

The NATO exercise *Saber Strike*

BELARUS BEING A FACTOR

From June 4 to 15 NATO was conducting a defense exercise *Saber Strike* in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland with 18,000 participating soldiers. The exercise sought to strengthen defense in a geographically significant region: a nearly 100-kilometer narrow strip of land near the city of Suwalki between NATO members Lithuania to the north and Poland to the south, and Russia's Kaliningrad to the west and the Republic of Belarus to the east. The so-called Suwalki Gap is often compared to the Fulda Gap - a probable offensive corridor of the Warsaw Pact countries on the NATO during the Cold War that lay in the triangle between Thuringia, Hesse and Bavaria.

Saber Strike was an announced exercise with the aim of also testing the rapid deployment of troops in the Allies, it was announced against the backdrop of many Russian exercises, and contrary to Russian practice, in reality the number of participants did not exceed the announced figures, and above all, it was of a much smaller scale than usual maneuvers on the Russian side.

The media coverage of the exercise *Saber Strike* described the situation in this region with a fair emphasis on the fact, that Russia's Kaliningrad stations a menacing, as well as massive, and not purely defensive contingent of troops and materiel, which has a noteworthy capacity of Russian Armed forces.

Belarus, however, which delimits the Suwalki gap on the east, should be seen in a light different than that of the media coverage. Here, at least for the time being, there

is no direct concentration of Russian anti-NATO troops, which makes the situation by no means comparable to that of the Kaliningrad region.

In various scenarios and comments, the threat level in the region is seen to be further amplified by the perceived equivalence of the situations in Belarus and Russia. Such views are overly superficial. While the Republic of Belarus is in a union state and a defense union with Russia, and its defense policy is closely linked to Russia with little room for its own discretion, still, in Belarus, and thus on an important eastern part of the NATO border, there are no Russian combat troops stationed as of yet.

The stand of Belarus

There are only occasional, if not insignificant, cases of presence of Russian troops in Belarus, including the service operators of two military aid organizations - a regional telecommunications center of the Russian Navy in Wilejka (Minsk district) and an early warning radar station near Baranovichi (Brest area)¹ — as well as temporary personnel and materiel presence during military exercises and training and material as-

¹ Skolko rossiyskikh voyenikh obyektov na territorii Belarusi? Deutsche Welle. Available at: <https://goo.gl/3JGXKh>. Accessed on 19.06.2018.

Voyennoe sotrudnichestvo Belarusi s Rossiyei. Belarus Security Blog. Available at: <https://goo.gl/SGduuE>. Accessed on 19.06.2018.

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sistance from Russia. Although the Regional Group of the Armed Forces of Belarus and Russia is entitled to use a number of joint military infrastructure facilities, these still remain in each nation's own hands during peacetime.²

Over the recent years the government in Minsk has - much to the displeasure of Russia - successfully warded off attempts of Russia to station Russian stand-alone offensive forces - for example, one of the wishes of Moscow was to have a Russian own air base as well as group of Iskander missiles operated by Russian personnel. It is obvious that such refusal was extremely difficult to stand by due to contractual relations, political integration and economic dependency, and thus represents a remarkable success of Belarusian foreign and security policy.

Minsk was able to strike an agreement that only the existing shared facilities would be modernized instead of having new Russian facilities: at the end of 2017, the Belarusian government approved a \$ 20 million program of the Union state of Belarus and Russia till for 2020 to modernize the shared military infrastructure in the Republic of Belarus. In December 2017, a Russian-Belarusian agreement on joint military and technical support of the Regional Group of Armed Forces of Belarus and Russia was published.³ The latter, which has existed since 1998, comprises the armed forces and military assets of Belarus and the Russian forces and military assets stationed in three areas near Belarus. In the case of deployment for purposes of defense, according to

an intergovernmental agreement between Russia and Belarus, the Regional Group is to be used on the basis of uniform Russian-Belarusian plans.⁴

Russia's reactions to Minsk's refusal was manifested not only in greater political pressure on Minsk, but also the replacement of the assets kept near Smolensk and in Klinty, on Russian territory bordering on Belarus, with new military bases. For example, in Klinty - 45 kilometers from the Belarusian border and near Ukraine - Russia started building up an approximately 10,000-strong 144th motor-rifle division on the basis of a 28th motorized rifle brigade relocated from the Siberian city of Yekaterinburg in May 2016.⁵ These 10,000 soldiers alone exceed the number of rotating NATO troops in the entire region many times over and will be permanently stationed, unlike the NATO units.

An engineer battalion, a rifle regiment and an armored regiment of the 144th Division were stationed in Jelnja near Smolensk - about 100 kilometers from the Belarusian border. Smolensk itself has taken up a reconnaissance battalion and a communications battalion. Other units in the division - two more rifle regiments, an artillery regiment, an anti-aircraft and missile regiment, electronic combat units and supply departments - are all stationed along the Belarusian border in the Russian regions of Smolensk and Bryansk. This also shows a clear

² Voennoe sotrudnichestvo Belarusi s Rossiyei. Belarus Security Blog. Available at: <https://goo.gl/SGduuE>. Accessed on 19.06.2018.

³ Minsk razvivayet sotrudnichestvo s NATO, sokhraniaya voyennoe sotrudnichestvo s Rossiyei. Belarus Security Blog. Available at: <https://goo.gl/wL2PkA>. Accessed on 19.06.2018.

⁴ Voennoe sotrudnichestvo Belarusi s Rossiyei. Belarus Security Blog. Available at: <https://goo.gl/SGduuE>. Accessed on 19.06.2018.

⁵ Rossiya perevodit voyska k granitse s Belarusyu. Chto eto znachit? UDF.BY. Available at: <https://goo.gl/v1it2R>. Accessed on 19.06.2018. Also see: Schlechte Stimmung zwischen Moskau und Minsk. Länderbericht, KAS-Belarus. Available at: <https://goo.gl/fBw54Z>. Accessed on 19.06.2018.

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focus on Ukraine.⁶ In view of these developments, since 2015 Minsk has also been making greater efforts not only to improve its own relations with NATO, but also to position itself as a mediator between NATO and Russia. While NATO has been reluctant to respond to these requests from the Belarusian side, Minsk was able to provide important impetus for a dialogue through its praiseworthy mediation services for the conflict in Ukraine, as well as through further diplomatic efforts and expert conferences. The most important recent diplomatic action was the call for a peace conference to reduce tensions between Russia and the West. This initiative, quite ill-dubbed "Helsinki-2," has seen no positive response from the West so far, while Russia has come to terms with this idea only these past few weeks and is now apparently trying to shape the initiative according to its own ideas. One of the fundamental problems behind it all is that the West occasionally suspects covert activity of Russia behind Minsk's suggestion, while a more credible view is that the idea actually comes from the Belarusian Foreign Ministry and Russia

is not particularly happy about such discretion of its alliance partner Belarus.

In terms of security policy, Belarus is not only hampered by the generally increasing tensions between NATO and Russia, but also, in particular, by the war in Ukraine on its southern flank. Minsk is being very careful not to get involved in any way in this conflict beyond its peace efforts towards Ukraine. So far, the Belarusian policy has been successful. Belarus is the only state in the Eastern neighborhood without territorial conflicts: this is a state of things that should be acknowledged and preserved by the West.

Pressure from Russia

The fact that Minsk has been able to withstand the massive Russian pressure so far is often as wrongly overlooked in the Western commentary as the fact that the new Belarusian military doctrine adopted on 20 July 2016 (i.e. after the Crimean annexation) for the first time ever articulates the goal of good relations with NATO and the European Union. Despite the traditional and regular pro-Russian positioning of the country's leadership resulting from its diverse close ties with Russia, Belarus, unlike others, is interested in good relations with NATO and aims to make arrangements with both parties.

As important as strengthening NATO's defense and documenting NATO's defense preparedness, for example through *Saber Strike*, is ensuring that in the event of a military conflict with Russia in the region the most immediate military threat would emanate from the region of Kaliningrad. In the event of a conflict, Russian ground troops would first have to march from their bases to the east of Belarus, first crossing the entire Belarus - which, however, can be done in just one day. The Belarusian troops, on the one hand, have little offensive potential; on the other hand, it would be contrary to Belarusian security concept to support Russian offensive. Therefore, in case of the scenario with Russia actually making advance towards the Baltics across the territory of Belarus, NATO would probably also

⁶ See: Novaya diviziya ZVO. Livejournal. Available at: <https://goo.gl/vN6ctg>. Accessed on 19.06.2018. Vystupleniya nachalnika generalnogo shtaba WSU Wiktora Muzhenko! Ili generala Muzhenko? Woennoe obozrenye. Available at: <https://goo.gl/qWXEBt>. Accessed on 19.06.2018. Rossiya gotowitsa k oborone? Informatsionnoe soprativlenye. Available at: <https://goo.gl/qBZZRB>. Accessed on 19.06.2018. Rossiya planiruyet do kontsa goda razvernut tri divizii na granitse s Ukrainoi. UNIAN. Available at: <https://goo.gl/1TK9Gr>. Accessed on 19.06.2018. Ryadom s Vitebskom i Mogilevom poyawitsya nowaya Rossiyskaya motostrelkowaya diviziya. BELSAT. Available at: <https://goo.gl/Gp8smR>. Accessed on 19.06.2018. Istoriya nichemu ne nachila. Nezawisimiy analiticheskij centr geopoliticheskikh issledovanij. Borisfen Intel. Available at: <https://goo.gl/bn6iSt>. Accessed on 19.06.2018.

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have to face the loss of Belarusian sovereignty. Any reasonable planning must expect that Russian troops, after crossing Belarus, could also stay in Belarus, let alone, see it incorporated into Russia (akin to the Crimean scenario).

Comprehensive defense planning therefore requires not only looking at Belarus closer than previously, but, in particular, paying closer attention to the situation on the Belarusian-Russian border in eastern part of Belarus. Stronger arms control, observations, open sky, reconnaissance and monitoring are recommended approaches here.

Dialogue and Information

Greater attention to Belarus is not only appropriate for a realistic assessment of the situation in the region, but is ever relevant also against the background of the currently too few military-political relations between the Alliance and Belarus, given the size, location, stability and sovereignty of the country. Although Belarus participates in NATO's *Partnership for Peace*, cooperation takes place in less important fields of the security policy. In addition to NATO-Russia Council and good relations with Ukraine, a stronger interaction with Belarus could contribute to a more meaningful dialogue on the security situation in the region.

A refusal to dialogue, despite the clear will from Minsk, strengthens within the Belarusian apparatus, where the voices still dominant in the military field speak in support of one-sided closer military ties with Russia: voices that support a reasonable balance displayed by Belarus in its mediation between East and West and that also exist in the government, are hardly supported by the West.

This situation also means that the Western Alliance is receiving too little information about which security positions are represented in Belarus. In the case of a stronger confrontation in the region, there are also far too few personal contacts and interlocutors in the country.

Proactive approaches

For this reason, NATO and its individual Member States could examine the extent to which, **firstly**, Belarus can be more closely involved in political dialogue programs. No changes in cooperation are required if more intensive meetings and exchanges could take place within existing formats.

Secondly, the Alliance is currently doing very little to raise factual awareness of NATO in Belarus. In terms of communication, the security issues in Belarus are left to Russia and the CSTO. While the situation is similar in Russia, Moscow still has a *NATO Information Office*, although there is just an ambassadorial NATO contact point in Minsk. There is also a rotation of this Minsk contact point among the embassies, small as they are. In particular, the establishment of a NATO Information Office in Belarus seems to be a possible option to better raise awareness about orientations of the Alliance among the military, politicians, academic community and general public. Even if such an office is not feasible, at least the current activities of the Public Diplomacy Division in Belarus can be expanded. The already conducted events at the expert level could be intensified and feature more senior brass from NATO and the member states than previously. This also offers an additional dialogue opportunity with the Russian party.

Thirdly, the training assistance for Belarusian military executives, which was previously intensively provided by Germany, could be intensified once again.

Fourth, if the first three points are taken into account, one must also bear in mind that any activation of military contacts with Belarus must be accompanied by corresponding communication with Russia to rule out any suspicions of Moscow. However, the fear of Moscow's possible reaction to improved relations between NATO and Belarus is unfounded as long as NATO is focused on easing tensions and does not create the impression that it is undermining the defense union between Belarus and Russia.

Fifth, it is clear that Belarusian defense policy can only follow the already existing multi-vector approach if the country is not

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completely and exclusively dependent on Russian economic and financial support. In this sense, it still seems appropriate to support the economic development in Belarus and to respond to the declared desire of the government in Minsk to diversify its economic relations. At this point, the EU and the Member States already provide clear support, which, for example, has prospects for expansion within the framework of the Eastern Partnership. It goes without saying that this is conditional on continuing discussions on values, human rights and political freedoms in the country.

Sixth, it should be noted that Belarus gets all the more under military pressure from Moscow, the more active NATO becomes in the eastern NATO member countries. The Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makej has already suggested that the possible establishment of a US military base in Poland, which is currently being discussed, could lead to Minsk being even more pressured by Moscow to station Russian troops on Belarusian territory. So far, however, Moscow has only reinforced troops in its own territory - and in the Crimea.

However, if the Russian government exerts so much pressure on Minsk to create new bases for the alliance in Eastern Europe that the Belarussian government is forced to give in, contrary to the above, the region falls in danger of losing an important-for-security in-between state. NATO and Russian troops would then face each other directly and at point blank. This, in turn, would require further strengthening by the Alliance. The answer to avoiding can only be found in contributing to safeguarding the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Belarus, in strengthening the national armed forces of the neighboring NATO members, as well making specific steps by favoring the European instead of transatlantic instruments.

Note: Since 2015, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation has been promoting the security dialogue between NATO and the EU and Belarus through a large number of seminars and conferences, including representatives from Russia on a regular basis. Every year,

the Konrad Adenauer Foundation organizes a conference in Minsk with the Belarussian research institute FPS and the Public Diplomacy Division of NATO. In addition, since 2015, high-level foreign and security policy events have taken place within the framework of the Minsk Dialogue. Check out Twitter ([@kas_belarus](https://twitter.com/kas_belarus)) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/kasbelarus) for our reports on security relations in the region and relations between Russia and Belarus.