

# Role of the Military in Belarusian Foreign Policy



Belarus' voice is seldom heard on the international scene, and its concerns are rarely taken into account. Minsk has not succeeded in achieving its major foreign policy goals and appears to lack an overall strategy. The much-disputed [customs union](#) with Russia and Kazakhstan, the feebleness of its [military alliance](#), and its [prospects for EU accession](#) are three key examples of Belarus' foreign policy failures.

Belarus seems to be seeking a "[third way](#)" between Moscow and the West, but it is doing so with essentially no international influence. Belarus has few levers to pull and little to bring to the negotiating table. The traditional currency of power in international relations is a strong military backed by a strong economy. Unfortunately for Belarus, it has neither. In order to successfully pursue an independent course in the international sphere, Belarus needs to get its economy on track, rethink its military posture and alliance affiliations, and modernize both its military structure and equipment.

Belarus' 2009 defense budget was \$611 million, which somehow financed an active force of 72,940 and a paramilitary force of 110,000. With a budget of \$611 million, it is hard to imagine

that Belarus could project a modicum of force beyond its borders or equip its soldiers with new weapons. Clearly, Belarus is unable to stand up to serious pressure from an external foe. To successfully embark on "a third way" in the international sphere, Minsk needs to develop the military power requisite with such a strategy.

Switzerland, for example, runs a strictly neutral and independent foreign policy, only contributing troops to peacekeeping and monitoring operations – currently 7 international missions. It has a robust territorial defense plan and an impressive logistical operation. It spent \$4.51 billion on defense in 2009 and will spend another \$4.9 billion in 2010. Switzerland's 174,000 reserve force can be mobilized in the event of a crisis, and that force will be equipped with modern military hardware.

Switzerland's fully capable military allows the country neutrality and independence in its foreign policy decision making, and its military is supported by a \$532 billion GDP. It stood up to the German War Machine in World War II, and will not easily cave to future external pressure.

Belarus, on the other hand, would have to spend 13.3% of its GDP to equal Swiss annual defense expenditures, which would bring it to a level not seen since days of the Soviet Union. The key then to independence in Belarusian foreign policy lies in the economy. Until Belarus can significantly raise its \$60 billion annual GDP to support a modern, fully equipped military, it will not likely be able to run an independent foreign policy able to withstand external pressure.

Belarusian military forces are deployed in a defensive posture that aligns with the military doctrine of the Republic. The military's purpose is to guarantee the inviolability of Belarusian borders and to prevent foreign invasion. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to assess that the Belarusian

defense budget and force posture align well. It does not take a lot of money to fund domestic troop deployments where little is spent in the way of new platforms and military infrastructure.

A military posture centered on strict territorial defense works for a country such as Switzerland that is self-sufficient and runs a historically neutral and independent foreign policy. But for Belarus, which is not quite neutral and hardly self-sufficient, a single-track defense posture, supported by an antiquated and under-funded military is not requisite to achieving foreign policy goals, as it gives the country no bargaining power and likely would not stand up to outside pressure. Instead, Belarus should consider aligning itself militarily more closely with Europe – and of course economically.

Yes, close military alignment with Europe is a euphemism for increasing cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), with the prospect of eventually gaining full membership status. Participation in the military alliance would begin a process of gaining international credibility for Belarus, as NATO assistance would eventually lead to a complete overhaul of Belarusian force posture, structure, and equipment.

As a member of the world's most powerful military alliance, Belarus would be able to effectively contribute to global security by participating in peacekeeping, counter-terror, counter-proliferation, and stabilization operations around the globe. NATO's new strategic concept, that is currently being developed, could see the Alliance expand its role as a caretaker of global security, and Belarus would gain much by becoming a contributing member.

Currently, Belarus is a long way from qualifying for NATO military assistance, let alone a membership action plan; however, the Alliance eventually expanding to cover the

entirety of Europe is not beyond the realm of possibility. There are even credible voices now and again calling for [Russian NATO membership](#).

Belarus essentially has two choices if it would like to get its foreign policy on track and begin to achieve some goals: it can open its economy to massive foreign investment, increasing its GDP and allowing it to develop the type of military commensurate with a self-sufficient state that is capable of pursuing a sometimes unilateral course of action, or it can work to more closely align itself with a capable military alliance that would help to modernize Belarusian force posture, structure, and equipment.

Belarus' current alliance affiliations and dependence on Russia give it little international leverage, and it has effectively alienated itself from the West due to political considerations. Yet, Belarus does not have the economic or military power to unilaterally achieve major foreign policy goals. Minsk would be well advised to adopt a strategy of closer economic and military cooperation with Europe, and eventually across the Atlantic, which would be in the best interests of its military, the state, and its citizens.

\*Data on defense data taken from:

[The Military Balance 2010](#), International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, England.

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