

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MILITARY COOPERATION BETWEEN BELARUS AND RUSSIA: NEW CHALLENGES?

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Abstract: In 2013 Russia and Belarus strengthened their military cooperation, which included the biggest undertaking in military training ever to be carried out by any of the armies, installing batteries of anti-aircraft missiles and creating a Russian air force base in Belarus. The nature of “West 2013” maneuvers indicates that Minsk has been aware of some new threats to Belarus’ national security, most probably resulting from an internal crisis and of potentially military nature.

Keywords: National Security, Military Cooperation, Crisis of Power, Regional Threats.

РАЗВІЦЦЁ ВАЙСКОВАГА СУПРАЦОЎНІЦТВА ПАМІЖ БЕЛАРУССЮ І РАСІЯЙ: НОВЫЯ ВЫКЛІКІ?

Анотацыя: У 2013 годзе Расія і Беларусь узмацнілі вайсковае супрацоўніцтва, што ўключала найбольш маштабныя за ўсю гісторыю стасункаў вайсковыя вучэнні, усталяванне батарэяў супацьпаветранай абароны і стварэнне расійскай авіяцыйнай вайсковай базы ў Беларусі. Характар вучэнняў “Захад-2013” прадэманстраваў, што Мінск усведамляе новыя пагрозы нацыянальнай бяспекцы, якія вынікаюць з унутранага крызісу і патэнцыйна могуць набыць узброены характар.

Ключавыя словы: нацыянальная бяспека, вайсковае супрацоўніцтва, крызіс улады, рэгіянальныя пагрозы.

In the Belarusian Republic's latest National Security Concept of 2010, Belarus is defined as a sovereign European state that seeks to create the conditions for the acquiring of a neutral status and is not affiliated with any global power centre (Указ Президента., 2010). Taking into consideration other provisions of the Security Concept as well as the nature of actions undertaken by Belarus, the passage pertaining to neutrality does not seem to reflect reality. Further into the document, the achievement of the state's national security is clearly stated to involve developing military and technical cooperation with Russia, enhancing the defense capabilities of the Union State of Russia and Belarus, increasing the effectiveness of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)¹ and bestowing upon this organisation the role of the main instrument of collective security in the Post-Soviet region. CSTO is also to counterbalance the presence of NATO forces on the western border of the Russian Federation.

In response to the "Steadfast Jazz 2013" NATO maneuvers scheduled to take place in November 2013 in Poland and other Baltic states, Russia made plans for similar initiatives involving its partners from the former Soviet region. Those primarily were two simultaneous trainings: in Belarus – the "West 2013" maneuvers of the strategic level of Belarusian and Russian armed forces and the "Cooperation 2013" maneuvers of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force of CSTO and, analogically, in Kyrgyzstan – the "Thunder 2013" maneuvers of Collective Rapid Reaction Force (Учения коллективных сил ОДКБ, 2014).

Despite the prevalent political aspect of those initiatives, it needs to be observed that as a result of the planned 2014 withdrawal of NATO military units from Afghanistan, no other than the countries of Central Asia will carry the responsibility of ensuring the region's safety. That will serve to test the real-life effectiveness of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, particularly after Uzbekistan's withdrawal from its ranks. The focus will be on streamlining the decision-making process and establishing the identity and role of the organisation in the entire region.

In 2013 Belarus and Russia proceeded to a new stage of their bilateral military cooperation, which included installing batteries of anti-aircraft missiles S-300 on the Belarusian territory and creating a Russian air force

¹ Collective Rapid Reaction Force (Организация Договора о Коллективной Безопасности) was signed on 15 May 1992. According to the Treaty, the member states maintain their security on a collective basis. Article 4 of the Treaty claims: "In case an act of aggression is committed against any of the Member States all the other Member States will provide it with necessary assistance, including military one, as well as provide support with the means at their disposal in exercise of the right to collective defense in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter." Current members of the Treaty are: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan (Организация., 2014).

base with Su-27 and Mig-29 aircrafts in Belarus. The scheduling of joint “West 2013” maneuvers raised the concern of the neighbouring countries. The Lithuanian Minister of Defense demanded that more details of the scheduled training be revealed and asked for NATO observers to be invited (wPolityce.pl, 2013).

The “West 2013” military exercises, which were conducted on September 22-26 in training areas located in western Belarus, Kaliningrad Oblast and the Baltic Sea, proved to be the largest training initiative to date for both armies. The purpose of the training, which was attended by over 20 000 soldiers, was to test the integration of the Belarusian and Russian armies within the norms and structures of the Russian Armed Forces (Dyner, 2013).

Lithuania’s concern was not altogether unfounded as the training scenario included blocking and destroying the hypothetical enemy (officially referred to as illegal armed formations or terrorists). The forces and measures employed (including artillery units, rocket armies, air force bombardment units, large warships) and the tasks carried out are typically meant for fighting regular armies and not terrorist groups. Also incompatible with the declared purpose of the maneuvers is the use of the navy forces (the training on the Barents Sea included tackling a submarine attack carried out by terrorists!) and the use of units in Kaliningrad and Murmansk Oblasts, whose maneuvers included an attack of the landing forces and repelling sea landing operations. Other tasks covered by the training included taking and holding towns and fighting in urban areas.

There is no doubt that the “West 2013” maneuvers resulted from the shift in relations between Russia and the West, which, in turn, was caused by the situation in the Middle East (the Syrian conflict) and the conclusion of the efforts to secure an EU association agreement for Ukraine. As far as this strategic direction is concerned, Russia and Belarus’ traditional opponents are the neighbouring NATO member states – Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. Thus, training for a potential confrontation with the regular armed forces of those countries would be justified. Far less explicable is a scenario, which recognizes the need to battle illegal armed formations and terrorists and goes as far as to openly suggest aggressive actions on NATO’s part, including subversive initiatives on Belarusian territory. Since no confirmation of this sort of threats can be found in reality, those allegations are clearly meant to provoke a negative reaction from the NATO states bordering with Russia and to reinforce their image as russophobic and incapable of constructive cooperation. Or maybe Minsk is simply aware of some brand new threats to Belarusian national security?

A question should therefore be raised concerning precisely the nature of the threats faced by Belarus in the first decade of the 21st century. The enlargement

of NATO to include former Soviet countries proved to pose no external threat. The countries neighbouring with Belarus have expressed no hostile intentions, quite the contrary – in 2011 Lithuania acted as a lobbyist of Lukashenka's regime, refusing to support the economic and visa sanctions against some companies and the representatives of Belarusian authorities. Both Lithuania and Latvia are also among Belarus' most significant economic partners – 1/3 of all cargo handled in Klaipeda port comes from Belarus (recently it has been mainly potassic fertilizers). Furthermore, Belarusian cargo constitutes 40% of all cargo carried by Lithuanian railways (Kłysiński, 2013). This is of greater importance than the trade with Belarus itself as it benefits the transport and logistic sector, which constitutes 10% of the country's GDP. Latvia depends on the carriage of Belarusian (or transported through Belarus) cargo even more than Lithuania. The transport and logistics sector accounts for 13% of Latvia's GDP and the incoming cargo via Belarus constitutes over 50% of the total amount of the carried cargo (Kłysiński, 2013).

While Russia's readiness to make its installations along the NATO border is hardly surprising, the motives of the Belarusian President are much more puzzling, particularly as he must be aware that the Russian bases will not be easy to remove in the future. From the Kremlin's point of view, the military cooperation with Belarus serves to increase Russia's control over the country, to strengthen the dependence of the economically-challenged Belarus on Russia and to secure Russia's interests against Belarus' unstable situation. Furthermore, Russia's intention seems to be, with respect to its Eurasian plans, to engage Belarus into military cooperation in other regions as well. Most importantly, should any conflict occur in, for instance Caucasia, the presence of the Belarusian armed forces as Russia's ally would serve to legitimise and justify (for the sake of world opinion) any potential aggression or intervention into a local crisis.

Taking into consideration Belarus' growing self-isolation in terms of international presence and its largely ineffective multi-vector policy, it can be assumed that the main threat faced by the country lies in its deteriorating internal situation (economic, social and soon, inevitably, political), which is likely to cause a crisis of power in its current form. Thus, entering into military cooperation with Russia, Aliaksandr Lukashenka could be seeking to retain his political power and to guarantee Russia's military support in the event of an internal crisis (similar to Syria's). Hence the training to tackle illegal armed formations, take and hold towns and fight in urban areas.

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