Belarusian Army: Capacity and its Role in the Region

Without any loud political rhetoric to bolster the Belarusian army, it has nonetheless gradually developed from an appendage cut off of the huge Soviet military into an army more adapted to the needs and capacities of a 9.5-million nation.

Belarus has been spending little on its armed forces yet has consistently used them to promote better and closer relations with Russia. Despite their close ties, Russia has not shown interest in taking over Belarus’ armed forces or integrating them into their own.

These are some of the conclusions found in a new analytical paper Belarusian Army: Its Capacities and Role in the Region released by the Ostrogorski Centre today.

Does Belarus Have a Proper Army?

After the fallout from the Soviet Union’s collapse had begun to settle, Minsk’s future armed forces emerged under rather favourable conditions. Belarus was able to transform the well-armed, trained and supplied military units of the Belarusian Military District of Soviet times into their own armed forces.

Part of this successful transformation hinged on the fact that there were more than enough ethnic Belarusians – officers and specialists in the Soviet army – to help build a full-fledged army for the young independent nation.

Since gaining independence, Belarus has had a history of spending the bare minimum on its armed forces. Although it has more soldiers than many European countries, this does not strictly stem from its military ambitions or needs. It can partially be attributed to the Belarusian leadership’s
aspirations to use the army to promote civic consciousness among Belarusians.

The Belarusian army continues to possess advanced arms and equipment, but its condition has deteriorated over time as the government has purchased no new arms since gaining independence.

In recent years, Russia has effectively renounced its policy of delivering arms to Belarus at symbolic prices, delivering a serious blow to its ability to rearm itself.

The Belarusian Army: Between Russia and NATO

In addition to fulfilling the traditional security-related tasks of every army, Belarus’ armed forces play an important role in Belarus-Russian relations. Belarus is located in the vicinity of Russia’s heartland.

Given Minsk’s alliance with Moscow, a major function of the Belarusian army is its role in securing the area immediately adjacent to the main political, economic and military centres of Russia. Thanks to its geopolitical strategic importance, the Belarusian government is able to use its armed forces to get favours from Moscow in other arenas.

While the Belarusian army’ defence capacity remains relatively strong, its offensive potential is very limited. Much of its role in the region has been shaped and determined by Belarus’ foreign policy.
The government seeks to find balance in its alliance with Russia and also create a place for itself between the West and Russia. One of the most important functions of the Belarusian armed forces is to strengthen the government’s position in its dealings with Moscow.

So far, Belarusian collaboration with Russia remains limited and is more reactive than proactive in nature. Moreover, since the mid-2000s Belarus has increased its level of cooperation with NATO. This cooperation has been a long-term and relatively successful enterprise, one that continues to this day without much publicity.

Military cooperation between Belarus with Russia, however, has recently been undermined by Moscow. The Belarusian military has suffered for years from minimal funding and supplies. Recently Russia has renounced its previous generous policy of providing Belarusian military with modern equipment at low prices, a move that leaves Belarus with growing stockpiles of obsolete equipment.

Moreover, the Kremlin does not really see Belarus as an ally. Russia seeks to take direct control over components of Belarus’ national defence system, specifically those that are of the greatest importance to Russia (such as air defence).

Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising then that Belarus is very pragmatic in its cooperation with Russia and
considers itself free to look for other strategic military partners besides Russia (NATO, China).

The Belarusian army, despite its travails and pressure from its neighbour to the east, remains a distinct entity and has not been incorporated into Russia’s forces. Although the air defence systems of Belarus and Russia are now formally united, Minsk retains effective operational control over the Belarusian units and has been holding its ground at the highest levels of their cooperation by pushing for the appointment of a Belarusian commander for their united air defence system.

The rest of the Belarusian army has no direct official ties with Russia and functions under a Belarusian command, with Moscow exerting no control over it. Belarusian dependence on Russia for equipment and some specialised and advanced training is not at all unusual for a country of Belarus’ size and geopolitical situation (neighboring key regions in Russia).

**Does Belarus Need an Army?**

Neighbouring states and the wider Western community should recognise the security concerns of Belarus. It would be wrong to dismiss the current Belarusian state as a marionette of Russia.

On the other hand, harsh reactions and criticism levelled at ordinary military exercises in Belarus, or the promotion of flights dropping pro-democracy literature on Belarusian territory, may cause a more extensive Russian military presence in Belarus.
Such actions present a real threat to the gradual transformation of the country and its integration into the region. Simply put, Belarus is not a threat to anybody in the region, or beyond it. Responsible Western politicians and media should avoid helping the Belarusian regime by overstating their concerns about military related issues.

There are few, if any, real reasons for considering a repetition of the Crimean scenario unfolding in Belarus in the short- or mid-term. Firstly, the Russian military presence is restricted to two highly specialised technical facilities and a planned air force base. Moscow has no ‘stand-by’ military forces on the ground. Secondly, Russia has no comparable strategic interest in Belarus as it had in Crimea.

The Russian military facilities in Belarus, whilst valuable, do not hold the same level of the importance as the Crimean naval base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The Kremlin is also quite satisfied with the Belarusian regime and would hardly risk throwing it over in today’s climate.

There is only one plausible scenario in which Russia would intervene militarily in Belarus. It is – in the very distant future – a radical pro-Western takeover of power in Minsk with an anti-Russian programme pushing for closer ties with the US and joining NATO. Even under this scenario, Moscow will have more difficulties in Belarus than it currently has in Ukraine.

In the end, the Belarusian army can be seen as a guarantee that there will not be any Ukrainian-style conflict from taking place, although in order to better fulfil its role, it needs better funding and modernisation.