

What does a New Cold War mean for Belarus?

Last week's visit by the Russian Minister of Defence clearly demonstrated the Kremlin's intentions to undermine the image of Belarus as a country with a predictable and neutral military and foreign policy.

The confrontation between NATO and Russia, as a manifestation of the New Cold War, has direct implications for the independence, sovereignty and national security of Belarus.

There is a risk that Russia will manage to transform Belarus into a Cold War outpost in order to generate conventional and hybrid threats to NATO member states and Ukraine. The Kremlin may also destabilise the political and military situation in Belarus if it decides that Aliaksandr Lukashenka is crossing too many red lines.

A sudden visit from Shoigu

Last week Sergey Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Defence, paid an unexpected visit to Minsk to discuss Russian-Belarusian bilateral military cooperation during a joint board of defence ministries; such a meeting usually takes place only once a year. Nevertheless, the visit was not announced beforehand and seemed to be urgent.

During the meeting, he stated that the US and NATO are increasing their offensive capabilities on the western borders of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. He also detailed NATO's plan to deploy four multinational battalions on its Eastern flank in order to undermine the strategic stability of the region.

According to Shoigu, this means that the Union State has to formulate a joint response. Thus, Russia has already taken “defensive” measures against a possible Western threat, and the Kremlin is trying to persuade Minsk to do the same.

Without doubt, the Kremlin is trying to increase its political and military clout in Belarus. It involves Minsk in a number of different initiatives such as deploying Russian air, land, and missile bases on Belarusian territory. The formation of the joint military organisation of the Union State (by 2018) and the conducting of joint large scale military drills such as 'West'/'Zapad' have helped Moscow undermine Belarus's image as an open and reliable partner with an independent, predictable, and peaceful military policy. This also calls Belarus's intention to behave neutrally in the context of NATO-Russia confrontation into question.

Belarus and the region's military balance



Russia began to increase its military capabilities on the Western strategic direction right after the Crimean annexation and destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine. Moscow has already established the first Guards tank army on the Belarusian direction and re-deployed the 20th Guards Army to the Ukrainian border to assist in the hybrid war conflict in Donbas.

The Kremlin also plans to form new motorised (mechanised) and tank divisions in the Western military district and one motorised (mechanised) division in the South military district. Moscow is also rearranging the 11th Army Corps in Kaliningrad, providing it with additional facilities to enforce two motorised (mechanised) brigades to division level.

According to official statements, Russia is undertaking these military steps as a defensive response to NATO's increased activity in Central Europe and the Baltic region. The Kremlin will deploy two motorised brigades close to the border with Belarus for this reason as well.

One of these is stationed in Klinty, Bryansk region, 40 km from the Belarusian border, and will be upgraded to a mechanised regiment. The second one is located in Yelnya, Smolensk region, 90 km from the Belarusian border, and will be reinforced to a mechanised division at the beginning of 2017.

Russia's measures are disproportionate and superfluous from the point of view of military balance in the region

It is obvious that Russia's measures are disproportionate and superfluous from the point of view of military balance in the region, especially given that Belarus and Russia are still allies. According to statements of the Belarusian military, Minsk does not believe the deployment of the four NATO battalions in Poland and the Baltic states to be a direct military threat to the security of Belarus.

These steps will not significantly change the current military balance between Belarus and neighbouring NATO states. According to the Global Militarization Index, Belarus remains among the ten most militarised countries in Europe, placing 12th out of a total of 152 countries, leaving Poland (68), Latvia (85), Lithuania (63), and Estonia (25) far behind. From this point of view, Minsk doesn't have any reason to be concerned.

Russia as the real source of

concern

If NATO's activities on its Eastern flank do not generate a direct military threat even to Belarus, then the same must be true for Russia as well. Nevertheless, the Kremlin has been exacerbating the military situation in the region since the annexation of Crimea using any decision or move by NATO as a pretext.

Russia has already conducted sudden readiness checks of its armed forces in the Western military district with as many as 100,000 troops, practising large-scale conflicts with NATO on the Baltic and Scandinavian theatres. The fact that Russia has sent 'Iskanders' – nuclear-capable missile systems – to Kaliningrad, and deployed 'Kalibrs' – capable long range missile warships and submarines – to the Baltic Sea support the fear that Russia may use nuclear weapons in a hypothetical conflict with NATO.



This strategy of escalation serves as a tool of pressure and psychological leverage on the EU and NATO; it is meant to undermine the unity and solidarity of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. However, first and foremost this strategy generates security challenges and threats to Russia's neighbours, especially Ukraine and Belarus.

On the other hand, Moscow is generating instability in the countries along its border as a mean of reducing the influence of other world and regional powers in those regions. This is a result of Russia being unable to maintain its influence in the region through economic cooperation and soft power.

Is Belarus Russia's next target?

Obviously, the hardliners behind the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine and the confrontation with the West perceive the normalisation process of Belarus with the EU and US as a threat to Russia's influence.

For example, Russian military analysts believe that the West will be able to separate Belarus and other Eastern Partnership countries from Russia and draw them into its sphere of influence by the end of this year. Such analysis is problematic, as the normalisation with the West has obvious limits. Moreover, Belarus is not planning to join the EU and NATO or even sign an Association agreement in the foreseeable future.

At the same time, such analysis arms the Kremlin with reasons to put more pressure on Belarus. Moscow may even attempt to destabilise the country if it fails to stop its shift towards the West and China or if it loses its political influence following a regime change.

Belarus Digest will discuss possible scenarios in upcoming articles.

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