsources to Belarusian maintenance and repair plants. Disruption to these relationships could affect Russia's status as a global security actor, leaving a vacuum for other countries, such as China, to step in. Russia's key defence weaknesses may lie not in personnel, weaponry or doctrine, but in third-party outsourcing.

The political environment in Belarus could also be uncertain. The Kremlin has made it clear that it would like to see some alternative political groups emerge in Belarus, and perhaps ultimately a controlled transfer of power to another figure, but the closer Belarus's defence ties with Russia, the less likely it is for democratic forces to influence the domestic environment.

Fundamentally, while unified doctrines, military interoperability, and ideology place Belarus firmly within Russia's security orbit for now, prospects for change are not beyond view. The Belarusian *tyl* as the soft underbelly of the Russian armed forces may have been partially recognised by Russia's senior leadership, but the few practical steps taken to address it have not yet succeeded in reducing Russia's reliance on Belarus for machine parts,

vehicles and specialist training. The deeper that military integration with Belarus grows, the more pressing this issue will become for Russia in future.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Emily Ferris** is a Research Fellow in the International Security Studies team at RUSI, specialising in Russian domestic politics. Emily has a particular interest in Russia's military and civilian infrastructure including its railways, road and port systems, and the role this plays in advancing Russia's political ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region, as well as deployed in conflict zones such as Ukraine. She also researches domestic political administrations in Russia's Far East, and Russia's military and political relationship with Belarus. She holds a BA in Russian from the University of Cambridge and an MSc in Organised Crime and Terrorism from University College London, where she specialised in Russian organised crime.

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