

Opening a Russian Fighter Planes Base in Belarus Seems Unlikely

When seeing Lukashenka in Minsk on 23rd April, the Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu said that a Russian air regiment and an airbase will have been created on Belarusian territory by 2015. Shoygu said that the first military planes would come to Belarus already this year. His statement did not provoke a negative response from Lukashenka at that meeting.

However, on 26th April Lukashenka said in an interview: "You know my character and you realize that such thing will never happen. I am not a president who would give his to somebody else, let alone the highest thing – the sovereignty... As the Chief Commander, I lack two dozen modern airplanes. We buy Russian Su-27s, MiG-29s or some more modern planes to ensure inviolability of our state borders."

Further, the Chief Commander of the Russian Air Force, General Victor Bondarev, said that an airdrome near the city of Lida (Hrodna region) had been set aside for accommodating the regiment of Russian fighter planes.

The fact that the statements by Russian military officials occurred after the above mentioned claims by Lukashenka causes a sense of vagueness with this issue. Several experts suppose that Lukashenka will have to agree to the insistent offer from Moscow for two reasons:

First, the stock of Belarusian fighter planes consists of mainly Su-24 whose service life has expired and which must be written off. Fighter planes are needed for a properly functioning and reliable air defence system.

Second, Russia exerts pressure on Belarus and reduces its oil supplies. The Belarusian side will have to agree to deploy Russian fighter planes also because it needs Russian oil.

Deployment of a full-fledged Russian fighter air base is unlikely for the reasons discussed below.

Foreign Policy

If Belarus agrees that Russian fighter planes can be deployed to its territory, the negotiating capacity of Belarus regarding subsidies from Russia will get weaker. Russia will be less dependent on Belarus regarding air defence support in particular, and regarding military safety in general.

This is why Lukashenka said that the initiative of Shoygu was an encroachment on the sovereignty of Belarus.

Lukashenka has several times said that deploying a US anti-missile defence system and developing NATO's military infrastructure in the territory of Eastern members of the Alliance was aimed against Russia. It is in the interest of Russia in the first place that Belarus has a reliable air defence system.

Currently, Russia is not interested in being in conflict with Belarus. At large, several steps by Lukashenka's team (the release of the Uralkali CEO, end of the anti-Russian informational campaign – especially when the goals have been attained) can be enough to secure a sufficient quantity of Russian oil.

Despite the reduction of oil deliveries, Belarusian officials are pretty optimistic in their assessment of their prospects for cooperation with Russia in the sphere of oil refining. One should take note of the respective statements of the First Vice Premier Vladimir Siamashka. He says that by the end of the year Belarus will have received 23 million tonnes of oil.

On 11 October Lukashenka said that he had asked Putin to leave Belarus the revenue from oil products exports, part of which usually is transferred to the Russian budget. The sum is around four billion US dollars.

It is unlikely that the Kremlin will decide in favour of this request. Russia has budgeted for revenues of 118.5 billion Russian rubles to come out of Belarus as an export tax for oil and petroleum products; the forecast for the same category revenue in 2014 is 112.9 billion Russian rubles.

The initiative of Lukashenka indicates that official Minsk is optimistic about its chances to get a portion of the Russian oil pie, and at least as large of one as earlier.

Domestic Reasons

Lukashenka has plenty of domestic policy reasons not to agree to Russian military presence.

The fact that Lukashenka has been in power in Belarus since 1994 accounts for the fact, above all, that in authoritarian Belarus, like in other countries, authorities take into account public opinion, as well as the data of independent sociologists. According to an opinion poll, conducted by NISEPI in June 2013, less than 20 per cent of the respondents had a positive attitude towards the statement of the Russian Air Defence Minister Shoygu to deploy Russian air base in Belarus; 35.6 per cent said they were indifferent and 36 per cent were negative about it.

The idea to turn Belarus into a frontline of the Russian defence is unpopular with Belarusian society. Lukashenka can hold large-scale shows with the participation of the Russian military. However, he must bear in mind what people think about real military cooperation with Russia.

Perhaps, another factor is less significant here. Lukashenka is unpopular with the Belarusian army officer corps.

Belarusian army officers often say that Lukashenka's notion of the military sphere is dilettantish, and his concepts of military actions are at the level of the mid-20th century.

A monthly salary of a Belarusian lieutenant colonel is equivalent to \$650, whereas the salary of their Russian counterparts is RUR 64,000 (around \$1,900). Lukashenka, therefore, has many reasons to be against frequent contacts between Belarusian and Russian military servicemen.

Unlike in Russia, Belarus saves money on its army. Armed forces use ammunition from stores that were collected back in Soviet times. Lukashenka is not going to fight with anyone. He is concerned by domestic threats, and not by those outside the country.

The financing priority goes to security, defence and law enforcement agencies aimed for affairs at home – the KGB and the Ministry of the Interior. After the presidential elections in 2010, Lukashenka's praetorians got more convenient armour and shields with built-in electric shockers.