Belarus’s New Military Doctrine: What’s the Message?

On 20 July 2016 Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka approved the final version of the new Military Doctrine of Belarus. The previous version had been adopted in 2002 and has obviously outlived its usefulness in light of the dramatic changes in the global and regional security architecture.

The Russia-Ukraine hybrid conflict and a new “Cold war” contributed greatly to the development of this document. It now takes into consideration possible challenges and threats not only from the West, but from Russia as well.

Criticism from allies

The whole process of adopting the doctrine took several months, starting at the beginning of April, when the project was approved by the House of Representatives (Lower Chamber) after the first reading.

It seems that one of the reasons the process took so long was a campaign of heavy criticism coming from Armenia. The Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, Shavarsh Kocharyan, unexpectedly claimed that the new Military Doctrine of Belarus compromises the entire Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). It forbids the Belarus Armed Forces to take part in military operations abroad and therefore undermines Belarus’s obligations and the collective defence principles in the framework of the CSTO.
Some analysts suspect the Kremlin's hand in such statements. Moscow has decided to use its ally Armenia to send a message to officials in Minsk about its concerns regarding the new Military Doctrine as well as the normalisation process with the West.

In fact, the First Deputy Chairman of the Federation Council Committee on Defence and Security, Frants Klintsevich, has interpreted the adoption of a new Military Doctrine as a way of flirting with Western countries. He has also warned Minsk that this could lead to tragic consequences, as the West would merely take advantage of Belarus.

It apparently took almost four months to modify the document and make some insignificant, mostly stylistic changes in order to avoid such criticism in the future. The final version of the new Military Doctrine no longer directly prohibits the deployment of the Belarus Armed Forces abroad. Nevertheless, this prohibition is still mentioned in several clauses of the text.

**Defensive nature**

First and foremost, the new Military Doctrine of Belarus remains defensive in nature, as was the previous one. According to statements by Aliaksandr Lukashenka, this means that the Belarus Armed Forces may be used only on home territory, in cases of military conflict, for the purpose of protecting Belarusian independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty and constitutional order (the same is true if any CSTO member is attacked).

Secondly, by proclaiming a new Military Doctrine, Belarus confirms its fundamental commitment to the maintenance of international peace and security. Thirdly, Belarus affirms a peaceful foreign and military policy.
The new Military Doctrine does not portray any state as an adversary. However, Belarus does consider an adversary any state or non-state actor (such as terrorist and extremist organisations), whose activity poses a military threat. The text characterises such activity as having as its object interference in internal affairs or encroachments on the independence, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and/or constitutional order of Belarus.

**Impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict**

There is no doubt that the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid conflict, as well as the new “Cold War” between Russia and the West, precipitated the development of a new Military Doctrine.

The previous one, adopted in 2002, followed NATO intervention in the Yugoslav Wars (1991 – 2001), the enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe, and concerns from officials in Minsk that the West was preparing a “colour revolution” in Belarus. For this reason, Belarus gave priority to the formation of a common defence space with the Russian Federation at that time.

Doctrine does indirectly voice concerns about Russia’s aggressive foreign and military policy

However, the regional military landscape has changed dramatically since the Ukrainian crisis and the resulting Russia-NATO confrontation. For Belarus, The main priority for coalition military policy still remains the strengthening of collective security mechanisms (seen as defensive) with Russia and CSTO member states. Nevertheless, the text of new Military Doctrine does indirectly voice concerns about Russia’s aggressive foreign and military policy.
Countering hybrid warfare

We can find allusions to hybrid warfare in the section regarding characteristics of the current military and political landscape in Belarus's neighbourhood (Chapter 3). The new Military Doctrine mentions certain attempts by state actors to interfere in the internal affairs of individual countries, including European ones.

According to the text, such attempts have provoked internal armed conflicts with large-scale use of military force, including both traditional and guerilla (partisan or terrorist) warfare. Use of information-psychological warfare for aggressive purposes becomes a threat in such types of conflicts.

This section undoubtedly alludes to the practical application of so called “hybrid warfare methods” or the “Gerasimov doctrine” by Russia Armed Forces during the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Andrej Raŭkoŭ, Minister of Defence, has even claimed that the Belarus Armed Forces have been studying the experience of their Ukrainian counterparts in counteracting hybrid warfare in the Donbass.

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What's more, since the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Belarusian Armed Forces have been conducting exercises in preventing a Donbass-like hybrid scenario during almost every large-scale military drill or sudden combat readiness check.

Belarusian officials have decided to avoid the notion of “hybrid warfare” in spite of an announcement from former State Secretary of the Security Council Aliaksandr Miažujeŭ, possibly not to annoy Minsk's Eastern ally. Nevertheless, the new Military Doctrine does use the term “internal armed
An open and reliable partner

According to the new Military Doctrine, this opens the door for Belarus to build new military coalitions with countries other than Russia and CSTO or CIS member states, including countries that have signed bilateral international agreements with Belarus on strategic partnership.

Belarus has already concluded several strategic agreements, such as with China in 2013. This has provided significant impetus for intensified development of political and military cooperation between Minsk and Beijing.

Belarusian leadership wants to rely on China’s international influence, and in the case of a conflict with its Eastern neighbour, technical and diplomatic assistance at the least (Belarus and China have already developed some weaponry systems, such as the “Palanez” multiple launch rocket system).

Minsk is also seeking to maintain positive and mutually beneficial relations with the EU and establish dialogue on equal terms with NATO. Belarusian officials would like to increase transparency and promote mutual understanding in the framework of strengthening regional security, in line with the new Military Doctrine.

Such an approach helps Minsk achieve a balance and avoid involvement in confrontations between Russia and NATO. In this regard, the adoption of the new Military Doctrine sends a
message to the international community: by proclaiming a new Military Doctrine Belarus, wants to present itself as an open and reliable partner with an independent, predictable and peaceful military policy.

This is especially relevant in the context of regional instability caused by the aggressive foreign and military actions of the Russian Federation.

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