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DURABILITY OF THE BELARUSIAN-RUSSIAN MILITARY UNION AND SCENARIOS OF ITS DYNAMICS

Policy Paper

DR GRAŽVYDAS JASUTIS

Summary

This analytical publication reviews the current level of military integration between Russia and Belarus, assesses its potential and the main factors influencing the dynamics of integration. The presidential election in Belarus in 2020 led to a fundamental change in the attitude of the ruling regime towards the creation of a common defence space, and its formation gained momentum.

The first part of the publication explains how the potential of the alliance is formed. Key indicators: continuous exercises and training are conducted, joint programmes in the areas of standardisation and interoperability are carried out, and joint military elements that strengthen the sustainability and robustness of integration are created.



GRAŽVYDAS JASUTIS. Scholar and conflict management practitioner. Teaches post-soviet security courses in Switzerland, France and Spain. Prior to this, he worked for the EU and OSCE in Georgia, Indonesia, Mali, Burkina Faso, Kosovo and North Macedonia, Lithuanian Delegation to NATO and the Ministry of Defence. His research interests include human rights, security sector reforms, conflict management, political transformation processes and terrorism in the post-soviet area.

The armed forces are becoming interoperable and capable of fulfilling common tasks. The only questionable point is the practical use of military forces because the two states do not participate in joint combat operations.

The second part notes that so far the states have not agreed on a renewed military doctrine of the Union State and the aspects of joint command and the establishment of a military air base in Belarus remain unresolved. Military threats are also assessed. Although the likelihood of a direct military confrontation between NATO and Belarusian/Russian forces is extremely low, various provocations and incidents in the border section should not be ruled out.

The third part discusses three scenarios for the military integration of Russia and Belarus. It is concluded that the military integration of the two states is strengthening, and Lithuanian policy faces a value dilemma – pressure on the existing regime encourages Belarus to move further into the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation, but policy adjustments and concessions would indicate political recognition of the existing regime. In the short term, it is recommended to develop mechanisms for response, transparency and exchange of military information, and in the long term, it is recommended to focus on the transformation of the Belarusian security sector, which may oppose the inclusion of the state in Russia's orbit and for an alternative policy.

Introduction

The year 1999 was marked by the decision to establish a Russia-Belarus Union State and a programme for its implementation, which was to launch a new stage of bilateral cooperation and set cooperation objectives: the creation of a common economic space, free movement of labour, goods, services and capital, granting of equal rights for citizens, and establishing a common defence space. Over twenty-one years, progress was made in creating a common defence space, despite relatively limited progress in comprehensive integration. The years 2020 and 2021 were marked by social fractures in Belarus, which also forced Russia to react. Russia's reaction and the possible expansion of the military alliance will have direct security consequences in the region. The aim

of this analytical publication is to identify the current level of military integration between Russia and Belarus and to discuss its potential and problems, as well as to assess its impact on regional security.

In particular, the military integration of Russia and Belarus cannot be treated as a *fait accompli*, and significant developments are expected in the short term: actions related to the coordination of joint command and leadership of the military, negotiation of the military doctrine of the Union State, and the establishment of new joint military facilities in Belarus.¹

Second, the rhetoric of the Russian Federation is becoming increasingly strident and its

actions should be of concern to NATO countries. In June 2021, Russian forces fired warning shots towards the British Royal Navy destroyer HMS Defender, which was sailing near the annexed Crimea. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov stressed that "the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation is inviolable. The inviolability of its borders is an absolute imperative, we will stand guard over all this by diplomatic, political and, if necessary, military means."² The military rapprochement between Russia and Belarus, the enlargement of Russia's military capabilities and the de facto treatment of the state border of Belarus as that of the Union pose additional security challenges in NATO's Eastern area of responsibility. Although a direct military confrontation is unlikely, incidents in the border section should not be ruled out.

Third, the current political situation in Belarus reduces Russia's political costs and investments and further encourages the military integration of the two countries. The following scenario is likely in the short term. At the political level, the merging of the Belarusian and Russian military forces is supported, with the establishment of new military bases and the implementation of a joint command and control mechanism. New aspects of military integration may be considered, e.g. joint mobilisation, joint conscription and similar projects that will increase and expand the presence of the Russian military contingent at the border of four NATO countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Poland) and NATO partner Ukraine. These three aspects emphasise the seriousness of the current situation, while the dynamics of military integration and deepening cooperation between Russia and Belarus call for an adequate and well-planned response from NATO.

The publication draws the conclusions that (assuming the current regime in Belarus survives)

a common/Russian logistics base could be established within **one year**, the establishment of which is already set within the framework of the future military exercise ZAPAD 2021 (WEST 2021), and the military doctrine of the Union is also expected to be aligned. Within a horizon of **three years**, a Russian air force base could be established and an agreement on cooperation of special forces could be concluded. Within **five years**, joint command structures will be finalised, a common command and control system (CC) will be given a legal framework, and military units will be prepared to participate in joint combat operations.

It should be noted that certain documents of Russian-Belarusian military cooperation, which would help to assess the situation more accurately, are classified.

1 Military integration of Russia and Belarus by August 2020

Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus may already have achieved a high degree of integrity, taking into account legal arrangements, interoperability in certain types of forces, regularly conducted exercises, and partial implementation of joint command and control.

1.1 *Basic documents of military integration*

Since Belarus became an independent republic, security issues have been partially resolved jointly with Russia. This is evidenced by the consistent development of military cooperation, which is recorded in bilateral documents.

Table No 1. Documents of military cooperation between Russia and Belarus

The Agreement between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on the Coordination of Military Activities of 20 July 1992
The Agreement on the Procedure for Joint Action in Air Defence Measures and Capabilities of 25 February 1994
The Agreement on Military Cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation of 17 December 1997
The Agreement on Joint Ensuring Regional Security in the Military Sphere of 17 December 1997
The Agreement on the Sharing of Military Infrastructure of 16 October 1998
The Agreement on the Union State between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation of 8 December 1999

These documents formed a sufficient basis for military cooperation between the two countries, and the ambitions for military integration were confirmed by the decision of Belarus and Russia to create a union state. On 26 December 2001, the military doctrine of the Union State was adopted and then approved by the Supreme Council of State of the Union State.³ It is the first military document at the strategic level. The military doctrine is a document within the framework of the creation of a common state, which specifies the concept of security of the Union of Belarus and Russia and provides a synthesised entirety of official views and approaches, ensuring the military security of the states. The military doctrine was actually developed to create a common military organisation.

Paragraph 1.9 of the Doctrine states that the military organisation consists of state authorities and the Union's military leadership structures, military forces assigned to the regional military grouping, national armed forces used

for the defence and protection of the Union State, and part of the industrial and scientific complex that performs tasks for the military organisation of the Union State. An updated military doctrine was discussed at a meeting of the Union Council of Ministers on 13 December 2018, but it was not adopted.⁴ Its purpose was to assess the security context of the Union State and to adapt the legal framework with regard to new challenges.⁵ Despite Russian pressure, Lukashenka manoeuvred between Western states and his eastern neighbour and did not approve the final draft.

1.2 Common military units

Much progress has already been achieved in military cooperation on land with the formation of the Western Regional Security Group. Although the concept of a regional grouping itself originates from a multilateral mechanism, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia and Belarus emphasise this as one of the most successful projects in the context of military cooperation. This grouping is responsible for the protection of the western state borders and, if necessary, can provide support to the Kaliningrad Oblast. Significant resources are allocated to its mobility, technical and logistical maintenance, expansion and reconstruction of military infrastructure, general technical maintenance of military equipment (aviation, armoured equipment and vehicles, and air defence). Joint events are conducted to establish joint planning and grouping. For example, in April 2015, officers of the General Staff of Belarus participated in joint training in the Western Military District and coordinated joint plans and procedures for the use of the grouping.⁶ On 14 November 2017, the Agreement on Joint Technical Support for the Regional Grouping of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation entered into force.⁷

1.3 *Special forces*

The Russian-Belarusian special forces cooperate closely and give priority to the improvement of interoperability, joint training and joint command. On 6 December 2016, the President of Belarus signed a decree on an Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the participation of special-purpose forces in anti-terrorist operations in the territories of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus.⁸ This decision demonstrates a common interest and forms a platform for further cooperation. There is no official information on the entry into force of this Agreement but cooperation between the special forces of the two countries continues. Tactical joint exercises take place every year (at a battalion/company level), consultations on joint command are conducted, and joint events are held, which strengthen the personal and institutional relations between the special forces.

1.4 *Air force*

Russia and Belarus defend the airspace with a joint force, use a common anti-aircraft system, provide training to personnel, arrange training at a headquarters level and jointly maintain alertness. A joint regional Russian-Belarusian anti-aircraft defence (AAF) system has already been established. On 3 February 2009, the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on the protection of the common external border of the Union State and the establishment of a unified regional air defence system was concluded.⁹ The establishment of a joint regional AAF facing the west has strategic importance. It has simplified the protection of the airspace of the Union State and reduced the time of response to intrusion. The Agreement was adjusted and the amendments entered into force in 2017.¹⁰ The document updated the organisational structure of the regional AAF and

the procedures for the use of armament in the performance of joint tasks. The regional AAF consists of the entire Belarusian Air Force and Air Defence Force and the 6th Air and Air Defence Force, which is deployed in the Western Military District of Russia (with headquarters in Saint Petersburg).¹¹ The Commander of the Regional AAF is appointed with the approval of the Presidents of Russia and Belarus. The system is fully operational, i.e. it controls the Belarusian airspace, tracks potential targets moving towards or already in the airspace of Belarus, and transmits information to combat units in the Western Military District of Russia.

It is worth noting that a bilateral dialogue on the establishment of a joint military air base has been going on for several years. On 7 September 2015, a proposal was made by the Russian Ministry of Defence to establish a military air base in Belarus.¹² This was preliminarily agreed with the Belarusian side, but the final approval has not yet been received from Minsk.

1.5 *Exercises*

Military interoperability is enhanced by strengthening cooperation between air and land forces equipped with compatible armaments. Continuous exercises take place to achieve compatibility of procedures in order to conduct joint actions.

In 2009, the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus adopted a decision to hold a joint large-scale military exercise.¹³ At the strategic level, ZAPAD, a regular Russian-Belarusian military exercise, takes place, involving infantry, military aviation, armoured personnel carriers, missile forces, special forces, the Russian Baltic Fleet and the use of air defence elements. Although their scenarios are officially declared to be defensive in nature, it is clear that Russian and Belarusian military forces are making prepara-

tions for a possible confrontation with NATO forces, and are envisioning regional conflicts. Meanwhile, the strategic-level Shchit Soyuz (Union Shield) exercise is organised every two years. In 2019, the exercise took place at Mulin Range, Russian Federation, and involved 12,000 troops, 950 combat vehicles and 70 aircraft.¹⁴ Since 2003, the Boyevoye Sodruzhestvo (Comradeship-in-Arms) exercise is held every two years to enhance interoperability in the field of AAF,¹⁵ and since 2015, the Slavyanskoe Bratstvo (Slavic Brotherhood) tactical exercise, which involves special forces, has been organised.¹⁶

1.6 *Command and control*

It is noted in the military doctrine of the Union State¹⁷ that one of the foundations of the developing military organisation is the unification of the leadership of the armed forces of Belarus and Russia (Paragraph 1.11). The joint leadership, deployment and planning system of the regional grouping is operational and it is likely that joint command has been achieved to some extent in the leadership of individual operational and tactical units. This indicates that the military elements of the two states are already controlled by joint efforts, using a joint command structure and performing joint tasks. This is constantly checked in exercises, e.g. Slavyanskoe Bratstvo. In times of peace, the command structure remains within the national forces, and in the event of a threat, the joint headquarters takes over command. It is likely that the issues of command and control have already been fully resolved in the Unified Regional Aircraft Defence System. Article 9 of the 2009 Agreement on the Establishment of a Unified Regional Air Defence System was supplemented with a reference stating that in the event of an imminent threat, regional air defence becomes part of a regional grouping in performing combat tasks. A Joint Staff/Command is established to lead it.¹⁸ It is difficult

to judge of progress in this area in the case of special forces, but issues of joint command are constantly high on the cooperation agenda.

1.7 *Staff training*

Much attention is paid to staff training, which is based on mutual military exchanges, coordination of study programmes and courses free of charge in the two states. The situation is not symmetric, as the unified staff training takes place mostly in Russia. A bilateral programme on military training “On the training of Belarusian military personnel in the military training institutions of the Russian Ministry of Defence”¹⁹ has been adopted. The programme provides that the host country fully covers all expenses and maintenance of the students. 400 Belarusian officers and cadets are currently studying in Russia under this programme. Under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Belarus has an additional annual quota of military personnel receiving military training in Russian military schools (up to 200 per year). Cooperation in this area provides a solid practical and ideological basis for further interoperability. The training of officers takes into account Russian and Belarusian methodology and requirements, necessary for the establishment of joint military structures, participation in international training, peacekeeping and other operations. The military personnel training is successfully complemented by military scientific cooperation, which is organised in accordance with a programme approved by the Collegium of Defence Ministers.²⁰

In summary, it can be stated that the military integration of Russia and Belarus was highly developed by August 2020. The operational capability of the alliance was established, continuous exercises and training were conducted, joint programmes in the areas of standardisation and interoperability were carried out, and joint military elements that strengthened

the sustainability and robustness of integration were created, and common procedures were implemented at a tactical and operational level. It is obvious that both states have pursued policies to integrate military activities, and their military forces have become interoperable and capable of performing joint tasks. The only questionable point is how military cooperation would proceed in practice, because the two states have not yet participated in joint combat operations. It is worth noting that the lack of approval for the updated military doctrine of the Union State and the establishment of a military air base in Belarus reflected the internal political dynamics of Belarus. In other words, Lukashenka sought to maximise the potential benefits (both personal and national) during negotiations and to strengthen his position domestically. It should be noted that two military facilities of the Russian Federation successfully operate in the territory of Belarus, the operation of which is ensured by Minsk: a Russian radar station near Baranavichy (part of a missile attack warning system that detects ballistic missiles and space objects; there are about 2,000 Russian specialists working at the station²¹), and a control point for Russian submarines in the Atlantic based in Vileika District. Russia does not pay for the protection and maintenance of these facilities, and Belarus periodically uses information provided by Russian satellites in reciprocity.²² The agreement on these military facilities expires in 2021.

2 Military integration of Russia and Belarus after 2020 and its influence on regional security

2.1 *Tasks of the military integration of Russia and Belarus after 2020*

After the presidential elections in Belarus, an increase in military cooperation between the states has been observed, for which there are several contributing factors. First of all, the political climate and tension in Belarus encourage further military integration. Lukashenka treats Russia's support as a cornerstone that will help him to remain in his current position at least temporarily. Second, the Belarusian security sector is ideologically and practically similar to the Russian security sector, so political instability in the country may encourage representatives of the Belarusian military and security services to accelerate military integration projects. Third, Russia has its own pragmatic interests related to the military facilities that are deployed in Belarus. 2021 is the year of expiry of the lease agreement on the Russian radar station in the Baranavichy and the Russian submarine control point in Vileika District. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin has already instructed the responsible national agencies to conclude an agreement on extension of the lease.²³ Fourth, Russia is interested in expanding and strengthening its capabilities near NATO borders. The decision to establish a military air base and strengthen the interoperability of the states' military capabilities likely dominates the Russian-Belarusian military/political cooperation agenda. Such conclusions are based on an assessment of the following facts:

A. The number of military exercises has increased. Since September 2020, the Russian and Belarusian military forces have carried out exercises and manoeuvres every month.²⁴ The President of the Russian Federation confirmed these commitments during a bilateral meeting in Sochi. This year, the states have scheduled a record number of exercises.²⁵ According to unofficial data, 160 military events are to be held in 2021 (in comparison, 120 events were held in 2020).²⁶ Much attention is paid to logistics and supply. According to Russian sources, a common logistical base is planned²⁷ which can become a starting point for the establishment of a permanent joint force on the territory of Belarus. During 14–25 September 2020, the Slavyanskoe Bratstvo exercises were held near Brest and Grodno. The exercises involved 6 000 soldiers and 500 units of military equipment,²⁸ and were led by the Minister of Defence of Belarus, Viktor Khrenin, and the Commander of the Land Forces of the Russian Federation, Col. Gen. Andrey Serdyukov. The scenario of the exercises was focused on blocking the invasion of state territory by military groups in the border sector. It should be noted that during the exercise, the military forces of the Russian Federation were redeployed on IL-76 aircraft, which covered a distance of one and a half thousand kilometres within an hour and a half.²⁹ During 12–16 October 2020, the CSTO's Nerushimoye Bratstvo (Indestructible Brotherhood) exercises were held. The exercises involved 700 soldiers and 100 units of military equipment, as well as other components of the security sector. The exercises improved collective "peace-keeping" operations.³⁰ During exercises held in March this year, greater attention was paid to integrating the Belarusian military forces into Russian leadership structures (three joint battalions were formed, logistical capabilities that could support a

wider range of forces were strengthened, and the interoperability of air defence capabilities was tested). The exercises were also part of the preparations for the ZAPAD 2021 military training, when Russia's military capabilities in Belarus will be increased, and it is also likely that some Russian military personnel will stay in Belarus for a longer period of time. It is noted that greater attention is paid to the interoperability of land and special forces,³¹ which strengthen the capabilities of the alliance and can ensure the permanent presence of Russian troops on Belarusian territory. Continuous exercises help to avoid legal restrictions on the permanent deployment of foreign forces and prepare a bridgehead for full military integration and permanent deployment.

- B. Longer-term plans are being approved.** On 2 March 2021, the Defence Ministers of the two states signed a five-year strategic partnership programme.³² The text of the programme was not published in open sources. It is the first document of this nature that defines the prospects for military integration and identifies priority areas of activities. The programme drawn up provides certain flexibility and practicality for cooperation. The ongoing negotiations on the Union Military Doctrine are moving forward but the document has not yet been adopted. The strategic partnership programme may provide for the deployment of Russian troops in Belarus or more flexibly define the conditions for such deployment.
- C. New military training facilities are being established.** On 16 March 2021, an agreement on the establishment of three joint Russian-Belarusian military training centres was announced. One of them – the Training Centre for the Air Force and Air Defence Force – would be established in Belarus (in the Lida region). The other two – the Joint Land Forces Training Centre and the

Baltic Fleet Base – would be established in Russia. The deployment of Su-30SM fighters and crew training are being discussed in the context of establishing the training base in Belarus. The Belarusian side hopes to simply receive the fighters from Russia and train Belarusian pilots to pilot them. The Russian side hopes to have its own aircraft and its own pilots in the Belarusian territory.³³ This would be yet another step towards enlarging the military contingent of the Russian Federation in Belarus.

D. New guidelines for military integration are being negotiated. An update of the military doctrine of the Union State is under negotiation. According to Pavel Muraveiko, Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus, the updated document has yet to be approved by the Supreme Council of the State.³⁴ State Secretary of the Union State Grigory Rapota noted that the updated military doctrine should be adopted in the near future. The changes to the doctrine are associated with the current realities of the security architecture. The military forces of both states must be subordinated to a joint command, and continuous exercises allow for deeper integration of Belarusian forces into the Russian security sector.³⁵ At present, the military forces can be subordinated to joint command only in the event of a military conflict, while in peacetime the military forces of the two states have separate headquarters. It is likely that the Union Doctrine will resolve this issue and provide for a common military command structure, or at least a process for the establishment of a permanent joint military headquarters.

E. The military industry is dependent on the Russian Federation. Belarus's armaments are becoming outdated and their technical capabilities will diminish in five to eight years.³⁶ The modernisation of armaments is quite a sensitive issue and Russia's assis-

tance is expected here. In fact, the Belarusian military industry does not produce final products. However, there are 180 defence industry companies of the Russian Federation cooperating with 120 factories in Belarus.³⁷ State Secretary of the Union State Rapota mentioned that there are issues over restrictions on the transfer of certain weapons, but in principle those issues can be resolved.³⁸

F. The deployability of joint forces is being strengthened. On 10 December 2020, A.Lukashenka approved a plan to deploy a new regional military grouping.³⁹ According to Alexander Volfovich, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus, the joint military force is an instrument at a strategic level, which has been designed to deter large-scale aggression against the Union State. The joint action plan and the areas in which military units can operate have been updated, the structure of the regional grouping has been renewed, and the necessity of the modernisation and harmonisation of military armaments has been expressed.

These factors show that Russia has not yet fully integrated Belarus's military structures, though the latter could become completely dependent on Russia's military support. Russia is trying to increase its level of military control in Belarus, and the political situation after the 2020 presidential election in Belarus is particularly favourable for this. It no longer needs to invest politically in the overall strengthening of the military union because the Belarusian political leadership is itself interested in strengthening the military union to help maintain its position. The ongoing political integration of the states is not so obvious and rapid because its consequences are closely related to the loss of sovereignty, and it is likely that public opinion would be sceptical. However, the overall process of integration with Russia and regular attempts by the Belarusian political elite to cosy up to its neighbour (frequent

meetings at the top level) show Belarus' limited room for manoeuvre and constrained military autonomy. In addition, the military leadership is ideologically close to Russia, and a closer alliance contributes to its further entrenchment. During the meeting with Russian President Putin in Sochi at the end of May 2021, the Belarusian leader claimed that one of the topics touched on was cooperation in the military industrial complex, including the supply of modern armaments to Belarus.⁴⁰ The supply of modern armaments contributes to the strengthening of the alliance, and though some disagreements over the supply of armaments are noted, trends show the convergence of the states (e.g. the transfer of S-400 armaments to Belarus).

2.2 *Military threat*

The military integration of Russia and Belarus has an impact on regional security, and NATO states (especially those in the eastern NATO region) must be prepared for the strengthening of the alliance and additional challenges.

A. **Direct military threat.** In his annual speech in 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened the international community that he would not allow "red lines" to be crossed, and Russia itself will decide when a red line has been crossed.⁴¹ The President of Belarus was more specific, especially after the election. NATO forces are treated as hostile, posing a direct threat to the Union State. Although the direct use of military force against NATO states is unlikely in the short to medium term, provocations, border incidents and the expansion of military capabilities at the NATO border are possible. Lukashenka has announced that he will strengthen the protection of the state border, has redeployed more military units towards the west, and has held a series of exhibition military exercises. Additional units of Toch-

ka missiles and Polonez weapon systems were deployed near the Lithuanian border.⁴² On 31 May 2021, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu emphasised that military capabilities were being strengthened towards the west and that 20 new units would be deployed, which would adequately curb the actions of NATO and the West.⁴³ Although a military confrontation on the Belarus – Kaliningrad – Baltic states axis is unlikely, the strengthening of the Russia–Belarus alliance and the ongoing exercises are a reminder that Russia treats it as a flashpoint of potential conflict (in the context of military strategy). Furthermore, Russia declares quite openly that it remains the main power in the region that can successfully deploy nuclear capabilities, conduct large-scale conventional operations, and invest in new advanced technologies. Russia has the second largest strategic nuclear forces and the largest number of tactical nuclear weapons in the world, an integrated air defence system and sufficient transportation capabilities to allow the relocation of forces to Belarus within a very short time – for example, during the exercises, Russia managed to redeploy the battalion's tactical team from Pskov to Belarus within a few hours. During 10–16 September 2021, the ZAPAD exercises will be held in the context of a tense political situation. Of concern is the integration of the Russian and Belarusian special forces, and it is highly likely that ZAPAD 2021 will have a very clear offensive rather than defensive focus. According to Belarusian Defence Minister Khrenin, one of the planned scenarios relates to an escalation of the political/military situation in the state and could involve the use of assault groups in urbanised areas.⁴⁴ According to experts, Russia will seek to strengthen its military forces in Belarus through the exercises (especially aviation, special forces, electronic warfare, SIGINT, ELINT and missiles), and

Table No 2. NATO, Russian and Belarusian military capabilities in the Baltic region

Capabilities	NATO*	Russian Federation	Belarus	Relation NATO/RF-BY
Armed forces	31,813	78,000	45,500	1/3.88
Tanks	129	757	601	1/10.5
Combat aircraft	5457	1251	111	4/1
Armoured vehicles	280	1276	1550	1/10.1

* NATO forces include the capabilities of the Baltic states and Poland as well as the military forces of other NATO states deployed in the region. The number of combat aircraft is a total number, possessed by all NATO states. The number of Russian military forces includes the forces deployed in the Western Military District, and the number of combat aircraft includes all possessed by the Russian Federation.

Source: Heinrich Brauß, András Rác, “Russia’s Strategic Interests and Actions in the Baltic Region”, German Council on Foreign Relations, January 2021, https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/210107_Report-2021-1-EN.pdf, David A. Shlapak, Michael Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank Wargaming the Defense of the Baltic”, RAND report, April, 2016, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html, Scott Boston, Michael Johnson, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Yvonne K. Crane, “Assessing the Conventional Force Imbalance in Europe Implications for Countering Russian Local Superiority”, RAND report, 2018, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2400/RR2402/RAND_RR2402.pdf

will focus on a scenario associated with the growing NATO threat to Belarus. Attention is drawn to the intensive military preparation processes in the Baltic States, Poland and Ukraine.⁴⁵

B. An assessment of the proportions of NATO–Russia conventional armaments in the region, shows that Russia still retains a significant advantage.

Conventional power is difficult to assess because there are many factors involved, some less tangible than others (not only number of troops, but also quality of their training, quantity and quality of weapons, mobility, etc.). Military technology, geographical location, regional balance of power, and resources available in the territory of the states being attacked can either increase or decrease the possibility of conflict. As of 2019, Russia was strengthening its military capabilities in the region, which are directed against NATO. Although some of these forces are currently deployed near eastern Ukraine, Russia could redeploy 50,000 to

60,000 troops to the military zone within a few days.⁴⁶ Russia’s military capabilities in Pskov and Kaliningrad make it possible to attack on two fronts and reduce the possibilities for the Baltic states to defend themselves. Four multinational battle groups have been deployed in the Baltic States and Poland since 2017 in accordance with NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence Programme. Each group consists of 1,200 soldiers. It should be noted that the United States is strengthening its contribution to European security within the framework of the European Deterrence Initiative and increasing its military capabilities in Poland.⁴⁷ However, Russian forces are motorised, mechanised and can engage tanks. Therefore, in the event of a sudden attack on a NATO country, NATO forces would face problems in using both air and land forces because it is inherently difficult to redeploy all NATO forces to the Russian-Belarusian border in the event of a military conflict. During a westward conflict (from Russia’s strategic perspective), not all defence forces will

be employed due to unfavourable geographical distances. The strategic fragmentation of the space of the European continent only allows the use of those armed forces against Russia and Belarus that are deployed in the sub-regions of the Russia-NATO common border. In this case, during a sudden attack, potentially active armed forces will be present only in the Baltic States and Poland. It would also be possible to consider the use of NATO forces deployed in Norway, Denmark, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Germany. There are also US forces deployed in Europe: in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland and Germany.

C. The likelihood of hybrid hostility remains high. Disinformation, cyber-attacks, and inciting ethnic, social or political unrest can be among the main tools of hybrid warfare. Due to the restrictions brought about by COVID-19, the scope of human intelligence against Lithuania carried out by the Russian intelligence services has decreased. However, despite the restrictions, the Russian services carry out active intelligence activities in the Lithuanian border regions bordering the Kaliningrad region.⁴⁸ Close cooperation with Belarus at the level of the secret services increases the threat to NATO's eastern flank.

D. The issue of a joint command structure is not fully resolved. However, despite this shortcoming, it can be stated that military integration is progressing and remaining problems will be solved. The ambitions of the two states are quite clearly defined and aim at full integration (the concept of the union state), which should cover all sectors. The military sector maintains a high degree of integrity, so there should be no fundamental gaps between goals and real results. Continuous military exercises, joint training and exercises are carried out to strengthen the alliance and increase its potential.

E. Arms control and confidence-building measures remain important in Belarus's security and foreign policy. On 8 October 2019 October, Lukashenka emphasised the significance of arms control and national commitments, and also stated that short- and medium-range missiles would not be deployed in Belarus (unless such a step is taken by neighbouring countries first).⁴⁹ This statement was reinforced by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Vladimir Makei. At the Conference on Disarmament's High-Level Segment held on 24 February 2021, the Minister called for the establishment of multilateral initiatives for restrictions on the deployment of short- and medium-range missiles.⁵⁰ Belarus remains committed to strengthening conventional arms control regimes⁵¹ that help to maintain some degree of autonomy in security policy and preserve elements of independence.

In summary, it can be stated that the military integration of Russia and Belarus is intensifying and the activity of the military near NATO borders is growing. This increases the risk of incidents or uncontrolled provocations. Although a military conflict is unlikely, the probability of a conflict between states is non-negligible. The relative capabilities of states vary at different times and it is difficult to predict the direction in which the existing military balance may shift. States can seek to gain an advantage over others and also ensure that other states do not seek an advantage over them. The Belarusian factor is important but not decisive. Belarus has consistently opposed NATO's dominance in the post-Soviet space and prevented the creation of a buffer zone around Russia. The Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine could build such a cordon but they are hindered by Belarus. If such a project is implemented, Russia would be isolated from Europe and Belarus would be included in the Western zone.

3 Scenarios of military integration

Three main scenarios of military integration are distinguished. They are related to the strengthening, weakening, and status quo of the military alliance of Russia and Belarus.

14 indicators were selected for determining the possible likelihood of the scenario. Each indicator has one of the following values: increases the likelihood (+), neutral (=), and decreases the likelihood (-). The indicators were discussed with eight experts from Lithuania, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and Russia.

Table No 3. Construction of the scenario

Scenario	Results	Indicators
1. Scenario Strengthening of the alliance	<p>The doctrine of the Union State is adopted;</p> <p>A Russian military base is established in the territory of Belarus;</p> <p>Armaments are modernised with Russia’s help;</p> <p>A mechanism of joint command and control is implemented and transferred to the Western Military District;</p> <p>The current political elite in Belarus remains or is cosmetically adjusted with the help of constitutional reform but remains friendly to Moscow’s projects.</p>	<p>Increasing number of exercises (+),</p> <p>Offensive scenario of exercises (+),</p> <p>The number of Russian military forces in Belarus is growing (+),</p> <p>Modernisation of armaments (+),</p> <p>Stability of political leadership (+),</p> <p>New military bases (+),</p> <p>Legislation is improved (+),</p> <p>Increasing number of Belarusian military officers studying in the Russian Federation (=),</p> <p>Increasing total number of orders in the defence industry (+),</p> <p>Agreements on joint command and control (=),</p> <p>Identification of new directions of military integration (+),</p> <p>Public support (=),</p> <p>International pressure (+),</p> <p>Pressure from neighbouring countries (+).</p>
2. Scenario Status quo of the alliance	<p>Negotiations on the military doctrine of the Union State are carried out;</p> <p>The Russian Federation continues its policy of pressure to establish a military base;</p> <p>Grants are offered for the modernisation of Belarusian armaments;</p> <p>Negotiations on setting up a joint command and control mechanism are carried out;</p> <p>Belarus undergoes a process of constitutional reform controlled by Moscow, and the political elite welcomes the Kremlin’s role</p>	<p>Stable number of exercises (=),</p> <p>Offensive or defensive scenario of exercises (-),</p> <p>The number of Russian armed forces in Belarus remains stable (-),</p> <p>Limited modernisation of armaments (+),</p> <p>Possible change of political leadership (-),</p> <p>New military bases (+),</p> <p>Legislation is improved (+),</p> <p>Stable number of Belarusian military officers studying in the Russian Federation (+),</p> <p>Stable total number of orders in the defence industry (+),</p> <p>Consideration of agreements on joint command and control (+),</p> <p>Consideration of new directions of military integration (+),</p> <p>Public support (=),</p> <p>International pressure (=),</p> <p>Pressure from neighbouring countries (+).</p>

<p>3. Scenario</p> <p>Split of the alliance</p>	<p>During the constitutional reform, an alternative political force (opposition) is formed, which is neutral towards Moscow and is partially represented in the new political structure;</p> <p>The development of military integration is blocked at the political level;</p> <p>There is an indirect confrontation between the new political elite in Belarus and the military leadership.</p>	<p>Decreasing number of exercises (-),</p> <p>Defensive scenario of exercises (-),</p> <p>The number of Russian armed forces in Belarus decreases (-),</p> <p>Limited modernisation of armaments (+),</p> <p>Change of political leadership (-),</p> <p>New military bases are suspended (-),</p> <p>No legislation is created (-),</p> <p>Decreasing number of Belarusian military officers studying in the Russian Federation (-),</p> <p>Decreasing total number of orders in the defence industry (=),</p> <p>Withdrawal from agreements on joint command and control (=),</p> <p>Limitation of negotiations on new directions of military integration (-),</p> <p>Public opposition (=),</p> <p>Relief of international pressure (+),</p> <p>Relief of pressure from neighbouring countries (+).</p>
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First scenario – Strengthening of the alliance.

The Belarusian current political elite remains in power and the opposition remains fragmented. NATO and EU countries are increasing political and economic pressure on Belarus and begin to respond adequately to military processes in the region. They strengthen the military contingent in the Baltic region and decrease the response time of the military forces. Minsk and Moscow support the merger of the Belarusian and Russian military forces at the political level, with establishment of new military bases and setting-up of a joint command and control mechanism. New aspects of military integration are considered, such as joint mobilisation, joint conscription, and joint military training structures. The growing military threat to NATO and EU countries is associated with border incidents, hybrid warfare, intense intelligence activities and growing internal instability. In the case of this scenario, it is highly likely that:

Within a period of 1 year – an updated military doctrine of the Union State is adopted and a common logistical base is established;

Within a period of 3 years – a Russian air force base is established and an agreement on cooperation of special forces is concluded;

Within a period of 5 years – joint command structures are formed, a joint CC is made official, and military units are ready to participate in joint combat operations.

Second scenario – Status quo of the alliance.

Starting October 2020, the EU has been gradually imposing restrictive measures on Belarus. Sanctions continue because of incidents and violations of human rights. The international isolation of Belarus is deepening and the gap that has formed is being filled with the only alternative – cooperation with Russia and China. The Belarusian political (and especially military) elite remains friendly to Moscow and promotes military cooperation for a variety of reasons, but the primary one is the unavailability of an alternative. The international community continues to impose a package of tough sanctions and the Belarusian elite partially adjusts its human rights policy. This makes room for manoeuvre in Belarus’s relations with oth-

er states, and especially with Russia. Belarus continues a close dialogue with the Russian Federation on the Union State but negotiations are carried out on a basis of parity. The Belarusian military elite promotes military integration, calls for an agreement on an updated military doctrine of the Union State, the establishment of military bases and the use of Russian grants for the modernisation of armaments. The Belarusian political elite (either current or after a constitutional reform) is cautious about the merger of the states and continues military integration projects but has reservations about their further development. It agrees to carry out further negotiations, which could take decades. In the case of this scenario:

Within a period of 1 year – an updated military doctrine of the Union State is adopted and a common logistical base is established;

Within a period of 3 years – Russia’s pressure on Minsk for the establishment of a Russian air force base continues, modulations of the CC are negotiated, and the appropriateness of an agreement on cooperation of special forces is analysed;

Within a period of 5 years – an agreement on cooperation of special forces is concluded, a Russian military base is established, and the implementation of the CC is negotiated.

Third scenario – Weakening of the alliance. An alternative political elite forms in Belarus and a fundamental change in the political regime takes place. In the longer term, generational renewal in the political elite is possible and the newly formed governmental structures will welcome Brussels. NATO and EU countries or neighbouring countries pursue an open door

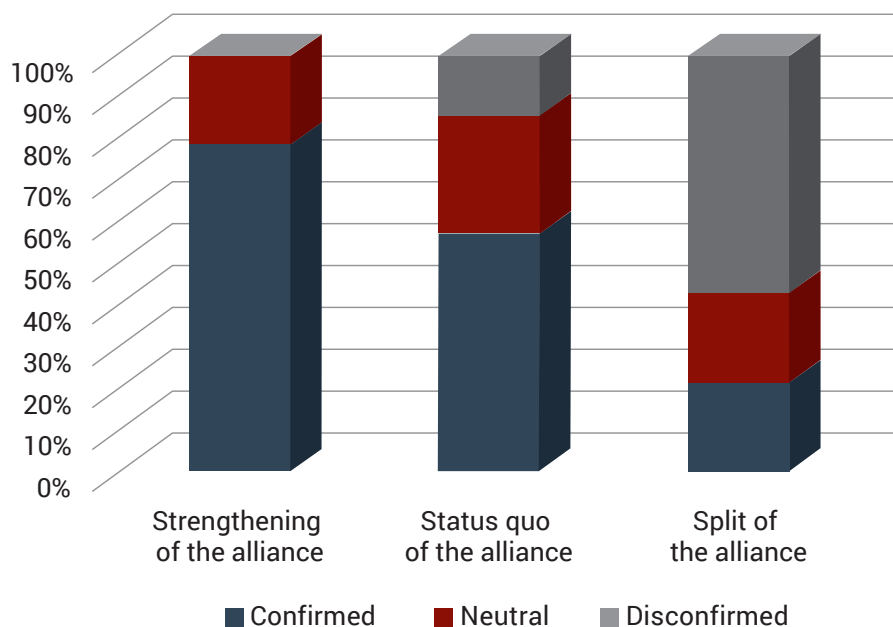
policy. The focus is on efforts to change the mindset of Belarus. Political and military cooperation programmes are proposed with the focus on openness, transparency and mutual understanding. There is at least limited cooperation with the Belarusian military elite and an exchange of information on the security situation in the region. Predictability in the region increases. Belarusian military representatives better understand the importance of transatlantic values and use the alternatives that have emerged to balance relations with Russia. Russia remains a key partner in the military field but military integration projects may be blocked by political leadership. The aggressive rhetoric of the states weakens, which has a positive effect and creates a platform for cooperation with Belarus. Negotiations with Russia on the establishment of a military base, joint command and the military doctrine of the Union State are ineffective.

In the case of this scenario:

Within a period of 1 year – an updated military doctrine of the Union State is adopted and a common logistical base is established;

Within a period of 3 years – further military integration projects for a Russian military base, cooperation of special forces and joint implementation of the CC are blocked or suspended;

Within a period of 5 years – Minsk demands greater control over the existing military integration projects, which reduce their sovereignty (such as a unit in the CC land and air defence forces, military industry, and military research and education).

Diagram No 1. Likelihood of the scenarios

The likelihood of the scenarios is constructed according to the likelihood categories used by the SSD (“highly likely” > 75%, “likely” – 50-75%, “not to be ruled out” – 25-50%, “unlikely” – 25%). It should be noted that the value of each indicator may vary depending on the situation and context. In this case, the value for each indicator is 7.14% and a permissible error of 5% is allowed for the overall assessment of the scenario.

According to the results displayed in the diagram, the first scenario, *Strengthening of the alliance*, is “highly likely”, the second scenario, *Status quo of the alliance*, is “not to be ruled out”, and the third scenario, *Split of the alliance*, is “unlikely”.

The likelihood of the highly likely scenario is reflected in the eleven key indicators that promote integration trends; there are no indicators that reduce the likelihood and only three indicators (related to public opinion, the number of Belarusian cadets in Russian military schools, and agreement on the CC) are neutral. As mentioned, the value of each indicator may vary depending on the situation and context; however, in the case of the highly likely scenario, the indicators overall suggest that military integration will be developed more rapidly.

The second scenario *Status quo of the alliance* should not be ruled out either, which is confirmed by eight indicators. It should be noted that in this case, three neutral indicators and three negative indicators are observed. The latter are related to the scenario of exercises, the constant number of Russian military forces in Belarus and a possible renewal of political leadership.

The split of the alliance is unlikely and the development of such a scenario is currently disconfirmed by eight indicators. The main factor that would change the likelihood of this scenario is a fundamental change at the level of the political regime.

Recommendations

NATO's eastern border faces increasing security challenges related to the military rapprochement of Russia and Belarus, the increasingly offensive posture of forces, strengthening propaganda, and the use of hybrid warfare (such as illegal migration). A union border and a territorial bridgehead are being formed, where the Union State may deploy nuclear weapons, develop a military organisation, share military infrastructure, make joint (and also unilateral) decisions on preparation for military action, and use territorial and civil defence means. The current situation in Belarus and its political/military elite do not provide conditions for productive dialogue; therefore, it is recommended to design actions based on a policy of "cooperation without recognition". In the short term, it is recommended to focus on strengthening military deterrence and the potential for response, military transparency mechanisms, and information exchange. In the long term, the focus should be on a change of security mindset, but this process is complex and requires long-term involvement.

- In view of the growing number of Russian and Belarusian military exercises, the establishment of new military facilities, the adoption of long-term military cooperation plans and the expansion of the use of joint forces, Lithuania should prepare a response plan based on available resources. **First**, it would be appropriate to provide for national, regional and NATO-level military exercises in a five-year perspective, which would be linked to security challenges in the region (scenarios can be either of defensive or offensive nature). **Second**, additional attention should be paid to NATO's initiatives and capabilities: to strengthen the capabilities of the NATO Response Force (NRF) and its deployment in the region in order to increase the number and reduce the response time of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force;

es; to initiate a five-year VHRJTF response plan with the focus on the Baltic region; to establish a regional logistical support base for NATO operations, which would help to resolve supply, military equipment and other issues; to strengthen the air-policing capabilities; to improve and adapt elements of NATO's strategic communication linked to the security situation in the region. **Third**, to strengthen national defence capabilities: to increase military capabilities, both quantitatively and qualitatively, which would at least partially reduce the conventional advantage of Russian and Belarusian military capabilities in the region; to consider and develop all-out mobilisation plans; to increase the number of conscripts and strengthen the active reserve.

- It is worth considering the establishment of new instruments that would contribute to the openness and predictability of military action in the region. Regional states and NATO may offer to exchange information with Belarus and Russia on their military forces, defence capability development plans and military budget at the working level, and to give prior notice of planned military activities. In principle, this would be the implementation of the conventional arms control measures laid down in the format of the Vienna Document. Russia and Belarus may be called on to strengthen the verification regime and to accept a limited number of inspections and visits by NATO military experts in their territory. For example, the Vienna Document provides framework for the demonstration of new types of weapons, visits to military bases and surveillance of military activities, joint action by states in the event of military incidents, and joint exercises. Given the tense situation in Belarus, it would be appropriate to exchange information on unusual military activities, and to cooperate in assessing the

nature of high-risk military incidents in order to prevent possible misunderstandings. It would be appropriate to agree on regional or bilateral confidence- and security-building measures. The proposal to establish regional confidence-building measures would be justified in the context of the blockade of the Belarusian regime, and it would help to fill the vacuum of cooperation caused by the current situation.

- The concept of a policy of “cooperation without recognition” is worth considering. This can mean a continuation of a regime delegitimisation policy while also selectively cooperating with various sectors in Belarus, establishing relations with progressive politicians and representatives of the security sector, proposing initiatives to strengthen Belarusian statehood (such as the promotion of the use of the Belarusian language), and supporting civil society. Although very difficult, it is necessary to contribute to an active civil society in Belarus, which is one of the elements that supervises the security sector in democratic countries. Although the non-governmental sector, which performs the monitoring of the activities and legal framework of the security forces, is actually non-functional in Belarus, support to civil society should be a priority in Lithuania’s foreign policy. Lithuania should direct additional funding to the creation of the elements of civil society which specialises in the oversight of the security sector.
- If the regime in Minsk changes, it would be appropriate to continue agreements on the implementation, and possible supplementation, of regional or bilateral confidence- and security-building measures. Lithuania can advise Belarus on the implementation of good governance principles in the security sector, and fund the studies of their representatives at General Jonas Žemaitis Military Academy of Lithuania and the Baltic Defence College or other NATO training structures. On the basis of bilateral military cooperation, Lithuania could help to change the mindset in the Belarusian security sector and help to reform its structures. Progressively-minded Belarusian representatives could contribute to the search for alternatives in security policy and limit full integration into Russia’s sphere of influence. Bilateral inter-institutional agreements may be concluded.
- Depending on the situation, Lithuania may advocate Belarus’ interests in transatlantic structures and continue the democratisation of its security structure in multilateral formats. Change of mindset is a complex process that involves changes and breaks in social relationships in the society. This would be a long process, the results of which could take decades, but the gradual inclusion of Belarus in the European space may gain the status of a long-term vision on the Lithuanian political agenda.

Endnotes

- ¹ Military integration is a multi-stage process, where the military capabilities of one state acquire the maximum degree of interoperability with those of another state and their leadership is transferred to a single institution. In the case of Russia and Belarus, the consequences of military integration would be associated with the minimum freedom for Belarus to manoeuvre in making security policy decisions.
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- ⁴⁹ Arseny Sivitsky, “Belarus’s Contribution to Security and Stability in Central and Eastern Europe: Regional Safeguards, Strategic Autonomy and National Defense Modernization,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 2, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-contribution-to-security-and-stability-in-central-and-eastern-europe-regional-safeguards-strategic-autonomy-and-national-defense-modernization/>
- ⁵⁰ Conference on Disarmament continues high-level segment. Hears from the Russian Federation, Belarus, Norway, Iran, the Holy See, Jordan, and Portugal. *United Nations*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.un Geneva.org/en/news-media/meeting-summary/2021/02/conference-disarmament-continues-high-level-segment-0>
- ⁵¹ “Conventional Arms Control and Confidence- Security-Building Measure”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus*, https://mfa.gov.by/en/multilateral/global_issues/global_security/armament_control/