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The Belarusian Vector of the Russian Threat to NATO

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The stationing of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus, now confirmed, and the recently announced redeployment of some Wagner Group fighters to this country is a powerful signal that what NATO is about to face to its East will be an even more multifaceted threat than before. By turning Belarus into a de facto vassal, Russia gains a whole set of new options of a hybrid, conventional and nuclear character for controlled escalation against NATO in the future. This poses a challenge for the Alliance's approach to defence and deterrence, including in the nuclear dimension, as well as resilience-building efforts.

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Until 2020, the defence integration of Russia and Belarus had been a sluggish process, marked by a cautious, step-by-step approach by the Kremlin with clear reluctance from Alexander Lukashenka to allow Russia to widen its control over Belarusian defences. The result was, first, that the Russian military footprint in Belarus was kept small. Second, the Belarusian vector of the Russian threat to NATO was largely omitted in expert discussions on the Eastern Flank escalation scenarios, even if there were strong indications that in certain contingencies Belarus would immediately become a Russian asset.

The dynamics between Russia and Belarus changed dramatically after the rigged presidential elections of August 2020.

The dynamics between Russia and Belarus changed dramatically after the rigged presidential elections of August 2020.¹ The brutal crackdown that followed on protesters and democratic opposition, who took to the streets in defiance of the electoral fraud, left Lukashenka with almost no internal legitimacy and having no choice but to finally turn to Russia for help with keeping power. This also meant accepting the Russian vision (and perhaps also schedule) of the Belarus-Russia integration, including in the military and domestic security domains.

It was then, when questions began to be asked, whether Russia had a special role for Belarus in its broader concept of escalation against the West. The validation of these concerns came on 24 February 2022 when Belarus enabled the invasion of Ukraine by allowing Russia to use its territory for both the movement of land forces and missile attacks.² Soon after, Belarus started to provide vast logistical and medical support as well as training for Russian forces, while the ongoing prospect of the Belarusian military actively joining the attack became a factor complicating Ukrainian operational calculations.

Today, it seems Lukashenka has passed the point of no return when it comes to the dependency of his regime on Russia. The deeply asymmetrical nature of this relation is unlikely to change unless there is some liberalisation inside Russia itself, which is impossible at least for the foreseeable future. Consequently, Russia will have an open door to test what additional options of escalation against the West can be provided by turning Belarus into Russia's *de facto* vassal. This poses a whole set of challenges for NATO.

First of them is that the expansion of Russian military infrastructure in Belarus, together with the potential deployment of larger Russian forces there and with Wagner Group forces already deployed to Belarus,³ may require the Alliance to rethink some basic assumptions regarding how it plans to defend the Eastern Flank against Russian escalation, including revisiting the size and format of forward-deployed Allied forces. Second, the presence of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus may prompt NATO to formulate more ambitious nuclear policy and perhaps also develop conventional and nuclear links within the broader approach to defence and deterrence. Third, the Alliance's concept of building resilience to the broadly understood grey zone activities (i.e., hybrid) may need to be updated to take into account a likely surge in such threats coming from the Belarusian direction.

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¹ For more, see: A. M. Dyer, "Belarusian Presidential Election: Towards Dependence on Russia," *PISM Bulletin* No. 166/2020, https://pism.pl/publications/Belarusian_Presidential_Election__Towards_Dependence_on_Russia.

² For more, see: A. M. Dyer, "Belarusian-Russian Cooperation During the War with Ukraine," *PISM Spotlight* No. 59/2022, <https://pism.pl/publications/belarusian-russian-cooperation-during-the-war-with-ukraine>.

³ For more, see: A. M. Dyer, "What is the Significance of Prigozhin's Revolt for Russian Security Policy?" *PISM Spotlight* No. 26/2023, <https://pism.pl/publications/what-is-the-significance-of-prigozhins-revolt-for-russian-security-policy>.

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Russian-Belarusian Military Cooperation up to 24 February 2022

The legal basis for military cooperation between Belarus and Russia is, first and foremost, the 1997 bilateral agreement on military cooperation, the 1999 Security Concept of the Union State of Belarus and Russia,⁴ and agreements related to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).⁵

For almost a decade Lukashenka has been able to effectively oppose establishing a Russian airbase in Belarus, something that Russia has long pressed him to accept.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has maintained two major military installations in Belarus: a radiolocation station in Hancevichi (near Baranovichi), which monitors outer space in the western direction as part of the Russian system of early warning against nuclear attack; and a nuclear submarine communications centre in Vileyka (Minsk province). Notably, for almost a decade Lukashenka has been able to effectively oppose establishing a Russian

airbase in Belarus, something that Russia has long pressed him to accept. Apart from that, both countries regularly conducted joint military exercises over the last two decades involving high-visibility manoeuvres such as *Zapad* or *Union Shield*, conducted at two-year intervals. At the same time, these drills used to be the largest combat-readiness tests of the Regional Forces Group, being the formal and practical vehicle for Belarus-Russia military cooperation ever since the creation of the Union State.⁶

A legacy of the Soviet era, there have been strong ties between the defence industrial and technological bases of both countries. Belarus has been providing Russia with navigation equipment, components for satellite communication systems, radios, and optical equipment, among others. For Russia, the most important industrial partner in Belarus is the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant, which produces transport-erector-launcher vehicles used as the main platform for some Russian missile systems, including ICBM launchers, and Peleng, the exclusive supplier of fire-control systems for major lines of Russian tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles. Some of the other Belarusian companies crucial to the supply chains of the Russian defence industrial and technological base include Integral, a manufacturer of semiconductors and microchips used in, among others, nuclear weapons, and Horizont, a producer of latest-generation displays.

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Russia in turn has supported the Belarusian armed forces for years with weapons and military equipment, as well as munitions, spare parts, fuel, and servicing kits. Russia also paid for military exercises conducted in Belarus and for the preparation and maintenance of training grounds provided by Belarus.

Despite extensive cooperation with Russia, Belarus was able for years to maintain considerable independence in its defence policy.

Notably, despite extensive cooperation with Russia, Belarus was able for years to maintain considerable independence in its defence policy. One example was the March 2020 common exercise of the UK Royal Marines (the

⁴ The Union State of Belarus and Russia was established on the basis of the signed Union State Treaty of 8 December 1999. The aim of it is to deepen cooperation between both states through integration in economic and defence policy.

⁵ The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) is an intergovernmental military alliance in Eurasia consisting of six post-Soviet states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. The organisation operates under the Collective Security Treaty of 1992, of which Art. 4 states that aggression against one member will be regarded as aggression against all members (*casus foederis*). For more, see: A. M. Dyer, "The CSTO Operation in Kazakhstan," *PISM Bulletin* No. 9/2022, <https://pism.pl/publications/the-csto-operation-in-kazakhstan>.

⁶ The Regional Forces Group includes units of the armed forces of both Belarus and Russia and was formed in 2000. Its aim is to protect the Union State of Belarus and Russia. For more, see: A. M. Dyer, "Belarus Announces the Formation of a Regional Forces Group with Russia," *PISM Spotlight* No. 132/2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/belarus-announces-the-formation-of-a-regional-forces-group-with-russia>.

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Plymouth-based 42nd Commando) and the Peacekeeping Company of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division, which were held in Belarus. Formally, Belarus had been a participant in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme until the invasion of Ukraine.

Belarus from the 2020 Rigged Election to a Russian Vassal

The military and economic integration of Belarus and Russia accelerated sharply only after the rigged 2020 presidential election. This was the price Lukashenka had to pay for Russian support during the mass post-election protests. By falsifying the election results, Lukashenka made the further development of relations with Western countries almost impossible. In autumn 2020, Belarus and Russia returned to negotiations on economic and military cooperation, which had been blocked by the former since 2019. As a result, on 4 November, at a meeting of the Supreme State Council of the Union State, Belarus and Russia signed the "Guidelines for Implementing the Provisions of the Treaty Establishing the Union State in 2021–2023", which included 28 more detailed integration programmes. Among them were proposals regarding the formation of a common agricultural and industrial policy, harmonisation of fiscal and financial policy, and the creation of a Union State Committee for Tax Affairs. However, the 28 programmes were only a prelude to further joint projects. In December 2022, Belarus and Russia announced the preparation of further projects for 2024-2026. Their common goal is to deepen bilateral cooperation in industry and agriculture, transport, and nuclear energy. In practice, however, their implementation will equal the subordination of the Belarusian economy in these branches to the Russian. It will also mean Belarus must adopt the Russian legal system regulating these areas.

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Putin not only recognised the elections as fair and free but also sent special police units (OMON) to Belarus, which were actively used to suppress the protests. What is more, Russian journalists were sent to Belarus to support local propaganda efforts after quite a large number of journalists (at least by Belarusian standards), previously loyal to the regime, quit their jobs in protest. Lukashenka was also officially supported by Russian propaganda, which framed the protests as the result of sinister actions by Western countries. Moreover, Russia increased its economic support to Belarus, which has largely allowed the Belarusian authorities to reduce the negative effects of EU and U.S. sanctions.

At the same time, Belarus is becoming more and more dependent on Russia in foreign trade. In 2022, Russia strengthened its position as Belarus' main trading partner—its share in Belarusian foreign trade increased by 10 percentage points (p.p.) to 60%. The same trend is visible in foreign investments. According to the National Statistical Committee, in 2022 Belarus received \$7 billion in foreign investment, with Russia being the source of 56.1% of all investments. These figures alone show how Belarus is becoming critically dependent on the condition of the Russian economy.

Since 2020, military integration between Russia and Belarus has sharply accelerated, particularly with the new version of the Union State Military Doctrine published in 2021.

Since 2020, military integration between Russia and Belarus has sharply accelerated, particularly with the new version of the Union State Military Doctrine published in 2021. The previous version was adopted in December 2001, two years after the agreement on forming the Union State was signed. Neither country attempted to revise it until 2018, when Belarus blocked the signing of a revised version. Interestingly, the new military doctrine of the Union State was finally

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negotiated only with the tightening of the integration of Russia and Belarus, and it was published in February 2022, just days before Russia invaded Ukraine.

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Most important, the document signals that the Union State is more likely to confront the West rather than to cooperate with it. It also stresses that, except for in a time of peace or war (which typically form the matrix that define the tasks of the state—its structures, armed forces,

etc.— in strategic documents adopted worldwide), there is also “a time of increasing military threat”. The new doctrine actually focuses on this period, which, according to this document, may be long-lasting. The key point is that if such contingency is declared (i.e., by one of the countries, as Belarus did in 2022), both countries can increase the legal prerogatives of their armed forces and security services to conduct operations against a potential adversary.

This is the context in which Lukashenka’s decision from October 2022 regarding the forming the Regional Forces Group should be seen. According to Lukashenka, the decision was a response to a sustained threat posed by NATO countries, including Poland, which was modernising its units stationed in the east of the country, and, allegedly, was preparing terrorist groups to act on Belarusian territory. Russian agreement to form the Regional Forces Group indicates at the same time that Russia formally shared the Belarusian perception of threats emanating from NATO countries, including in the non-military security sphere.⁷ The language used to justify the decision suggests that the doctrine may in practice be a convenient way to enable increased Russian military activities in Belarus.

According to the new doctrine, both states declare the intent to increase the number of joint regular exercises, to deepen cooperation between their defence industries, and to further develop military infrastructure. The document considers hybrid threats such as information warfare and cyberthreats as very important challenges to the security of the Union State, which can be understood as not only will Belarus and Russia improve their defences against these alleged threats but also will take active measures against NATO in the grey zone (hybrid) domain.⁸

What followed the adoption of the doctrine was the creation of a “common defence space” between Belarus and Russia, which was announced during Putin’s visit to Minsk in December 2022. In practice, this agreement primarily will mean close coordination of, if not joint, defence and operational planning. Next, there will be more military activities in Belarus, which will extend in scope and size beyond previous ones. They will include more joint drills, including in areas directly bordering NATO states.

Finally, both Russia and Belarus declared in 2023 that they were working on the security concept of the Union State. It can be assumed that the goal may be to increase cooperation between the

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security services and the judiciary of the two states by establishing a legal and administrative framework that would allow, for instance, operations by Russian agencies to be conducted in Belarus (and, at least theoretically, *vice versa*).

⁷ For more, see: A. M. Dyer, “Belarus Announces the Formation of a Regional Forces Group with Russia,” *PISM Spotlight* No. 132/2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/belarus-announces-the-formation-of-a-regional-forces-group-with-russia>.

⁸ For more, see: A. M. Dyer, “New Military Doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia,” *PISM Bulletin* No. 28/2022, <https://pism.pl/publications/new-military-doctrine-of-the-union-state-of-belarus-and-russia>.

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The Invasion of Ukraine: From Russia's "Back Office" to a Strategic Asset

A logical consequence of the tightening of defence ties between Russia and Belarus since 2021 is the support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which started well before 24 February 2022. The joint *Allied Resolve* exercises held between 10 and 20 February 2022 enabled Russia to deploy tens of thousands of troops to Belarus.⁹ What followed was the active use of Belarusian territory by Russia for carrying out various military actions against Ukraine. Most importantly, the main offensive

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towards Kyiv was launched from Belarus, and since then Russian troops have been carrying out missile strikes from Belarus on Ukrainian territory and using Belarusian airfields for air operations against Ukraine.

This is, however, only part of the picture. Belarusian support for the Russian attack on Ukraine is much broader than merely allowing Russia to use its territory. To begin with, the Belarusian military runs a vast training programme for newly mobilised Russian soldiers. Belarus also provides these soldiers with accommodation, food, uniforms, personal equipment, and first aid kits. Reports from the battlefields in Ukraine show that Russian units trained in Belarus present visibly higher combat capacities than most other Russian soldiers. Next, Belarus provides the Russian forces with weapons and military systems—tanks, munitions, and other weapons that had been in Belarusian stocks and are now made available to the Russians. The staging areas and bases for Russian troops deployed to Belarus are defended by Belarusian air-defence systems. Last, but not least, Russian forces are provided with very broad medical and logistical support by Belarus. The latter involves fuel and other petroleum products, which are provided to Russian units fighting in Ukraine by Belarusian refineries. Russian weapons are also maintained and serviced by Belarusian repair facilities, while Russian soldiers are treated in Belarusian hospitals.

According to independent Ukrainian estimates, there are now around 3,000 Russian troops deployed to Belarus.¹⁰ Although their presence has to be seen strictly in the context of Russian military needs arising from the invasion of Ukraine, there is more to it. For now, it is clear that because of how vital Belarusian support is for the Russian military, there is no chance that Russia will loosen its control—perhaps even total by this point—over the political situation in Belarus. Russian troops in Belarus can be seen as the best guarantee that no 2020-like anti-regime demonstrations are likely, much less any pro-democratic changes. Even in case of a widely speculated scenario in which Lukashenka would suddenly become unable to run the office of the president, no change, other than one that would guarantee the Russian grip on Belarus, is possible.

Sustained control over Belarus offers Russia both a strategic asset vis-à-vis the West and a set of benefits in the internal dimension.

In the longer run, Russia is also unlikely to make any U-turn in its approach to Belarus, regardless of how the war in Ukraine ends. Simply put, sustained control over Belarus offers Russia both a strategic asset vis-à-vis the West and a set of benefits in the internal dimension. The latter could be particularly important if the sense of loss becomes predominant in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. In a twisted sense, turning Belarus into a Russian vassal could be seen in Russia (with a proper propaganda effort) as at least one, palpable success of the Russian quest to reintegrate the post-Soviet space. Hence, it may help in solidifying Putin's grip on power, or that of any potential successor, who is very unlikely to represent a more liberal policy option. Further, Belarus also offers Russia significant economic opportunities, which stem from the countries' developed industrial base, agriculture, and, to some extent, foreign trade links.

⁹ For more, see: A. M. Dyer, "Before the Invasion: The Russian-Belarusian Allied Resolve Exercises," *PISM Bulletin* No. 37/2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/before-the-invasion-the-russian-belarusian-allied-resolve-exercises>.

¹⁰ "Nearly 2,800 Russian troops remain in Belarus, Ukraine says," *The new voice of Ukraine*, <https://english.nv.ua/>.

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The Belarusian Vector of the Future Russian Threat to NATO

It is safe to assume that with time, the Russian military footprint in Belarus will only grow. Further, its scope and complexity may evolve to include capabilities long not seen in Belarus, like nuclear weapons, the deployment which has already been announced. While it is hard to predict which path Russia will take in expanding its military posture in Belarus, it will naturally be centred on three elements—infrastructure, exercises, and forward-deployed forces.

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Infrastructure, here broadly understood as both military and dual-use facilities (objects) and systems that enable military operations, is likely to be of particular importance for Russia.

Obviously, the infrastructure-related needs of the Russian armed forces will not be a function of its goals with regards to Belarus itself (which could involve, for instance, increasing the interoperability of both countries' militaries, something that would naturally require expanding training grounds or storage sites for additional Russian military equipment). The primary driver of the Russian approach to Belarusian military infrastructure will be rather the context of the potential escalation scenarios against NATO. More specifically, Russia is likely to look at Belarus in a way similar to the Soviet approach to its Westernmost Warsaw Pact Allies—as a springboard for military action against NATO. Hence, Russia is likely to both expand the existing Belarusian facilities/systems that can be used almost freely by Russian forces already today, and start new investments. The latter may include, first and foremost, munitions/equipment stocks and railway logistic hubs, which would be instrumental in allowing Russia swift movement of larger contingents of its forces to Belarus and later enable their operations. Among the likely lessons learned for Russia from Ukraine are that robust logistical support, ready from day one of a conflict, is a prerequisite for any successful military operation. Paradoxically, Russia was unable to establish effective rear-area support on its own territory for months following 24 February 2022, but may be in a better position to achieve that goal with regards to Belarus in the future.

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Among the likely lessons learned for Russia from Ukraine are that robust logistical support, ready from day one of a conflict, is a prerequisite for any successful military operation.

In exercises, there are already strong indications that their number and scale is on an upward track. According to Sergei Shoigu, Russian minister of defence, Russia and Belarus held more than 20 joint military exercises in 2022. Even more are planned for 2023, including the major *Zapad* and *Union Shield* manoeuvres. Looking at past iterations of these high-visibility exercises, at least several thousand soldiers will be involved. Russia is also unlikely to lose such an opportunity

to signal the West that it maintains its resolve and still has considerable capacity to inflict damage on NATO. To meet such goals, Russia may again include provocative elements in the scenarios, such as new simulated nuclear strikes on NATO (as it did in 2009 during the *Zapad* drills) or episodes played out directly on NATO borders. The destabilising potential of such activities is obvious and may be even greater if Russia decides to include snap exercises involving forces already deployed to Belarus. A series of such drills may be easily used by Russia to escalate tensions in the Eastern Flank in pursuit of its broader political interests. Moreover, taking advantage of the presence of Wagner Group mercenaries in Belarus, both countries—during major manoeuvres like *Zapad* or *Union Shield*—may try to use them to organise provocations against the services protecting the borders of the Eastern Flank countries.

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Further, snap exercises are also a proven way of disguising preparations for an actual military operation, which in this context would mean Russian escalation against a NATO member. Ambiguity

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as regards the Russia's true intentions would be at the same time higher due to the potential of less clear early warnings/indicators. Some crucial marks seen by NATO prior to 24 February 2022 would not be so obvious, as many elements of logistic or medical support could be established in Belarus on a permanent basis.

Finally, one cannot dismiss the perspective of Russia forward-deploying some forces to Belarus quasi-permanently, including to areas adjacent to the borders with NATO. While some support or command and control elements are bound to be deployed permanently to Belarus—mainly because of the need to effectively command the Regional Forces Group, or with regards to the upcoming deployment of nuclear weapons—some manoeuvring land units or air detachments could be rotated to Belarus on a regular basis. Thereby, Russia would be able to establish quasi-permanent military pressure on the eastern border of NATO. Together with the natural ability to engage such forces in exercises, Russia would be able to dial up or down military tensions on the border with NATO as it wishes.

Russia would be able to establish quasi-permanent military pressure on the eastern border of NATO.

The nuclear element of the Russian posture in Belarus may require separate analysis, as not only has it a clear external but also an internal dimension. Regarding the latter, it seems that it is a Russian statement to Lukashenka—and, more broadly, to Belarusian political elites—about how much Russia considers Belarus now irreversibly linked to it, to say the least. Officially, the decision on the deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus was presented as proof of Russia's readiness to defend Belarus and the entire territory of the Union State. Moreover, Lukashenka himself stressed that it was also a result of his very own, long-term efforts and that he had been highlighting for years that the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the territory of Belarus following the collapse of the USSR was a mistake. Yet, what is somewhat lost in this picture is the fact that not only will Russian nuclear weapons remain under the exclusive control of Russia (which is natural given both the USSR practice towards Warsaw Pact countries and the U.S. approach to NATO allies) but also that there are no signals that Russia will include Belarus in any form of consultations on planning or deciding about the use of nuclear weapons (again, as was the case in the USSR, but different to how NATO nuclear-sharing works).¹¹ This means in practice that the Belarusian forces—if they are assigned a nuclear mission at all—will likely be playing a strictly executive role, while taking all the risks stemming from nuclear escalation. It is hard to imagine a better testament to how natural it is for Russia to consider Belarusian integration *fait accompli*.

The very fact that Russian nuclear weapons are deployed in the vicinity of NATO border does not change the strategic situation between the U.S./NATO and Russia in any way.

At the same time, the external dimension of this decision pertains in a natural way to the adequacy of NATO's defence and deterrence posture. To begin with the obvious: the very fact that Russian nuclear weapons are deployed in the vicinity of NATO border does not change the strategic situation between the U.S./NATO and Russia in any way. Neither are the delivery systems, some of which were already deployed

to Belarus as a novelty, such as the 9K720 Iskander system, which had already been based close to NATO borders. However, a permanent deployment of such systems to Belarus would enable Russia to broaden its escalation options against NATO at the operational level. More specifically, they

¹¹ For more, see: A. M. Dwyer, A. Kacprzyk, "Russia Preparing the Deployment of Nuclear Weapons in Belarus," *PISM Spotlight* No 17-2023, <https://pism.pl/publications/russia-preparing-the-deployment-of-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus>.

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provide Russia with some extra capacity (number- and time-wise) to engage high-value targets on NATO territory (particularly Poland due to geographical factors) and, thereby, further complicate Allied calculations as regards the planning of defence operation on the Eastern Flank. Perhaps more importantly, however, Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus will likely underwrite Russia's notorious nuclear signalling, so that it could start having detrimental effects on Allied cohesion. Any movements, exercise, or merely increase of readiness of nuclear missiles deployed "at NATO borders" would hit news programmes all across Europe and America. The latter is something that Russia would count on precisely in a contingency of escalating tensions and a quickly evolving crisis, albeit without crossing the threshold of war. Needless to say, the menace of "nuclear annihilation", if picked up by public opinion in some key NATO countries, could be playing right into Russia's likely political goals in such scenario. Russia may believe this will help paralyse NATO's decision-making in a conflict—and the Alliance should disabuse Russia of this notion.

The Russians are already considering the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus as a future bargaining chip in relations with the U.S. and NATO.

Moreover, the Russians are already considering the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus as a future bargaining chip in relations with the U.S. and NATO. This means that Russia, in return for the possible withdrawal of these weapons from Belarus, may for instance expect the U.S. to withdraw its nuclear weapons from Europe. We can also expect that, in return for such a step, Russia could also

demand the withdrawal of NATO military infrastructure from countries that joined the Alliance after 1997 (as it expected in its demands for security guarantees published at the end of 2021).¹²

Notwithstanding the military dimension of the threat to NATO coming from the Russia-Belarus vector, there is also a clear hybrid/grey zone aspect. Already today, Belarus plays an instrumental role in Russian hybrid campaigns against NATO countries, and particularly the Eastern Flank nations. The most visible example is the ongoing border crisis, which includes direct attacks on the border infrastructure of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia by Belarusian services and manipulation of migrants. The border crisis that started in 2021 is the most serious, continuing hybrid attack on NATO territory to date.¹³ As is now evident, Russia's goal was to divide and distract NATO, and more broadly, the politically-defined West, over the situation of migrants as a means of preparing the ground for the invasion of Ukraine. Through public polarisation and heated discussions about the optimal reaction to the crisis, the public trust in state institutions in the affected countries was meant to be undermined and their relations with Western allies were to be burdened with tensions. Notably, the operation at the border was accompanied by Belarusian and Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns aimed at, in particular, public opinion in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, along with military and diplomatic activities.

Belarus plays an instrumental role in Russian hybrid campaigns against NATO countries, and particularly the Eastern Flank nations.

Regardless of the construction of a physical barrier on the border with Belarus, over the last several weeks the Polish Border Guard has been reporting that dozens or even hundreds of people have been trying to cross the border irregularly every day. The unchanged goal of Belarus and Russia in their orchestrated action of manipulating migrants into attempting to cross the border through irregular means is to undermine the position of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia within NATO and the EU as countries reluctant to accept refugees and migrants. Maintaining constant tension at the border

¹² For more, see: A.M. Dyer, M. Terlikowski, "Potential Impact of Russia's Demands on NATO's Defence and Deterrence," *PISM Bulletin* No. 218/2021, <https://pism.pl/publications/potential-impact-of-russias-demands-on-natos-defence-and-deterrence>.

¹³ For more, see: A.M. Dyer, "The Border Crisis as an Example of Hybrid Warfare," *PISM Strategic File* No. 2/2022, <https://pism.pl/publications/the-border-crisis-as-an-example-of-hybrid-warfare>.

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allows Russia to burden Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia with increasing costs of intensified border protection, including electronic surveillance and physical protection.

The border crisis is just one example of a hybrid tactic that Russia may deploy against NATO, with Belarus as its proxy. The value of Belarus in this context should be seen as considerable, at least from the Russian perspective. For practical reasons, like geographical proximity to NATO's easternmost allies, the lower language barrier, or established business contacts or people-to-people relations with these countries makes Belarus better positioned to run grey zone/hybrid operations on the Eastern Flank than Russia. In the Russian concept of hybrid conflict, plausible deniability lays at the core of its efforts, as it allows more freedom of action and also enables political benefits. It is simply a necessity if the objectives of grey zone/hybrid action, being the destabilisation of the opponent's military and economic capacity, are to be achieved through information and psychological operations, supporting radical political forces, and by conducting terrorist and diversionary activities. Hence, Russia is likely to use Belarus as a proxy agent in a broad, hybrid campaign against NATO. Such a campaign would involve potentially not only orchestrating artificial migration pressure or running disinformation campaigns on social media but also conducting cyberattacks or acts of sabotage aimed at critical and ICT infrastructure. Facilities such as power plants, transmission networks, and railway lines, especially those running to Ukraine, will be particularly vulnerable to diversionary acts and cyberattacks.

Russia is likely to use Belarus as a proxy agent in a broad, hybrid campaign against NATO.

The presence of Wagner Group mercenaries in Belarus entails additional risks. The mercenaries may become involved in trafficking people from African countries to Belarus and then to the border with NATO countries. Poland, and other countries on the Eastern Flank, may also become targets of attacks carried out by troll farms linked to the Wagner Group and located not only in Russia (formally owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the "Patriot" media group has been closed down, but this does not necessarily mean the end of its activities) but also in Africa. Moreover, Wagner mercenaries, equipped with Belarusian passports, could be sent to Eastern Flank countries to identify critical infrastructure facilities and, in extreme cases, to launch physical attacks against them. Thus, the presence of Russian mercenaries in Belarus may pose a number of additional challenges for NATO related to increasing the necessary protection against hybrid threats.

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The Belarusian vector of the future Russian threat to NATO has clear conventional, nuclear, and hybrid dimensions, which impinge Allied defence posture, including operational plans, the command and control structures, forces, and resilience. The pressing question for the Alliance should then be whether decisions, such as implementing the concept of the "defence of every inch of Allied territory" as adopted in Madrid in 2022, are adequate to the challenges stemming from Russia with Belarus as its vassal.

The Belarusian vector of the future Russian threat to NATO has clear conventional, nuclear, and hybrid dimensions.

Implications for NATO

First and foremost, new NATO operational plans to be accepted at the Vilnius Summit should be examined with regards to the adequacy of the Allied response in case Russia uses Belarusian territory for escalation against the Alliance. While it is safe to assume that these plans already take into

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account the operational significance of Belarus in a potential Russian operation against NATO, what should be done is a thorough analysis of how the Alliance would respond to a whole set of different scenarios with Russia using divergent means and ways of escalation through Belarus. Notably, the results of such an exercise should not equal a formal change of plans, but rather finding the best way of implementing them so that the capacity of Russia to leverage its *de facto* control over Belarus and threaten NATO is mitigated.

This would likely require tailoring NATO's posture on the Eastern Flank. More specifically, the agreed forward-deployed assets of the Alliance, involving both forces deployed under Enhanced Forward

Facing Russia's multiple options to augment rapidly its posture in Belarus, NATO may want to establish a heavier forward presence across at least the part of the Eastern Flank that borders Belarus.

Presence and Enhanced Vigilance Activities, could grow. The consensus from Madrid—in which scaling-up battalion-sized battlegroups to brigades should only happen in a crisis and remain only a tested capacity of framework nations for now—might not withstand this reality check. Facing Russia's multiple options to augment rapidly its posture in Belarus, NATO may want to establish a heavier forward presence across at least

the part of the Eastern Flank that borders Belarus. The recent German decision to gradually increase its presence in the Lithuanian EFP battlegroup to a full brigade may lead the way in this regard. More importantly perhaps, it could also inform the calculations of the U.S. with regards to the perspective of sustaining its additional deployments to the region (i.e., those linked to the Russian-invasion of Ukraine). But thinking about NATO's posture through the prism of the Belarusian vector of the Russian threat also implies a discussion on other forward-deployed capabilities. Definitely, the Alliance needs more insight into what is happening in Belarus, which would primarily imply a more permanent and multi-layered intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets deployed to the Eastern Flank. To complicate Russian calculations, NATO might also want to add some critical capabilities to its forward-deployed assets portfolio, like long-range precision fires, air and missile defence, or electronic warfare. Detailed decisions on such capabilities should stem from the above-proposed re-assessment process and be guided by the principle that forward-deployment of some assets would in a time of crisis deny Russia the time advantage it gains from control of Belarus.

Next, the presence of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus should be seen as a final wake-up call for all Allies who have been approaching the discussion about NATO's nuclear policy as potentially destabilising or provocative towards Russia. As a matter of fact, the Alliance should now run a broad analysis of what options (operationally- and nuclear signalling-wise) are provided to Russia by the use of Belarusian territory for stationing its nuclear weapons.

On this basis, decisions should be taken with regards to both NATO's own strategic signalling to Russia and the actual Allied nuclear posture, including the link between the conventional and nuclear dimensions of defence and deterrence.¹⁴ With regards to the latter, the Alliance should not shy away from checking the available options

The Alliance should not shy away from checking the available options of expanding the nuclear-sharing programme to involve Eastern Flank nations more.

of expanding the nuclear-sharing programme to involve Eastern Flank nations more. Even if the process is gradual or linked to developments with regards to Russian weapons in Belarus, it could provide pushback to likely Russian attempts to build a policy of intimidation and threats based on its nuclear presence in Belarus.

Finally, within the broadly understood area of resilience to hybrid/grey-zone threats, NATO should conduct an audit of its "toolbox" in this area, including cooperation with the European Union. The guiding assumption here should be that the eastern border of both the Alliance and the EU will now be a hot border, with ongoing testing of readiness and also perhaps attempts of sabotage, including

¹⁴ For more, see: A. Kacprzyk, "Russia Sharpens Nuclear Signalling Towards NATO," *PISM Bulletin* No 85 (2204) 30 June 2023.

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cyberattacks. While there are multiple avenues of work to do in this regard, both in NATO and within NATO-EU cooperation, they apparently lacked a reference point, which had been to date the general Russian threat. Now, these various programmes and initiatives could be refocused more to look at the developing situation on the NATO-Belarusian border.

When that moment comes when Belarusians embark on the road towards a democratic transformation, the Alliance should be ready to offer mechanisms and instruments for developing security and defence-focused cooperation with Belarus.

While the Belarusian vector of the Russian threat to NATO poses a new set of challenges for the Alliance, requiring a rethink of how the Madrid pledge of defending “every inch” of Allied territory should be implemented, it is at the same time crucial to underscore that a democratic and independent Belarus has a prominent place within the future European security system as a partner of NATO. When that moment comes when Belarusians embark on the road

towards a democratic transformation, the Alliance should be ready to offer mechanisms and instruments for developing security and defence-focused cooperation with Belarus. In such a scenario, NATO support, building on the record of the past Belarusian participation in the Partnership for Peace, which has not been formally cancelled, could be the key to reform of the Belarusian military and helping with the broader need for security-sector reform.