

# The Growing Importance of Belarus on NATO's Baltic Flank

*Glen E. Howard*



September 2019

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**Washington, DC  
September 2019**

## THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

Published in the United States by  
The Jamestown Foundation  
1310 L Street NW  
Suite 810  
Washington, DC 20005  
<http://www.jamestown.org>

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# **The Growing Importance of Belarus on NATO's Baltic Flank**

## **Introduction**

No country better stands to transform the strategic military balance in the Baltic Sea Region than Belarus. Wedged between Russia and America's NATO allies in northeastern Europe, Belarus until recently has not been considered in discussions about the North Atlantic Alliance's Baltic flank. On August 29, then-US National Security Advisor John Bolton became the highest-ranking Washington official to visit Belarus in the past 25 years. His trip marked a growing recognition in US policy circles of the increasing strategic importance of Belarus to European security in the Baltic and its vital role in the regional balance of power. Bolton's visit was immediately followed, several days later, by a trilateral meeting between the national security advisors of Belarus, Poland and Ukraine, in Warsaw, to discuss regional security. Prior to the US National Security Advisor's visit, Belarus made a major strategic decision to begin imports of oil from the United States to diversify its energy supplies as well as to work with Poland on reviving a dormant pipeline to import the (more costly) US oil. Belarus is rapidly emerging as a new interlocutor in regional security with the West at a time when Russian pressure is mounting for Minsk to remain eastwardly focused, especially as the United States creates new military basing arrangements in Poland. Currently, there are no permanently based Russian ground or armored formations inside Belarus, and any increased US military presence in Poland will have important repercussion for Belarus in its ability to withstand sustained economic and military pressure from Russia.



## Why Belarus Matters

A variety of strategic issues explain why Belarus matters to NATO and more specifically to the United States. First and foremost, Belarus is a strategically important neighbor of Ukraine due to its unique geography bordering Russia and several NATO member states in the Baltic. The Russian annexation of Crimea in February 2014 and the invasion of eastern Ukraine in August 2014 has dramatically altered how Belarus and Russia interact with one another. Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has supported the Minsk peace process ceasefire, publicly criticized the Russian annexation of Crimea, and refused to recognize Crimea as part of Russia. Additionally, he has refused to recognize the Russian annexation of Georgia's provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Lukashenka has also publicly stated that Belarus will never become an invasion corridor threatening Ukraine. In fact, Lukashenka has gone further by indirectly voicing his support for Ukraine to join NATO, stating on June 1, 2018, that he would prefer Ukraine to join NATO rather than see it taken over by nationalism and turned into a "bandit state where everyone against everyone rages."<sup>1</sup> These modest steps reflect a level of defiance in how Minsk interacts with Moscow and complicates Russian decision-making in terms of how it views Belarus as an ally.

Belarus's growing geographic importance has an important role in the balance of power in the Baltic and is a key borderland of NATO. Belarus lies along an important historic invasion corridor that was both the path of invasion and retreat for Napoleon in 1812. Moreover, it was the launching pad for the Soviet conquest of the Baltic States in 1944, during *Operation Bagration*, after the Red Army destroyed Hitler's Army Group Center in Belorussia, a defeat that some historians regard as more devastating than the German defeat at Stalingrad.<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Belarus reminded policymakers of its strategic

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<sup>1</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, June 13, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent account of the massive defeat of Army Group Centre in Belarus in June 1944 see: Paul Adair, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat: the Collapse of Army Group*

importance when President Lukashenka rejected President Putin's November 2016 announcement that it would establish an airbase in Belarus. Virtually overnight, Belarus was thrust into the spotlight as an important strategic buffer state between NATO and Russia.

Central to understanding Belarus is the fact that President Lukashenka refuses to align against Russia or NATO, preferring to play a non-aligned role and even took the step of joining the Non-Aligned Movement in 1998. In many ways Belarus is seeking to play the role of strategic buffer in an East European version of the role played by Belgium. During the Thirty Years' War, the battle between France and Spain over the Low Countries resulted in the emergence of the Netherlands and Belgium as strategic buffers between Spain and France in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Belarus occupies a similar position and some experts have even referred to it as a Slavic Switzerland.

Eager to maintain a neutral stance, Lukashenka has in his own style stood up to Russian demands and even taken unprecedented steps to curtail the size of Russian military exercises during Zapad 2017, when he rejected Moscow's last-minute demands to bring in additional Russian forces to participate in the drills. Prior to Zapad 2017, President Lukashenka placed a limit on the size of the participating Russian forces at 5,500 in order to comply with the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, a decision that so irritated President Vladimir Putin that both he and Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu shunned the exercise in Belarus as originally agreed.<sup>3</sup> Instead Lukashenka watched the exercises independently and separately from Putin, who observed the exercises by himself in St. Petersburg.<sup>4</sup> In a truly Lukashenka way of doing things, the Belarusian leader even went so far as to downplay the incident, claiming that both leaders had agreed beforehand to watch the exercises separately. Previously, both

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*Centre, June 1944*, Arms and Armour Press: London, United Kingdom, 1994, pp.69–80.

<sup>3</sup> Grigory Ioffe, "What are the Limits of Belarus Sovereignty," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 4, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/limits-belaruss-sovereignty/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Baltic Defense Review* 39/2017, September 20–26, 2017.

leaders had watched the exercises jointly since the Zapad exercises were revived in 2009, and again held in 2013—a clear reflection of the tense state of relations by 2017.<sup>5</sup>

President Lukashenka further irritated Moscow by announcing Belarus would abide by the 2011 Vienna Document of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on Confidence and Security Building Measures to which Belarus was a signatory.<sup>6</sup> During the exercises, from September 14 to 20, Minsk adhered to the agreement requirements and requests by inviting military observers from seven European countries, five of whom were NATO member states, to monitor the Zapad 2017 exercises.<sup>7</sup> According to a statement from the Belarusian Ministry of Defense, the invited delegations were from Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Sweden, and Norway. These realities underscored the growing strategic importance that tiny Belarus has begun to play in the great power competition in the Baltic.

Tensions between Minsk and Moscow have been on the rise since the Russian invasion of Crimea in February 2014. In the ensuing years, President Lukashenka has consistently rejected Kremlin demands to establish an airbase in Belarus, after which Moscow apparently suspended these requests. Under the terms of the Russian-Belarusian Union Treaty, Moscow has permission to rotate its air force planes in and out of Belarus for exercises, but does not have the right to keep these planes in Belarus longer than 24 hours—a continued source of irritation for the Kremlin. Russia must constantly rotate its aircraft in and out of Belarus for short periods of time, something that certainly complicates Russian operational planning in its homeland air defense.

Unable to get its way with Belarus due to Minsk's insistence that Moscow respect its sovereignty, the Kremlin has waged a form of

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<sup>5</sup> Originally cited by *Interfax*, September 20, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.osce.org/international-impact/publications/witness-zapad>.

<sup>7</sup> *Interfax*, August 22, 2017.

psychological warfare against Belarus. Questions over a permanent airbase in Belarus are only the tip of the iceberg, as much of this feuding is not public. Prior to the Zapad 2017 exercises, for example, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that it would be procuring as many as 4,162 train cars to move military equipment to Belarus as part of the preparations. The announcement sparked outrage in the Baltic States: Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė characterized the train car announcement as heralding a future war against the West.<sup>8</sup> However, the Russian statement was viewed somewhat differently in Minsk. From Belarus's vantage point, it appeared presage a massive movement of Russian men, arms and equipment that would be tantamount to the 1968 Czechoslovak invasion. As such, Belarusian officials were stunned by the defense ministry's declaration, which appeared in the form of a Russian newspaper article rather than as a formal diplomatic request. Later, however, post-Zapad analysis by some Belarus experts determined that the article in question had been deliberately planted as a disinformation operation, aimed at causing alarm in the West and to intimidate Belarus.

Reacting to the announcement, Belarus took the precautionary move (also, effectively, a measure of defiance of Moscow) of countering Russia by inviting Western military experts from neighboring Poland and the Baltic States, as well as representatives from the OSCE, to monitor the joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises on its territory in a major gesture of transparency toward the West. Later, when President Putin unexpectedly and at the last minute sought to deploy more troops to Belarus in the middle of the exercise—which was not a part of the original detailed military plan worked out by the two countries in advance—Lukashenka objected and refused their entry. Stinging from Lukashenka's move, Putin abruptly canceled his

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent analysis of the wagon debate caused by this article, see: Ihor Kabanenko, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 27, 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/rekindled-train-wagon-debate-calls-question-planned-size-zapad-2017-exercise/>.

planned participation to watch the joint Zapad 2017 exercises in Belarus.<sup>9</sup>

## The Belarus Enigma

Among American and European military experts, Belarus is largely an unknown entity. Human rights advocates and democracy promoters often have simplified Belarus to being nothing more than a close ally of Russia with little or no sovereignty. Extensive funding of the Belarusian opposition movement by US and European non-governmental organizations (NGO) has created a cottage industry of experts who frequently cloud Western understanding of Belarus. At one time, the US NGO Freedom House had as many as 50 people working in its Vilnius office whose sole responsibility was to promote democracy in Belarus. A major source of information on Belarus is the *Charter97* website, operated by the Belarusian opposition, that often publishes misleading information about the country. In fact, opposition groups in the West were the source of the term “the Last Dictator of Europe,” which was affixed to the Belarusian president. While Lukashenka is certainly no model for a progressive leader, comparisons of him to the late North Korean leader Kim Jong Il are grossly overblown, and he has demonstrated a pragmatic side that is willing to work with the West.<sup>10</sup> Known for his sense of humor, Lukashenka has occasionally mocked Putin by referring to himself as the “next to last” dictator in Europe—ostensibly after the Russian leader.

For policymakers in NATO, this unbalanced focus on human rights proved to be a detriment in properly reacting to the changing strategic environment along its Baltic flank, as perhaps no neutral third country after Ukraine was becoming as important to NATO planning. After the 2014 invasion of Crimea, Belarus has assumed even greater geopolitical importance in Central Europe’s balance of power,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/limits-belaruss-sovereignty/>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-24229633>.

especially after President Lukashenka announced that his country would resist becoming an invasion corridor to Ukraine. Western strategic thinking about Belarus finally began to markedly shift in September 2015, when President Lukashenka rejected Putin's announcement that he had ordered the Russian Ministry of Defense to create a new airbase in Belarus, which would have been a flagrant violation of the country's sovereignty. From this point onward, Western experts began to take Belarus more seriously as it sought to avoid becoming a Russian *platzdarm* of offensive operations against NATO.

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe A. Wess Mitchell accelerated this change in US strategic thinking when he took office at the State Department and publicly placed Belarus in the same category as Ukraine and Moldova as "bulwarks against Russian neo-imperialism." Mitchell made the comments during a major speech on Europe's East, at the Atlantic Council, on October 18, 2018. This re-categorization of Belarus as one of three frontline states against Russia in a new geopolitical formulation, adopted by the Trump Administration, had been long overdue and reflected the rising geopolitical importance of the country.<sup>11</sup>

## **The Role of Belarus in Strategic Geography**

Until recently, Belarus failed to register in the geopolitical thinking of Western experts on Europe and Eurasia. One of the first Western analysts to point out the strategic importance of Belarus was Paul Goble, who noted that the shortest distance between Berlin and Moscow lies through this country. A closer examination of Belarus's history underscores that the country has been a major invasion corridor between the East and the West for centuries, in particular due to the fact that a key land route leading eastward to Moscow via the so-called Smolensk Gates traverses Belarusian territory. From Napoleon's epic march on Tsarist Moscow to Hitler's Operation

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<sup>11</sup> For a full copy of his remarks, see: <https://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2018/>.

Barbarossa against the Soviet Union, Belarus has been a key invasion corridor throughout its history. The Berezina River in Belarus, for example, was the site of Napoleon's great escape during his epic retreat from Moscow, when Dutch engineers under his command constructed a bridge overnight in the frigid waters, allowing 25,000 of his men to escape from the clutches of the Russian army. In a major deception operation launched to deceive Russian Field Marshall Prince Mikhail Kutuzov and Admiral Pavel Chichagov, who were defending the Berezina, Napoleon dispatched Marshal Nicolas Oudinot with a force of cavalry 20 miles upstream, away from his route of retreat. Oudinot led the Russian Admiral to believe that the French would cross the Berezina in a completely different location. This enabled Napoleon, with the assistance of his Dutch engineers under the command of Jean Baptiste Eblé, to build bridges across the Berezina, allowing the remnants of the Grande Armée to escape. Napoleon's so-called "miracle on the Berezina" permitted the French General to retreat to Vilnius with the most elite units of his army to regroup and fight another day.<sup>12</sup>

Strategically, Belarus lies along a "land bridge" linking Central Europe with Moscow, in the heart of Russia. A key chokepoint on this overland route, just east of modern-day Belarusian territory, is known as the Smolensk Gates. This 45-mile-wide neck of land between the headwaters of the Dvina and Dnepr rivers funneled invading armies marching both east and westward, and it has been fought over for centuries. The Polish Army took the Smolensk invasion route in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during its invasion of Russia; and two hundred years later, in 1812, Napoleon's forces burned the nearby city of Smolensk to the ground. All but forgotten to history today, the Smolensk Gate nonetheless remains the entryway to one of three major invasion corridors into the European heartland, as described by Belarusian analyst Zmitser Bandarenka (with one of the other invasion corridors passing through Iran and Asia Minor into the Balkans, and the third

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Battle of the Berezina: Napoleon's Great Escape*, Pen and Sword, 2010.

route traversing the Black Sea steppes). Bandarenka noted, “We know from history that once the Russian empire crossed the border of the Dnepr, its next stop was the Carpathians and the Vistula, or even the Elbe and Danube.”<sup>13</sup>

The geopolitical importance of Belarus stems directly from the fact that it squarely abuts the Smolensk Gates. Indeed, the coat of arms of Mogilev/Mahiliou, the administrative capital of Mogilev Region (which borders on Russian Smolensk), features an armored guardian of the gates; and above his image is the well-known symbol of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—the “Pursuit” (*Pahonya*)—thus, referencing Belarus’s long history within this former Eastern European state. Instead of being a crossroads between East and West, Belarus should be considered the last frontier of Europe, a claim that would strategically imply its role as a buffer state. Others have noted that, historically, when Russia was repelled from this corridor, Muscovy turned its expansionary focus to other geographic areas. For example, when the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania Stephen Bathory fought off the invasion of Ivan the Terrible in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, he deterred the Russian forces at the Smolensk Gate; this led the Russian ruler to turn his expansionist policies toward the Urals and Siberia, halting Russian westward expansion for 75 years.<sup>14</sup>

Western policymakers have increasingly started to grasp the strategic importance of Belarus as an East-West invasion corridor and a springboard for a possible Russian attack on Poland and the Baltic States. Belarus also strategically sits astride the eastern edge of the Suwalki gap, the narrow 60-mile stretch of territory connecting Poland and Lithuania that is flanked on the other side by Russia’s highly militarized Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad. Since the Russian “hybrid” invasion of Crimea in February 2014, followed by the Russian invasion of Donbas in April 2014, Belarus has risen increasingly in

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<sup>13</sup> “Russia-EU: The Battle for the Smolensk Gate”, Interview with Zmitser Bandarenka, July 3, 2015, <https://charter97.org/en/news/2015/7/3/158238/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



strategic importance to NATO and is rapidly becoming a strategic buffer between the North Atlantic Alliance and Russia.

Wedged between the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine and Russia, Belarus has also increasingly become the subject of Kremlin attention. Although Belarus is in a Union State with Russia, and maintains close economic and political relations with its large eastern neighbor, it has been careful to avoid becoming dominated militarily and has tried to keep a careful distance from Moscow by seeking stronger economic relations with the European Union. Meanwhile, Russia has sought to punish Belarus for not allowing permanent Russian bases on its territory by refusing to provide Belarus with new jet fighters and other forms of sophisticated military equipment that Minsk has long sought from Moscow.

Consequently, Minsk has attempted to balance its ties with Moscow by developing closer military relations with Beijing and even has gone so far as to develop a joint weapons system with China known as the Polonez (Polonaise). The Polonez is a Multiple-Launch Rocket System (MLRS) developed with the assistance of China that has a 200-kilometer range that is being expanded and tested to a range of 500 kilometers. The new extended range of the Polonez would enable Belarus to have a long-range rocket system capable of striking the suburbs of Moscow from Vitebsk, or Vilnius, depending on your threat perspective. The fact that China would help Belarus develop a long range MLRS speaks volumes about the latter's mistrust of Russia, despite the fact that Polish officials have said the system is in fact directed at Warsaw.<sup>15</sup> To bolster its export capacity, Belarus has even started selling the Polonez to Azerbaijan in an effort to develop its weapons export revenue for the Chinese-designed system built on the chassis of a Belarusian tractor. Over ten Polonez systems were

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<sup>15</sup> Belarus Digest, December 7, 2015.

exported to Azerbaijan in 2018, according to reports from the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*.<sup>16</sup>

Belarus watchers in the West have noticed a rise in bilateral tensions with Russia since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Belarus, for example, has adopted a new military doctrine implicitly aimed at deterring Russian hybrid war. And it explicitly refused to recognize the Russian annexation of Crimea or support its denied war in Donbas. Minsk has also chosen not to recognize the independence of the Russian-occupied separatist Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Despite his authoritarian rule, President Lukashenka is increasingly becoming a Belarusian version of Yugoslav leader Josep Broz Tito who is determined to defy Putin, as Tito defied Stalin, and maintain a level of sovereignty and independence similar to the former Yugoslav leader.

## **Baltic Awakenings**

Belarus's Baltic neighbors have slowly begun to recognize Lukashenka's changing role as a barrier to Russian expansion, despite the past 20 years of poor-to-modest relations with Minsk. A noticeable warming trend in relations between Belarus and the Baltic States particularly started to emerge since the Russian invasion of Crimea. Moreover, ties between Warsaw and Minsk have increasingly improved since the election of Law and Justice in Poland, in 2015. Relations with Vilnius, on the other hand, remain problematic, particularly over questions of their shared historical legacy and, more immediately, Belarus's decision to build a nuclear power plant (with Russian assistance) less than 25 km from the Lithuanian border. Lithuania is fearful of the environmental threat it could pose, and the fact that the nuclear plant is located approximately 32 kilometers from the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. Moreover, any potential stationing of Russian armored forces to Belarus near the border with Lithuania—

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<sup>16</sup> <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2018/04/19/belarus-sells-its-polonezes-to-azerbaijan-how-will-armenia-react>.

for instance, under the pretext of securing the Belarusian nuclear plant—would alter NATO defense planning in the Baltic and likely evoke calls for a permanent US military base in Lithuania to augment the forward-deployed Enhanced Forward Presence multinational NATO battle groups that are operating in each Baltic State.

Meanwhile, relations with Latvia and Estonia today actually rank among Belarus's best, while relations with Poland continue to improve following years of poor relations. Riga, specifically, has championed closer security ties with Minsk in NATO circles. For example, in September 2018, the Chief of the General Staff of Belarus traveled to Riga to hold high-level meetings with his counterpart in Latvia. Only a month earlier, a delegation of the Polish Ministry of Defense, headed by Colonel Tomasz Kowalik, traveled to Belarus to hold talks with officials from the Belarusian Ministry of Defense on “planned military cooperation with Poland.” The two-day meeting took place in Brest. It. Combined with an earlier meeting held the year before, were unparalleled developments in the recent history of Polish-Belarusian military contacts.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, news of the meeting was released by the Belarusian Ministry of Defense on its website first and only later appeared in the Polish press. The July 2017 talks concerned, among other topics, the exchange of military observers deployed for military exercises as well as historical matters, although a disclaimer was later issued claiming that no talks on military cooperation were discussed.<sup>18</sup>

## **Zapad 2017: Belarus Walks the Tightrope**

The Zapad 2017 military exercises, held from September 14 to 20, proved to be a watershed in Belarus-Russian relations and a new defining moment that demonstrated the limitations of Moscow's ability to bully and intimidate Belarus. As the strategic-level drills approached, the Belarusian government unexpectedly began to flex its

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<sup>17</sup> First cited by the Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* in Baltic News Service, August 31, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

diplomatic muscles by announcing that it would limit the number of Russian troops being deployed to Belarus for the duration of Zapad 2017, unlike in previous years. Belarusian officials also insisted that all Russian forces deployed to Belarus would return to their bases after the completion of the exercise. In an unusual move, Belarus opted to comply with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) restrictions capping the number of troops that could participate in the exercise in Belarus and subsequently notified OSCE officials in Vienna that it would limit the number of Russian troops allowed to participate in Zapad.<sup>19</sup>

Specifically, Minsk limited the number of Russian troops that participated in the exercise on Belarusian soil to a total of 10,200 men, in compliance with OSCE requirements, while the entire number of participants in the exercise on Russian territory were estimated to total 75,000 to 100,00 men.<sup>20</sup> According to the Belarusian government's data breaking down the number of participants in their segment of the exercise, the number of men from Belarus who took part were a little more than 7,000 men, while the number of Russian forces participating in the exercise equaled 3,000. This development irritated Moscow and subsequently resulted in President Putin canceling his visit to Belarus to watch the culmination of the northern segment of the exercise in St. Petersburg. By comparison, Moscow prevented OSCE observers from traveling to Russia to watch the Zapad exercises on its territory—in a major contrast to the transparent role played by officials in Minsk. In fact, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg openly criticized Russia for not allowing Alliance observers to monitor the military exercises in Belarus, whereas foreign ministry officials in Minsk gave the green light to NATO officials to send monitors to observe the exercises despite the fact that Moscow had already said no to the idea.<sup>21</sup> Belarus sent out invitations to NATO member states

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<sup>19</sup> *Baltic Defense Review*, September 20–26, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> For a thorough breakdown of the Russian and Belarusian forces who participated in Zapad 2017 see: <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/66967>.

<sup>21</sup> *Defense News*, August 27, 2017.

Poland, Lithuania and Latvia to watch the Zapad 2017 exercise.<sup>22</sup> This example reflects the nuances with which Belarus operates in its security relations with Moscow as it balances that relationship with its relations with the West while maintaining a distance from Moscow in an effort to be militarily transparent.

## **Sovereignty Before Airbases**

In October 2015, a major controversy erupted between Russia and Belarus, sparked by Russian President Vladimir Putin's statements that Moscow had planned to create a new airbase in Belarus. These remarks had followed a carefully orchestrated Russian drumbeat of reports that sought to pressure and intimidate Belarus into adhering to the Kremlin's demands. For Belarus, talks on airbases have always revolved around negotiations with Moscow to obtain new fighter aircraft for its aging air force. On August 1, 2014, talks with Viktor Bondarev, the Russian air force commander, began when he announced Russia would open a base at Baranavichy after Russia signed an intergovernmental agreement with Belarus. Later, on December 23–24, at a bilateral meeting of defense ministers, officials from Minsk refused to legally formalize the creation of a Russian airbase after Russian officials demanded that their ally allow more Russian aircraft to be based inside Belarus.

Under the terms of its Union State agreement with Moscow and as noted above, Belarus does not allow Russian aircraft to stay in Belarus longer than 24 hours before they are required to return home. In other words, the Russian air force must constantly rotate its airplanes in and out of the Republic. This complicates Moscow's planning and guarantees a level of sovereignty in Belarus decision-making that extends to other areas, such as the 2009 Joint Air Defense Agreement between the two countries, whereby Belarus retains the ultimate authority to decide on whether to use force against any foreign

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<sup>22</sup> *Baltic News Service*, August 2, 2017.

intruder.<sup>23</sup> Officials in Moscow do not have the final say in whether Belarusian air defense reacts and fires on a foreign intruder; Minsk simply consults with Moscow. This nuance in their decision-making is not well understood by NATO or US defense circles, based upon conversations with Western defense officials by the author. President Putin has been asking the Russian parliament to amend the 2009 agreement with Belarus that would allow Moscow to position air-defense weaponry on the border with the EU, meaning the Polish-Lithuanian border. However, Belarus has refused to agree to this new modification agreement.<sup>24</sup>

Russian demands for a new airbase in Belarus and Belarus's rejection of those requests are closely tied to, but not entirely dependent upon, the ongoing tension between Minsk and Moscow over Russia's reluctance to strengthen the Belarusian air force. Belarusian security analyst Siarhei Bohdan has indicated that part of the dispute over the airbase is related to whether Russia would provide Belarus with new fighter aircraft: before there can be any discussion on a new airbase in Belarus, Moscow must agree to this condition. Bohdan wrote that Belarus has been awaiting delivery of over 20 new aircraft from Moscow and it has not added any new aircraft to its air force since 1991. Prior to the 2014 Ice Hockey Championships in Belarus, Lukashenka asked Russia to "give" 12 new aircraft as a gift to Belarus,

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<sup>23</sup> Another well-known Belarus military analyst, Alexander Alesin, has pointed out this nuance in the 2009 agreement: many parts of the agreement are not exactly clear as to which side has authority to make the final decision with regard to air intrusions. Prior to the Zapad 2017 exercises, Putin announced that Russia would place air-defense weaponry in Belarus on the border of Poland, something officials in Minsk refused to comment on. Alesin's comments and views on the air defense agreement are cited here:

<https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/accidents/2017-08-11/razmeschenie-putinyim-pvo-na-belorussko-ukrainskoy-granitse-v-belarusi-sdelali-vajnyie-utochneniya/103919>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.unian.info/politics/2077109-putin-seeks-joint-air-defense-with-belarus.html>.

and Moscow then reportedly agreed to give three or four aircraft in an effort to fulfill this request.<sup>25</sup>

When these requests went unfilled by Russia, President Lukashenka opted to ask Moscow to overhaul and upgrade a dozen MiG-29 aircraft in Belarus's possession after noting his request for new aircraft was refused. Currently, Belarus has about 29 operating MiG-29s and several aging Su-25s. Fuel shortages in the air force plagued Belarus in the past; and as a result, until 2011, Belarusian pilots obtained anywhere between two to five hours of flight training a year, which would be on the same level as Ukrainian pilots today, if not slightly higher. But in 2011, Belarus increased that figure to 100 hours a year per pilot. More importantly, according to the Berlin-based Belarus analyst Siarhei Bohdan, the key issue for Moscow is the glaring hole in Russia's air-defense network posed by the absence of airbases in Belarus. Until this hole is filled, he argues, Moscow will continue to feel vulnerable in defending the Russian capital in the event of any potential NATO attack.<sup>26</sup> As Bohdan noted, if Minsk were, in fact, a valued military ally, Moscow would be willing to bestow all of its latest and most sophisticated weaponry on Belarus in an effort to improve its defenses against a NATO attack. The military analyst further pointed out that Iran receives more sophisticated weaponry from Russia than Belarus, including more up-to-date S-300 air-defense missile systems. Meanwhile, Belarus continues to receive second-hand military equipment from Moscow. Belarus operates the older S-300PS, while Iran received the much newer and more sophisticated S-300PMU variant.<sup>27</sup>

Discussions on Russian access to an airbase in Belarus first began in 2013, when Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told the media, after his meeting with the president of Belarus, that such a Russian military airfield would be established on Belarusian territory within

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<sup>25</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, August 20, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, November 16, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, February 3, 2016.

two years. Several days later, Lukashenka carefully denounced the statement, saying that his discussion with Shoigu focused on supplementing the Belarusian army with Russian fighter jets rather than opening a full-fledged airbase. Those interpretations caused an immediate wave of resentment in the Russian media; but the issue soon faded from the headlines. However, from time to time it has reappeared, with new, often controversial details, which point to an uneasy negotiation process occurring behind closed doors.<sup>28</sup> In response to the statement made by Putin about airbases in Belarus, President Lukashenka said, “We do not need a base these days, especially military air forces. What we need are certain types of weapons. This is what I told [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and, before that, [Prime Minister Dmitry] Medvedev,” said Lukashenka. He further explained, “We need aircraft, not bases. We have great pilots and excellent schools of military and civil aviation. Why would I want to create a base? Why would I want to bring foreign aircraft and pilots here? What would ours do then?”<sup>29</sup>

## Preparing for Hybrid Warfare

In early 2016, Belarus took perhaps one of its most significant steps since gaining independence by redesigning its military doctrine to adapt to new hybrid threats after a thorough examination of its external challenges. On January 22, 2016, President Lukashenka approved the landmark changes following a year-long review by the Ministry of Defense initiated in response to the events in Ukraine in 2014. In fact, this was the first ever change in modern Belarus’s military doctrine—a clear indication that the previous revolutions in Libya, Egypt, and Syria did not have the same impact that Ukraine did on Belarus’s thinking. Most importantly, the document revealed a change in the mindset of Belarusian officials, showing their view of a possible Russian intervention in Belarus, as the threat of “hybrid

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Yauheni Preiherman, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 7, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/minsk-breaks-silence-on-russian-airbase-issue/>.



warfare” and “color revolutions,” come to dominate the country’s security thinking.<sup>30</sup> Belarusian Minister of Defense Andrei Raikou claimed that Belarus did not consider any foreign state an enemy, “But,” he added, “we of course will not concede our territory and will use any force and means, including military to avoid that.”<sup>31</sup> On July 20, 2016, Belarus adopted a new military doctrine that referred to the threat posed by hybrid warfare, a clear, albeit unstated, reference to the threat posed by Russia and its use of non-linear warfare.

The adoption of the new military doctrine reflected Belarus’s classic style of balancing its ties with Russia. Though a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which squarely places Belarus in a collective security alliance with Russia, Minsk has adopted a new military concept that is obviously oriented against the country it is ostensibly aligned with. Combatting the dual threats posed by either a colored revolution or a hybrid threat conveniently masks the Russian threat represented by the latter. On October 30, 2018, speaking before the military leadership of the Belarusian Armed Forces, Lukashenka said, “Having allies is an important factor in ensuring our military security. Nonetheless, we shall build the mechanism of collective protection in accordance with our national interests.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, by balancing the two threats, both viewed as internal, Lukashenka has demonstrated how he closely walks the Russia tightrope, even in security relations that never openly identify Russia as a threat. Belarus uses the two perceptions of the threat to adapt to the new regional security environment and to legitimize its preparation for a hybrid threat to the country. This is a clear sign that the events in Crimea and Donbas—i.e., Ukraine—were viewed by Belarus as an existential threat to its survival.

At the same time, Lukashenka has also laid out a military vision for the country’s defense that goes beyond conventional deterrence, and

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<sup>30</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Security Digest*, February 3, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Siarhei Bohdan, *Belarus Digest*, February 3, 2016.

he has been adamant about his country's need to prepare for a new form of warfare that focuses on greater military mobility. Lukashenka outlined this concept in September 2017, when he noted, "There will be no war between fronts. Instead, the fighting will be local. We need highly mobile forces for defense, and wars fought around the world recently suggest we should have mobile units."<sup>33</sup>

## **The Belarus Conundrum**

Throughout its entire period of independence, the greatest impediment to Belarus interacting with the West has been its economic interconnectedness with Russia, something that, until 2014, Minsk had made no urgent effort to move away from. That said, in a January 2013 meeting with the a delegation from Jamestown, President Lukashenka asserted that, for the first time in his country's history, trade with the European Union had surpassed that of Russia. Today, nearly 50 percent of Belarusian trade still remains dependent on Russia, but trade with European Union member countries has been growing, now making up almost a third of its total. The Belarusian leadership understands the need to diversify its relations and lessens its dependency on Russia. However, Western policymakers need to understand that Belarus will not take the Baltic nationalist path and go for a clean break in relations with Moscow; it will adhere to a distinct Belarusian path in its ties to Russia unless Putin forces the issue and demands that Minsk accept an either "you are with us or against us" approach. Critics of Belarus also fail to take note of on an intense period of Belarusization on the use of its national language in national education, public forums and its sovereignty that has gathered intensity since 2014. These nuances in Belarus's security ties with Russia are not well known among Western policy analysts, and account for the rising level of nationalism emanating from Belarus.

Lukashenka remains adamant and unyielding when it comes to his country's sovereignty and independence. At the same time, the

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<sup>33</sup> Baltic News Service (BNS), September 21, 2017.

Belarusian leader will not take overly antagonistic steps to irritate Moscow. He recently declined to attend the 2019 Munich Security Forum for this very reason; likewise, Lukashenka has repeatedly turned down offers to visit Brussels at the invitation of the European Union.<sup>34</sup> Instead he prefers to travel to Moscow to meet with Putin and try to resolve bilateral issues. Lukashenka even skied with Putin after meetings in Sochi. The Putin-Lukashenka relationship is one that follows a pattern similar to that of Russia's neighbors Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Both of those countries pursue a multi-vector diplomacy with the West while maintaining a high level of sovereignty and independence. Losing Belarus as a strategic ally, however, would be a major blow to Moscow at a time when Russia has fewer allies to rely upon among its neighbors. Ultimately, Russian efforts to establish an airbase or force other forms of political-military coercion on Belarus will always backfire.

## **Belarus Is Not Ukraine**

Domestically, politics inside Belarus differ significantly from those in Lithuania or Ukraine. It is not a country seeking NATO membership, and the majority of the population neither consistently voices support for NATO nor harbors strong anti-Russian sentiment. Belarus is developing closer economic ties to the European Union as the more westward-leaning part of the country uses its close ties to Poland and Lithuania to integrate itself economically with the Baltic. Long-standing ties with Russia and its relative infancy in terms of being a nation-state, enable Belarus to become a unique bridge between East and West.

Vladimir Socor, a noted expert on Belarus, points to the fact that the country is, in important ways, an accident of history but also a gift to the West in the shape of a strategic buffer between the Baltic States and Russia. Belarus as a state was born out of the Brest-Litovsk agreement,

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarusian-leader-skips-munich-conference-because-of-talks-with-russia-s-putin/29772181.html>.

signed in present-day Belarus on March 3, 1918. Out of this agreement, Belarus experienced a period of short-lived independence from 1918 to 1920. Until this temporary independence, Belarusian territory had been largely dominated by landowning Polish gentry, who spearheaded resistance to Soviet rule, but ethnic Belarusians were treated as second-class citizens. Thus allowed for Bolsheviks to establish a common cause with the latter and rewarded the Belarusians for their loyalty. “Liberation” by the Soviets enabled ethnic Belarusians to assume senior-level positions in government whereas most of the land-owning Polish minority were relocated to Poland.

Socor also emphasizes that the Second World War and Belarusian resistance to Nazi occupation, which resulted in 80 percent of the country being destroyed, were also defining moments in modern-day Belarus’s state identity. Belarusian resistance to Nazi rule fostered one of the most concentrated partisan movements in German-occupied areas of the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the reputation of Belarus as the “*partizanski respublik*” is something that deeply resonates in the nation-state identity of Belarusian society today, and it is something President Lukashenka has cultivated, if not significantly nurtured, since the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea.

## **US-Belarusian Relations**

US-Belarusian relations have been largely estranged for nearly a decade. Ties were nearly severed following the ill-fated decision by Belarus to withdraw its ambassador to the United States in December 2010, in response to the Western denunciation of its crackdown on demonstrators in Minsk, which occurred after a group of Belarusian anarchists threw Molotov cocktails at the Russian embassy in Minsk. Five of these demonstrators were imprisoned as a result. Lukashenka

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<sup>35</sup> For an account of the role that Soviet partisans played in Belarus in the massive defeat of Army Group Centre in June 1944 see: Paul Adair, *Hitler’s Greatest Defeat: the Collapse of Army Group Centre, June 1944*, Arms and Armour Press: London, United Kingdom, 1994, pp. 69–80.

was walking a tightrope in ties with Moscow over how it handled this display of anti-Russian sentiment. Aside from this outburst, the majority of the demonstrations were peaceful. The United States reacted harshly to the crackdown that followed and reciprocated by withdrawing its ambassador to Minsk, bringing about a cold chill in bilateral relations.

Owing to these developments, no US ambassador has been stationed at the US Embassy in Belarus since December 2010. The chain of strategic indifference to Belarus by the United States continued until the March 28, 2016, visit to Minsk by then–Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia and Eurasia Michael Carpenter. Carpenter reversed Pentagon policy of mostly ignoring Belarus and singlehandedly revived bilateral military-to-military relations. His trip was the first US Department of Defense–led visit to Minsk by a senior-level Pentagon official in over ten years: all previous visits by US Defense Department officials had been part of multi-member, State Department–led groups, where democracy promotion and human rights issues dominated the bilateral agenda.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the lengthy chill in US-Belarus relations, the government of Belarus has made significant efforts to engage the United States and even dropped its precondition that there would be no return of a US ambassador to Belarus unless US sanctions were removed. In early 2012, Belarus made its first overture to the United States. President Lukashenka began to allow the transit of lethal and non-lethal military equipment through Belarus as part of the reverse transit of American materiel via the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), when the US military drawdown from Afghanistan was launched by the Obama Administration. Belarus’s participation in the program, between 2012 and 2014, was a discreet but consciously proactive level of support for

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<sup>36</sup> On September 10, 2014, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia and Eurasia Evelyn Farkas visited Minsk as part of a US governmental delegation consisting of US State Department officials from various regional bureaus.

the United States and NATO, even though Belarus was under the full weight of US sanctions.<sup>37</sup>

In another move of transparency that defies the image of Lukashenka being a North Korean-style dictator who seeks isolation from the West, Minsk introduced visa free travel to Belarus for up to 80 countries, including the United States and most of its NATO allies in the European Union. The move was a major step forward to allow greater trade and tourism for Belarus as it sought to balance its ties with the West. The visa free travel announcement simultaneously created tensions with Moscow that only has been recently resolved. When Belarus made its announcement in January 2017, Russian authorities were caught by surprise, fearing overland travel by Westerners to Russia via Belarus as there are little or no border posts safeguarding the border.<sup>38</sup>

The above gestures by Minsk notwithstanding, for the past ten years US-Belarusian relations remained largely frozen. In addition to a lack of ambassador, until recently there has been no US military attaché based in the country to give Washington a better understanding, despite the periodic large-scale Zapad and Union Shield Russian-Belarusian military exercises. This has affected US understanding about the country and its delicate relations with Russia. Then-Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell's visit to Minsk, in November 5, 2018, however, has led to a major change in relations between the two countries. Mitchell sought to develop a roadmap for building closer US relations with Minsk for the strategic purpose of signaling to Putin that the US is no longer going to ignore Belarus. In a speech on October 19, 2018, at the Atlantic Council, two weeks prior

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<sup>37</sup> For a rare analysis of Belarus defense cooperation with the United States compiled from discussions with Belarus officials, see the two part series by Vladimir Socor: "NATO's Silent Partner in the East, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 8, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Grigory Ioffe, "Visa Free Travel to Belarus and the Dawn of a New Era in (Dis)Information Wars," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 18, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/visa-free-travel-belarus-dawn-new-era-disinformation-wars/>.

to his November visit to Minsk, Mitchell lauded “Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus as bulwarks against Russian neo-imperialism.”<sup>39</sup>

## Repercussions for NATO

Alarmed by the warming relations between Washington and Minsk as evidenced by the Mitchell visit in November 2018, Moscow is desperately trying to find ways to keep Belarus in its strategic orbit while simultaneously intensifying the information war component of this campaign against Minsk. On June 12, 2019, Polish President Andrzej Duda visited the United States and signed a new agreement to base US forces in Poland. Although the size of the US force remains unclear, this development will likely result in Moscow putting greater pressure on Minsk economically and militarily. Due to this development, Moscow could renew its calls for Minsk to allow a permanent Russian airbase on its soil or possibly to demand the forward deployment of a Russian Motorized Rifle Division (MRD) in Belarus. Economically, Moscow may suspend its oil deliveries to Belarus, which are strategically important to the country, but also vital to Ukraine. Nearly 40 percent of Ukrainian oil imports come from the refined oil produced by Belarusian refineries, and any suspension of Russian oil would have a detrimental impact on the Ukrainian economy.

The Russian military threat demanding forward deployed forces in Belarus is real. To date, Belarus has refused to comply with these requests and has limited Russian deployments and exercises in order to maintain its sovereignty and independence to short-term durations: as noted above, Lukashenka explicitly declared that all Russian forces would return to their bases after the completion of Zapad 2017. But should the Belarusian government be compelled to drop its opposition; such a development would significantly affect NATO’s military strategy for defense of the Baltic States. The Lithuanian capital

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/state-department-official-sounds-warning-on-russian-chinese-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe>.

of Vilnius, for example is less than 30 kilometers from the Belarusian border. Any major Russian armored deployment along that frontier would, therefore, force NATO and US policymakers to reconsider the current posture of US forces in the Baltic.

Rising tension between Belarus and Russia has important repercussions for NATO's eastern flank. Belarus has had a short history as an independent state, and since gaining independence in 1991 it has followed a path of developing close economic and military relations with Russia in exchange for the latter accepting Belarusian sovereignty. Following the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, Belarus has increasingly distanced itself from this relationship in its own nuanced way, weary of a repeat of the Donbas scenario that led to the splintering of eastern Ukraine. Uncertain about Moscow's intentions, Minsk has maintained a high level of independence in its relations with Russia, enabling Lukashenka's Belarus to remain free of permanent Russian military bases unlike its quasi-ally Kyrgyzstan, which maintains a similarly close security relationship with Moscow and allows the Kremlin to maintain a fully functioning, Russian-operated airbase at Kant. Both countries have close economic and security ties with Russia, but Belarus refuses to bend to Russian demands for a permanent airbase.

Meanwhile, Moscow continues to increase its military presence on the Belarus border. Two recent developments highlight the growing concern in Belarus about a Donbas scenario being considered by Russia. Specifically, Russia has created and deployed two new Russian motorized regiments near Belarusian territory: one at Yel'nia, near Smolensk, and the other at Klint'sy. Additionally, both of these Russian units are located adjacent to strategic railheads important to Belarus, with Yel'nia, in particular, near the major Belarusian city of Gomel. These units were deployed following Lukashenka's refusal to allow Moscow to create a new airbase on Belarusian territory.

Writing about the new military bases near Belarus, US military analyst Michael Kofman pointed out in his blog, on January 12, 2016, that



Minister of Defense Shoigu had announced the formation of three new divisions, none of which were in response to US deployments in Europe, NATO exercises or the prospect of new multi-national battalions being sent to the Baltic States. According to Kofman, “The thinking in the Russian General Staff is more about a Ukraine and Belarusian contingency or perhaps a color revolution in Belarus.”<sup>40</sup> It is no accident that Yelnia on the Belarus border is directly proximate to the Smolensk Gates, described by one retired US Air Force officer as a “military tank superhighway.”<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the themes of this paper has been the focus on Belarus representing a strategic buffer between Russia and NATO’s Baltic flank. *The inherent value to NATO is a Belarus that remains free of Russian ground troops or new Russian airbases that would severely reduce the readiness and warning time for NATO forces deployed in the Baltic.* Whether Belarus is *de jure* militarily aligned with Russia is beside the point as Belarus serves NATO interests by being *de facto* neutral and non-aligned.

For this reason, NATO needs to intensify its ties to Belarus. Engagement between Brussels and Minsk to date have been limited by Lithuania, which harbors deep resentments and has obstructed any opportunity for Belarus to even develop a modest relationship with the North Atlantic Alliance. Lithuania’s opposition to Belarus revolves around the construction of a Russian nuclear power plant in Belarus at Astravets, which is about 32 kilometers from the Lithuanian capital. The nuclear power plant will be finished and come online by the end of 2019, and Lithuanian efforts to block its construction will have amounted to nothing. To add embarrassment to Lithuania’s position,

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<sup>40</sup> See the commentary by Michael Kofman on the formation of this new division, <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/2016/05/07/russias-new-divisions-in-the-west/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

the Belarusian nuclear power plant was recently certified as safe and secure by an EU inspection team in July 2018, using a new nuclear safeguard check list developed after an earthquake ripped through the 2011 Fukushima reactor in Japan. The Belarusian nuclear plant passed the EU test, noted *Radio Free Europe* in a report on the visit. Aside from Vilnius, no other EU member government has voiced opposition to the Astravets facility.<sup>42</sup>

Geopolitically, Belarus greatly resembles the Yugoslavia of the 1950s, before Tito's final break with Moscow. Yugoslavia was in a pivotal position in the Balkans and subsequently became a bulwark against Soviet expansion into Greece. The rupture in relations between Tito and Stalin ended up allowing the West to resist Soviet efforts to spread to the Adriatic and Mediterranean. Belarus can occupy a similar position with regard to the Baltic. Given the rise in tensions between Minsk and Moscow, Lukashenka could become another Tito if Putin continues to insist on treating Belarus as a subordinate country and refuses to honor its sovereignty. On several occasions, from 2015 onward, Lukashenka publicly rebuked Russia's request to create a new airbase in Belarus. Two weeks after Moscow's initial request went public, demonstrations erupted in Minsk, with up to 1,000 demonstrators voicing their opposition to the base—a rare public outburst and a strategic tool Lukashenka could utilize to justify his refusal to grant Russia further basing privileges.

In a meeting with a Jamestown delegation visit to Belarus on November 3, 2018, led by former US Commanding General US Army Europe Benjamin Hodges, Lukashenka reiterated this point noting, “Why does Russia need an airbase in Belarus? Russia is only five minutes flying time from Belarus.” He underscored the point that Belarus can ensure the security of its own airspace. Moreover, in a cryptically nuanced, Lukashenkaesque-style statement, the Belarusian leader went on to say that, “While Belarus and Russia remain military

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/planned-belarusian-nuclear-plant-passes-stress-test-neighboring-lithuania-still-worried/29336314.html>.

partners and are allies, we also have a budding defense relationship with China; and the Chinese will do things with Belarus militarily that Russia would never even consider doing.” This remark was an obvious jab at Moscow, underscoring the limits Russia imposes on cooperation with Belarus despite the fact that the two countries are supposed to be treaty allies.

By remaining free of Russian ground troops, Belarus enhances the security of Poland and Lithuania and allows NATO to adequately defend the Suwalki gap by giving the Alliance greater defensive depth along its periphery. And by remaining free of Russian ground forces and staying *de facto* non-aligned, Belarus serves NATO purposes without ever having to join the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. Recently, at an event hosted by the Atlantic Council, in Washington, DC, Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Oleg Kravchenko remarked that his country wants to be friends with everybody, including NATO.<sup>43</sup> By engaging Belarus, NATO actually can help this small state become a bulwark against Russian neo-imperialism, as envisaged by former Assistant Secretary Mitchell, in his October 2018 speech. Belarus does not have to choose sides. If the United States establishes a new military base in Poland, all eyes will be on Minsk and its leadership, which is already forced to walk the Russian tightrope. As the geopolitical importance of Belarus looms ever larger, the pressure on this strategically placed East European state will continue to grow ever more intense.

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<sup>43</sup> Grigory Ioffe, “Beyond Lies: A New Stage in the Belarus-Russia Information War,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 14, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/beyond-lies-a-new-stage-in-the-belarus-russia-information-war/>.

# Author Biography

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Glen Howard is the President of The Jamestown Foundation, a research and analysis institution based in Washington, DC. He is fluent in Russian and proficient in Azerbaijani and Arabic, and is a regional expert on the Caucasus and Central Asia. He was formerly an Analyst at the Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) Strategic Assessment Center. His articles have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, and *Jane's Defense Weekly*. Mr. Howard has served as a consultant to private sector and governmental agencies, including the US Department of Defense, the National Intelligence Council and major oil companies operating in Central Asia and the Middle East.

