



BULLETIN

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Prospects and Consequences of Military Cooperation between Belarus and Russia

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Military cooperation between Belarus and Russia is the most advanced bilateral process of integration within the Commonwealth of Independent States. It involves not only the close coordination of the activities of the armed forces but also issues such as the production of military equipment and training of soldiers. At the same time, due to Belarus' limited financial resources, the role of Russia as a supplier of equipment and sponsor of military exercises is growing. Poland and other Central European NATO countries should closely monitor the deepening military cooperation between Russia and Belarus, while continuing to develop their own capacities and cooperation programs, and seek to maintain the involvement of NATO in the region.

Determinants of the Belarus-Russia Cooperation. The institutional framework for the two countries' alliance is provided by the Russia-Belarus Union State and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Military cooperation is regulated by a dedicated agreement from 1997, as well as the Security Concept of the Union State of Belarus and Russia of 1999 and an agreement in 2012 on a common air defence system. Belarus is a particularly valuable strategic ally of Russia because it allows for a line of defence 540 km further to the west. Belarus is also important because of the presence of major military installations on its territory: a radar station in Hancevichi (near Baranovichi) monitors ballistic missile launches from a western direction and is part of the Russian early warning system, and a centre to communicate with strategic nuclear weapons-capable submarines in Vileyka (Minsk province). Both facilities are leased by Russia free of charge until 2020.

Both countries regularly conduct joint military exercises. In October 2011, 12,000 troops, 120 aircraft including helicopters, and 200 units of other military equipment took part in the "Shield Alliance" military exercises in the Ashuluk training range. They were exercising primarily using the S-300, S-400, Tor, Pantsir and Buk air defence systems. For 2013, 78 joint actions of various scale have been planned, including recent tactical exercises involving Belarusian special forces and a Russian air-assault platoon (a total of 800 troops) on 22-24 April at the Brest military range, and on 21 May in Minsk, a second stage of joint military staff manoeuvres involving the commands of the armed forces of the two countries. These activities are part of the preparations for the "West 2013" exercises planned for September this year.

The Military Industry—Russia's Siamese Twin. Since the times of the Soviet Union, both countries have had strong links between their arms industries. Belarus provides Russia such items as navigation equipment, antenna systems for satellite communications, radio stations, portable and desktop computer systems, automation systems and software, and optical equipment. The Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MWTP) is the only maker of mobile transporter-launchers for the Russian Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missiles. The company Peleng is the exclusive supplier of fire control systems for the basic Russian tank, the T-90S, and the planned Tank Support Fighting Vehicle (BMPT). Through intermediaries Beltechexport and Rosoboronexport, Peleng participates in the modernisation of fire control systems of armoured vehicles made during Soviet times that remain in the inventory of many countries. Among the companies generating strong interest in Russia are producers of air defence missile systems, radar and air target

imitators—the Tetraedr, and Vitebsk design office Display—manufacturers of military computer monitors, and the Adunok remote-controlled observation and weapon station placed on the chassis of the Russian Tigr high-mobility multipurpose military vehicle. Other important entities producing equipment for the armies of both countries are Integral and the Horizont company. Integral produces semiconductors and microchips that can also be used in nuclear weapons, while Horizont produces latest generation displays. Control and navigation systems for Su-27UB, Su-30 and Su-33 aircraft are provided by the company Ekran.

In order to increase the production capacity of its defence industry, Russia for several years has striven to purchase the best Belarusian companies. The most important is MWTP, which has been targeted by the GAZ Group from Nizhny Novgorod. Recently there have been reports about selling Integral to Ruselectronics. It has to be stressed that the Belarusian defence industry does not produce complete weapons (with rare exceptions), but only components and replacement parts. Therefore, the decision of the Russian government in December 2012 to open access to Belarusian companies to state orders under the same rules as Russian companies was very important for the Belarusian military industry.

S-300 Missile Systems and a Russian Fighter Base in Belarus. Reports that Belarus would host a base for Russian fighter aircraft to complement the air force combat capabilities of Belarus appeared for the first time in December 2012. Due to frequent accidents and the end of their service life, Su-27 fighters and Su-24 bombers (about 50-60 aircraft) were withdrawn from service by the Belarusians. According to Russia's plans, Su-30 fighters with the capability to carry bombs and air-to-ground missiles will probably be deployed in Belarus. A regiment of Russian fighter aircraft will most likely be located close to Baranovichi, at the 61st Air Force Base, where the Su-27s had been stationed. Moreover, already this year, Russia plans to establish an air force command in Belarus and start combat patrols over the country (now performed only by the Belarusians). In 2015, Belarus will also receive from Russia four Yak-130 training-combat aircraft.

To strengthen the capacity of its air defences, in 2014 the Russians are also planning to provide its ally with four squadrons of S-300s. At the same time, in order to enhance its capabilities to defend against a low altitude air strike, the Belarusian army bought three batteries of Tor-M2 missiles. The first entered service in 2011, the second in 2012 and the deployment of the last battery is planned for the current year.

The fighter base will at the same time be the first Russian unit with offensive capabilities located on Belarusian territory. It will strengthen Russia's control over the Belarusian part of the joint air defence system and shorten the response time in case of a violation of the country's airspace. From a PR point of view, Russia's decision was also a response to the expansion of the military cooperation between Poland and the U.S.—the Aviation Detachment and extension of the Air Policing mission in the Baltic States.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Given Belarus' current budgetary situation and its lack of sufficient resources to restructure its army (the Belarusian defence budget for 2013 is about \$686.4 million; for several years it remained relatively stable, but compared to 2012, it increased by 15%), Russian support to maintain the country's military capabilities is necessary. Indirectly, Russia finances the Belarusian army. This cooperation is seen in the supply of military equipment (especially aviation technology, S-300 complexes, and, in the future, possibly also S-400 and Iskander missiles), as well as ammunition, spare parts, fuel, and servicing equipment. Russia also pays for the military exercises it conducts with Belarus (West-2009, West-2013) and the preparation and maintenance of training grounds. Nevertheless, apart from these processes, Lukashenka will try to maintain the independence of the Belarusian army through the control of its human resources policy and, possibly, delaying a decision on the deployment of the Russian military base in Belarus.

Russia uses its increased military presence in Belarus to show its readiness to respond to U.S. and NATO operations in Central Europe. What is more, the significance of its western neighbour will grow in case of worsening Russian relations with NATO. In that case, further activities by Russia, such as the deployment on Belarusian territory of new weapons and even land forces, should be expected.

At this stage, the development of Belarusian–Russian military cooperation cannot be treated as the beginning of an “arms race” in Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, Poland and other NATO countries should closely monitor the deepening military cooperation between Belarus and Russia, not least because the airbase in Belarus will increase Russian influence in that country. Poland should also make an effort to observe the West-2013 exercises, although probably the number of troops and tanks that will take part in it will not exceed the limits laid down in the Vienna Document (1300 and 300, respectively). At the same time, Poland should continue to modernise its own defence capabilities, pursue regional cooperation and work towards maintaining the involvement of NATO in the region.