



BELARUS BETWEEN NATO AND CSTO. LAW AND GEOPOLITICS

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KEY POINTS

- Arms build-up near both the western and the eastern borders of Belarus intensifies the tension in the region and creates a state of military danger for the country.
- Belarus adheres to a rather cautious approach to military cooperation with Russia, although legislatively this cooperation is stated to be a priority.
- Official Minsk does not perceive NATO as a direct threat, but does not seek to expand the scope of cooperation or to convert it to practical one.
- The US and NATO member states are also interested in the “soft” nature of cooperation with Belarus, with a view not to provoke aggression from Russia.
- The main way to maintain security in the region is to strengthen the independence and sovereignty of Belarus, including increasing the military potential of the national armed forces.

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Introduction

Political crisis in Ukraine in 2014, which subsequently led to an armed conflict in the east of the country and the annexation of Crimea by Russia, became the starting point for the so-called “second cold war”. Geopolitical confrontation between the collective West and Russia continued to grow, which led to the suspension of the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (INF Treaty) in August 2019 due to the withdrawal of both the United States and Russia.¹

These political events led to a significant escalation of tension in the region. The suspension of the INF Treaty in fact legitimizes a substantial buildup of certain types

¹ Nevertheless, the treaty is still formally in force due to non-withdrawal of other parties (USSR successors), including the Republic of Belarus.

of armaments of the United States and Russia, and may also undermine the effectiveness of other arms control treaties. The **situation in the region is aggravated** by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) continuing military expansion in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as the deployment of Russian armed forces just near the border with the Republic of Belarus.

A significant role in this confrontation should be assigned to NATO, due to the fact that protection of US geopolitical interests in Europe is seemed to be possible particularly within the framework of the military alliance. On the other hand, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (the CSTO), as well as the supranational formation the Union State of Belarus and Russia, are to be considered as a similar tool to protect the interests of the Eastern bloc.

Due to significant changes in the region, it is necessary to rethink the **role of Belarus** in the context of geopolitical confrontation between the US and Russia. Although it is a member of Russia-led organizations (the CSTO and the Union State), Belarus continues to cooperate with NATO in the military area. That is why there is a need to review legal aspects of Belarusian cooperation with Russia and the CSTO one the one hand, and with NATO on the other. An important role should be given to the official position of Belarus on security in the region, which, inter alia, is determined in legislation and can be seen in statements by government officials. In the conclusion, we will consider the question: what should be the optimal foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus given the current geopolitical situation with a view to maintain peace and security both in the country and in the region?

Official doctrine: respect Russia, but don't despise NATO

The official position of Belarus on cooperation with military-political alliances and foreign states that have a certain political weight and influence on security in the region is contained in two main documents:

- 1) **Military Doctrine**² of the Republic of Belarus: the doctrine defines the main

² Law of the Republic of Belarus of July 20, 2016 No. 412-Z «On approval of the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus».

threats to the country's national security, as well as practical aspects of cooperation with states (coalitions of states) with a view to improve the country's security situation.

- 2) The **Concept of National Security**: the only legal documents that presents the cooperation with NATO as contributing to the strengthening of regional security.

Military Doctrine³ was adopted in 2016, so we can imply that the post-2014 geopolitical situation was taken into account. The document approves the main directions of the country's foreign policy and describes the motives behind choosing those directions. The Doctrine recognizes the presence of *military danger*, and defines it as a military-political situation in which the interests, intentions and actions of states, coalitions and non-state actors under certain conditions can lead to a military conflict. Though this is not the same as *military threat* (the highest degree of danger), one can imply that Belarus considers the situation in the region as unstable and, therefore, shapes foreign policy so as to be ready to repel aggression from various actors.

One factor of military danger, according to the Doctrine, is

- (1) The desire of individual states or coalitions of states to resolve the existing problems with military force.

This situation can be interpreted as the desire of both Moscow and NATO to use military force to resolve existing problems.

Other factors of danger are considered to be:

- (2) Expansion of politico-military alliances, which the Republic of Belarus is not a member of, in the European region.
- (3) Strengthening the offensive capabilities of military infrastructure in the territories of states adjacent to Belarus.
- (4) Reducing the time needed for military readiness, which allows states to create

3 Law of the Republic of Belarus of July 20, 2016 No. 412-Z «On approval of the Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus».

shock troops for action against Belarus in a short time.

It can be assumed, that the provision (4) implies for NATO being the dominant military-political alliance, which at the moment is physically present in countries that share common borders with Belarus .

(5) Reduction in the potential and capabilities of the politico-military organizations that Belarus is member of.

Statement (5) points to the reduction in capabilities of the CSTO as an organization of a defensive nature. On August 12, 2019, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said he did not perceive the CSTO as a threat: *“Partly because it is not a very strong organization. Some of the countries are NATO partners. We do not see it as directed against us.”* In fact, the CSTO is not an organization capable of mirroring the expansion of NATO, nor can it afford to compete with the latter.

The Doctrine also recognizes the following the factors able to lead to a military threat: (a) the concentration in the armed forces of another state along the state border of Belarus, as well as (b) the declaration and demonstration of force of another state, indicating preparation for an attack. These provisions may indicate the possibility of a threat from both NATO countries and Russia: the armed forces of both are located near the Belarusian border. Besides, Moscow’s foreign policy is characterized by aggression (the events in Ukraine in 2014 serve as an example). Based on the wording of the Doctrine, we can say that **the foreign policy of both NATO and Moscow can be regarded by Minsk as a destabilizing factor.**

However, Belarusian military policy is expressly pro-Russian. Belarus considers as priority the collective security system strengthening and further development of relations:

- with the Russian Federation under the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State (including the issue of a common defence space, ensuring the functioning of a regional group of forces);
- with the CSTO member states, including the creation of unified military systems (for defeating the enemy in a regional war).

The Military Doctrine does not consider cooperation with NATO and the EU as factor contributing to security. Nevertheless, in the National Security Concept⁴ (as amended in 2014), Belarus recognizes the need for cooperation with the US (developing dialogue on the principles of equality, mutual respect and partnership in the context of ensuring international security), NATO and the EU in the interest of strengthening the European safety and stability.

Eastern vector: Friendship as much strong as it is fragile

The military doctrine and the National Security Concept essentially reflect Belarus's obligations under the CSTO and the SU. However, both the CSTO and the SU impose certain restrictions on the Belarusian foreign policy.

CSTO

Such a restriction follows from an obligation imposed by the Collective Security Treaty Organization not to join military alliances or to take part in any groupings of states, as well as in actions directed against another state party. Thus, participation in the CSTO automatically precludes Belarus' accession to NATO and does not allow it to cooperate with NATO to the extent that this could be regarded by Russia as a threat. At the moment, Belarus have never been a member of joint operations or exercises with NATO, which could theoretically be directed "against" Russia.

According to **Article 9 of the CSTO Statute of 2002**, Belarus is obliged to coordinate its foreign policy positions on international and regional security issues. Thus, it can be concluded that cooperation between Belarus and NATO should not contradict cooperation within the framework of the CSTO and should be agreed upon with the CSTO member states.

At the moment, the direction and principles of cooperation between Belarus and NATO coincide with the direction and principles of cooperation between NATO and the CSTO. In particular, at a meeting of the CSTO Council of Foreign Ministers on May 24, 2019, the CSTO Ministers of Foreign Affairs [adopted](#) an open appeal to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the NATO member states on strengthening mutual

⁴ Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus of November 9, 2010 No. 575 «On Approving the Concept of National Security of the Republic of Belarus»

trust and developing cooperation. The document proposes a set of measures to establish direct contacts between the secretaries general of the two organizations, a dialogue between the CSTO Permanent Council and the North Atlantic Council, as well as promoting mutual participation as observers in military exercises in the CSTO and NATO formats.

In fact, cooperation between the CSTO and NATO has not been established and is not expected in the near future. Nevertheless, the official position of the CSTO coincides with the official position of Minsk.

Union State

A sufficiently clear framework for the military-political future of Belarus is defined in the agreement on the creation of the Union State:

- Article 2 defines the implementation of a coordinated foreign and defense policy as the goal of the Union State.
- Article 17 determines the functioning of a regional grouping of troops within the exclusive jurisdiction of the Union State.
- Article 18 provides for a joint defense policy, joint use of military infrastructure.

No practical steps have yet been taken in this direction. Moreover, as far as is known, no specific documents were adopted on relevant issues. However, this does not in any way undermine the legal force of the provisions of the treaty: even such «framework» agreements have its field of application.

Nevertheless, the policy pursued by Minsk since 2014 indicates rather cautious attitude towards integration processes, especially in the security sphere. In particular, it is indicated by the following events:

- The refusal of the Republic of Belarus to deploy Russian air base.⁵ (As an alternative, Lukashenko suggested the use of Russian aviation forces by Belarusian pilots under Belarusian jurisdiction).

⁵ It can not be interpreted as non-compliance with any agreements with Russia: not a single provision of the Union State agreement obliges the Republic of Belarus to deploy the armed forces of a foreign state on its territory.

- Invitation of NATO member countries to observe in the «Zapad-2017» military exercises. (despite the fact that in the framework of the exercises, NATO was presented by Russia as an «enemy» that poses a threat to the security and territorial integrity of Belarus).
- Numerous statements and actions aimed at enhancing the independence and effectiveness of the national armed forces (this, in particular, is evidenced by a change in the legislation on military service).⁶

Moreover, the recent joint exercises with Russia (Union Shield-2019 (Shchit Soyuz-2019), Friendship Defenders-2019 (Zashchitniki druzhby – 2019) together with Egypt) were held more than 800 kilometers from the border of Belarus. The First Deputy Minister of Defense of the Republic of Belarus, Major General **Oleg Belokonev**, [drew attention](#) to the fact that the conduct of the exercises «Shield of the Union-2019» in the «depths of the territory of the Russian Federation» was a conscious decision to not aggravate the situation in Europe.

Thus, it can be noted that Minsk's security policy does not contradict obligations within the CSTO and the Union State: cooperation with NATO does not go beyond the «line» established under the CSTO, and obligations within the Union State do not currently have any practical application, although in perspective they are in fact aimed to create a single defense area.

Belarus – NATO: since 2014, interaction has been on the rise

Belarus [officially](#) supports the maintenance and expansion of constructive cooperation with NATO on a mutually respectful basis. Cooperation between Belarus and NATO has been implemented within Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council since 1992 and within Partnership for Peace program since 1995. The first Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAP) was developed in 1997, and the latter was adopted in November 2017 for the period 2018-2019. Belarus joined the «Partnership for Peace Planning and Review Process» mechanism in 2004, providing a wide range of military resources for conducting training exercises with NATO.

⁶ Law of the Republic of Belarus “On changing laws on the effective functioning of the state’s military organization”.

The list of cooperation areas between Belarus and NATO is contained in the IPAP document. The distribution of the IPAP is limited, yet the [main areas of cooperation on IPAP are known](#):

- confidence- and security-building measures (in particular, the International Security and NATO Conference held in 2017 and 2018);
- civil emergency planning (Belarus initiated a training session on response to emergencies appearing during major sporting events. The session was held in 2013-2014 at NATO headquarters;
- military education (Since 2013, training courses open to all Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council countries, including NATO countries, have been held on the basis of the Ministry of Defense. Belarusian scientific community works with the alliance as part of the NATO Science for Peace and Security program);
- preparation for participation in multinational operations (Belarus made a practical contribution to the anti-terrorist operation of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, which was carried out by the alliance on the basis of UN Security Council resolution 1386 (2001). In particular, Belarus provided its airspace for the transit of military and civilian cargo. Member states of the alliance and other countries that participated in the ISAF operation have been carrying out transit rail crossings through the territory of Belarus).

Thus, it can be noted that, particularly since 2014, the number of joint events with NATO has increased and even exceeds the number of joint events with the Russian Federation (although, of course, the events held jointly with the Russian Federation are more practical). Nevertheless, cooperation with NATO does not acquire a practical military character, and therefore does not violate Belarus' international obligations and does not worsen relations with Moscow. This level of cooperation is acceptable for NATO: the United States establishment is interested in a neutral and independent Belarus, which will continue to act as a buffer in the region.

“We shouldn't look at them as enemies”

Numerous official statements by representatives of state structures of the Republic of Belarus indicate an intention to continue cooperation with NATO.

Alexander Mikhnevich, the Permanent Representative of Belarus to NATO, already in 2016 [noted](#) that the destabilizing factor is troops build-up in both the East and West of Belarus. He also emphasized that the Republic of Belarus does not support the idea of deploying foreign armed forces on its territory and seeks to develop its own as to protect state sovereignty.

This position has not changed by 2019. **Oleg Kravchenko**, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the [conference](#) «Belarusian Dilemma: for Minsk and the West» in the Atlantic Council on January 31, 2019 [emphasized](#) that an increase in NATO's military presence in eastern Europe is not a «direct threat to the security of the Republic of Belarus». But the deployment of the armed forces by both NATO and Russia «increases the risks and calls into question the security in the region», although they are regarded as exclusively defensive.

As part of a [briefing by](#) Major General **Oleg Voinov** with military attaches accredited to the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Belarus in February 2019, the concept of international military cooperation for 2019-2023 was defined. The concept defines partnership with Russia and the CSTO as a primary priority. The concept also underlined the need for the gradual improvement of relations with NATO member states, the EU and other states that respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Belarus.

In March 2019, **President Lukashenko** [called](#) for a mutually respectful relationship with NATO. He emphasized «We should not look at them as enemies», adding that warmer relations ultimately contribute to the security of Belarus. In April of the same year, the President [noted](#) : «We cannot but be bothered by the strengthening of the military forces of NATO and the US in neighboring states. These are realities that require strengthening the power of the Belarusian Armed Forces and taking measures to ensure our security».

A similar [statement](#) was made in May by the CSTO Secretary General **Valery**

Semerikov, who expressed concern about the growing number and scale of NATO exercises, the systematic buildup of the alliance's military activities, and the deployment of its infrastructure. «Under the flag of NATO, the American military presence in Europe is growing» - he said.

Speaking at the [Minsk Dialogue](#) expert seminar on June 4, Foreign Minister **Vladimir Makei** [called it](#) «deeply erroneous» to strengthen the US military presence on the territory of belarusian neighbor countries . The strengthening of NATO in the region, in his opinion, will provoke retaliatory action by the opposing side. The Minister emphasized that, while remaining in the CSTO, Belarus has restored military cooperation with Great Britain, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the US.

Based on provided facts, two main concepts of Belarusian policy with respect to NATO can be deduced:

- NATO is not a threat to Belarus's security, while cooperation with NATO is an important element in maintaining international security.
- Nevertheless, arms buildup by both NATO and Russia destabilizes security in the region, which requires Minsk to build up national military capabilities.

Concluding remarks

The legislation of Belarus to some extent recognizes the presence of military danger, which can be interpreted as emanating from both Russia and NATO.

Officially, Russia remains the main partner in military cooperation, however, the intensity of this cooperation has not been increasing. While Moscow is definitely seeking control of the Belarusian armed forces, Belarus is taking all measures to strengthen the independence of the army.

Official Minsk (unlike Moscow) does not perceive NATO as a direct threat to security, which allows us to build a dialogue for further planned cooperation. At the same time, both parties have no intentions to expand the scope of cooperation or to make Belarus switch military-political alliances by joining NATO. The existing “soft” cooperation at the moment does not cause a negative reaction from the Russian

Federation. If NATO decides to take a more persistent course towards practical cooperation with Belarus, this could provoke a backlash from Moscow, including political and military aggression, making NATO-Belarus cooperation counterproductive.

For both the West and Belarus, it seems appropriate to maintain the country's neutrality, as well as to promote the effective functioning of independent national armed forces.

The desire of Belarus to ensure the independence and effectiveness of the national armed forces to a certain extent can be successfully realized. In particular, in the ranking of military power Military Strength Ranking-2019 compiled by the Global Firepower organization (also known as the Global Firepower Index), Belarus took **39th** position. This is the best indicator of the Republic of Belarus in this rating in recent years.

In the framework of the current geopolitical situation, this approach is seen as the only rational one. Consistent “unobtrusive” cooperation with NATO and “careful” military cooperation with Russia without undue reliance on the CSTO allows the Republic of Belarus to remain with a larger neutral state and act as a buffer between the geopolitical West and Russia.