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Russian Nuclear Weapons in Belarus? Motivations and Consequences

Nearly three decades ago, Soviet nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles left Belarus for Russia. This return was as much the result of great power pressure as it was an attempt to bolster Minsk's newfound independence from Moscow. By summer 2023, nuclear weapons seemed to have returned to the country.

Belarus, an independent republic that emerged from the ashes of the Soviet empire, has maintained a complex relationship with Moscow. Under the leadership of Alexander Lukashenka, who has ruled the country with an authoritarian hand for the past thirty years, Belarus has sought to balance its ties between Russia and the West. It aligned itself more closely with Moscow as its patron, while striving to maintain a degree of autonomy by playing to the West. This balance was definitively tipped in 2020, when Lukashenka solicited Russian

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support to brutally suppress the widespread protests that followed the most recent rigged elections in Belarus.¹ In the context of Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine, Minsk has become even more politically and militarily dependent on Moscow. Its gradual loss of sovereignty is illustrated by the emerging Union State of both countries—an integration project which began as early as 1999, but whose implementation has gathered speed since 2020 and threatens to swallow Belarus as an independent republic.²

But this process is not a one-way street. Minsk has also gained some strategic leverage due to Moscow's need for support from Belarus in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine.³ Indeed, through Russia's recent nuclear-related deployments, Lukashenka appears to have finally fulfilled a long-held desire. As he said in late April 2024, shortly after the adoption of a new military doctrine that describes the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil as a deterrent against foreign aggression, if he had been the one making the decision in the early 1990s, Belarus would never have returned the nuclear weapons to

What drives Minsk's desire to have Russian nuclear weapons deployed on its territory?

Russia: "It was the most powerful arsenal [and] we would not have needed any other modern weapons."⁴

And yet, given the notorious problems of extended deterrence that have plagued decisionmakers in Western Europe for decades, the question is: what drives Minsk's desire to have Russian nuclear weapons deployed on its territory? Moreover, given Moscow's long-standing criticism of NATO's nuclear sharing, why has Russian President Vladimir Putin changed his position and decided to

take on the costs and risks of deploying nuclear capabilities abroad? Finally, who retains decision-making authority over these weapons, and what are the consequences of these developments for NATO countries?

While the Russian-Belarusian nuclear arrangement gained media attention throughout 2023 and 2024, nuanced explanations of these actions remain sparse.⁵ Meanwhile, even recent academic and policy literature on Belarus' nuclear weapons politics focuses primarily on the country's path to denuclearization in the 1990s.⁶ Moreover, scholarship on alliance politics and nonproliferation has overwhelmingly focused on the United States and its reassurance policies, while Moscow's approach to these issues has received less attention.⁷

In this article, we first offer an empirical analysis of how the current Russian-Belarusian nuclear arrangement unfolded. We then offer theoretically grounded arguments about the likely rationales of decision-makers in Minsk and Moscow,

and an assessment of the military, political and legal-normative implications of the deployments for European security and the broader international order.

Our ultimate conclusion is that there are benefits to the arrangement for both Belarus and Russia, but that it is also a risky gamble for both. Minsk is likely trying to protect its regime through deterrence vis-à-vis NATO and closer ties with Moscow, but it risks losing whatever vestiges of independence it had left. Moscow, in turn, is seeking to both reassure Lukashenka and tighten its control over him, while signaling resolve to the West and improving its negotiating position vis-à-vis the United States. In doing so, however, Russia is accepting high long-term risks by allowing for the possibility that its nuclear systems could at some point come under Minsk's control. While this agreement is unlikely to enhance Russia's offensive military capabilities, the renewed risk-taking it signifies should concern both policymakers and analysts.

How We Got Here

Over the past two decades, Moscow and Minsk have been intermittently discussing the potential deployment of Russian nuclear-capable systems and warheads to Belarus.⁸ However, concrete decisions appear to have been made only gradually after February 2022, in the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine. Much remains unclear, however, with respect to the type, number, location, and exact timing of the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons, as well as Belarus' actual ability to employ them.

It is clear that in November 2021, Lukashenka publicly offered to host Russian nuclear weapons in his country for the first time since 1996.⁹ Shortly thereafter, and almost simultaneous to Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Minsk laid the legal foundation for such a move: as part of a constitutional amendment adopted in early 2022, Belarus removed the provision defining the country as a nuclear-weapon-free zone as well as a clause on its neutrality status. At that time, Lukashenka did also stipulate that he would only ask Russia to send nuclear weapons to Belarus if the West transferred such arms to Poland or Lithuania.¹⁰

And yet, over the summer of 2022, it was announced that two types of nuclear-capable delivery vehicles would be made available to Belarus. First, Belarusian Su-25 fighter aircraft would be converted to carry Russian nuclear bombs, and Belarusian pilots would be trained in Russia. Second, Russian Iskander-M systems, capable of launching both conventional and nuclear-armed ballistic and cruise missiles, were to be transferred to Belarus, operated by Belarusian troops, and certified for nuclear use.¹¹ At the end of 2022, the Belarusian government declared that the Iskander-M missiles had been relocated and certified for

nuclear use.¹² Official statements and various technical measures indicate that Belarus wanted to be able to launch several dozen Russian nuclear weapons using its own delivery vehicles.¹³

Despite the aforementioned steps, in both June and December 2022, Moscow repeatedly ruled out the construction of storage facilities and the possible transfer of Russian nuclear warheads to Belarus in peacetime.¹⁴ At the beginning of 2023, however, Moscow fundamentally altered its position. In March, Putin announced that the necessary storage facilities for a Russian nuclear deployment in Belarus would be ready by early July, and in June he said that nuclear warheads would be moved to Belarus by the end of the year.¹⁵ The Belarusian air force was also

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to be further trained to employ nuclear weapons, Putin said. In April 2023, Belarusian units spent several weeks in Russia to exercise how to employ the Iskander system to launch nuclear weapons.¹⁶ At the end of the month, the Belarusian Defense Ministry reported that fully-certified servicemen in the air force had conducted exercises with Su-25 planes and Iskander-M systems.¹⁷ A month later,

the defense ministers of both countries signed an agreement on the logistical details of the deployment of Russian nuclear warheads to Belarus.¹⁸

Events seemed to unfold quickly. Russia had already deployed its first nuclear weapons, Putin said in mid-June 2023, mere days after his earlier announcement.¹⁹ Lukashenka also stated by the end of the month that the majority of the expected nuclear weapons were already in Belarus.²⁰ US intelligence officials and British ministers confirmed as early as the summer of 2023 that Russia had moved some nuclear weapons to Belarus,²¹ as did several Western officials in March 2024.²² Moreover, the Russian-Chinese joint statement following Putin's meeting with Xi Jinping in May 2024 suggests that Russian nuclear weapons might currently be deployed abroad: while the bilateral declarations of 2022 and 2023 had called on all states to withdraw nuclear weapons stationed abroad, the latest version referred only to US deployments.²³ In July 2024, Moscow's ambassador to Minsk said the Russian deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus was "proof of allied relations and mutual trust."²⁴

Despite all of these statements, a number of observations render it unclear how far the Russian nuclear deployment has actually progressed.²⁵ Satellite imagery indicates that construction work is taking place at various bases and weapons storage sites in Belarus. This applies in particular to the central Belarusian town of Assipovichy, where the nuclear-capable Iskander systems have been installed, and the Lida airbase in the west of the country, where converted Su-25 fighter jets appear to have been deployed.²⁶

However, it is not possible to determine with certainty whether nuclear weapons are actually located at either of these bases, or whether these updates are intended for the long- or short-term storage of nuclear warheads. Uncertainty is also heightened by the fact that the physical protection standards of the storage facilities are below those normally required by Russia for its own tactical nuclear weapons bunkers.²⁷ According to Russian warhead control regulations, troops from the 12th Main Directorate of the Russian Ministry of Defense (12th GUMO) should also be permanently stationed in Belarus to handle all issues related to nuclear weapons. There are indications that such troops are present at these bases. Nevertheless, the duration and extent of such deployments remain unclear.²⁸ Finally, the exercises and trainings observed do not indicate that the Iskander crews have reached the level of certification that Russia normally requires of its own troops. If all this is the case, it would not make military sense to store nuclear warheads in Belarus. This would, in turn, suggest that weapons may not yet have been put into place.²⁹

Given these uncertainties, it is also possible that the purpose of the Belarusian sites is primarily political, with Moscow and Minsk seeking to achieve their aims by bluffing, or that these storage facilities are intended as transit sites for Russian nuclear weapons in the event of a crisis rather than as permanent storage locations. This suggests that even if Russia completes the construction of the warhead storage facilities in Belarus, there is no guarantee that nuclear weapons will actually be transferred to Belarus on a permanent basis, or at all in peacetime.³⁰

The Russian and Belarusian nuclear exercises conducted in May and August 2024 did not provide any additional insight.³¹ On the Belarusian side, Su-25 fighter aircraft flew between two airports in the first round of exercises, which did not permit any conclusions about the presence or absence of nuclear weapons.³² Shortly thereafter, Lukashenka announced two more rounds of exercises, this time synchronized with Russia.³³ A few days later, Russia began exercises with Kinzhal missiles and Iskander-M systems. Initially, there was no indication that Russia intended to integrate the systems in Belarus into its war games. In mid-June, both sides confirmed that joint exercises with nuclear-capable delivery vehicles had taken place, but all available information suggested that only mock warheads had been employed.³⁴ No evidence suggests coordination in the third round.

Various Rationales in Belarus and Russia

After examining how developments around the Russian nuclear deployments in Belarus have accelerated since 2022, the question arises as to what is driving

Minsk and Moscow toward such an arrangement? While much remains unclear, our analysis suggests that influence in both directions seems to be the name of the game. For Minsk as the protégé, deterrence is the primary driver of its nuclear aspirations—but Lukashenka is also likely trying to make himself and his country indispensable to the Kremlin, thereby securing his position and regime. Meanwhile, Moscow, as the patron, is trying to both reassure Belarus and limit Minsk's room for maneuver in foreign policy. And yet, the arrangement also carries risks for both parties.

Deterrence on Minsk's Mind?

The behavior and statements of decision-makers in Minsk allow only tentative conclusions about their motives. However, there is much to suggest that defensive military considerations—first and foremost for regime security reasons—have played the main role in Minsk's policymaking. A deepening of bilateral relations with Russia against the backdrop of both the war in Ukraine and domestic political unrest may also have been a driver of action.

Several arguments point to deterrence as the main factor behind Minsk's choices.³⁵ First, all official communication in Minsk warns that the West has to be deterred from launching conventional attacks against Belarus in the

Several arguments point to deterrence as the main factor behind Minsk's choices

event of a crisis. Government statements and state documents describe the nuclear deployments as necessary reassurance against NATO and a symbol of Russia's security guarantees to Belarus. This rationale is also supported by the public statements that Lukashenka had made to encourage Russia to deploy nuclear-capable systems in Belarus.³⁶

Moreover, these motives correspond with scholarly expectations as to the behavior of autocratic states: on one hand, a war could strengthen Lukashenka's authoritarian regime

by uniting the population against a common enemy. On the other hand, however, it is more likely that an external conflict would lead to domestic political upheaval and the eventual collapse of the regime—a mechanism that should spur Minsk to action.³⁷

Second, various wargames conducted by Western think tanks indicate that Minsk could deem a limited Western conventional attack against Belarus a plausible scenario, and it therefore seems rational for the Belarusian leadership to try to deter NATO from resorting to such action. If, for instance, a Western conflict with Russia over Ukraine were to escalate, Western policymakers could use

force against Moscow's allies in Minsk to signal their readiness to escalate vis-à-vis Moscow, all while worrying less about retaliation and nuclear escalation than if they attacked Russian territory directly. If Russia were to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine, Minsk could fear that the West would be more willing to use force against a non-nuclear Belarus than to attack Russia.³⁸

Third, Minsk has constantly sought to signal that with nuclear weapons deployed on its territory, it has the ability to employ nuclear weapons in extreme cases. For example, Lukashenka, his defense minister, and numerous other government officials repeatedly stated that Belarus would play a role in the decision-making process for the use of nuclear weapons—even though the Belarusian Foreign Ministry had previously confirmed that Russia would not hand over control of these weapons to Minsk.³⁹ Moscow has never directly and explicitly rebuffed such statements—probably so as not to undermine Minsk's deterrence efforts. At the same time, Moscow has repeatedly stressed that Russia will retain full control over its nuclear weapons.⁴⁰

The causal strength of this argument is called into question by the overarching challenges of extended deterrence. As long as Russia retains control of these weapons, it is unclear whether a mere deployment on Belarusian territory and the capability of Belarusian forces to deliver nuclear weapons once Moscow has given the needed authorization would serve as a sufficient deterrent against a foreign use of force.⁴¹ Hardly anyone doubts that a full-fledged invasion of Belarus has become much riskier. From a Belarusian perspective, however, it remains questionable how much deterrence can be achieved against a limited conventional attack targeting, for instance, military bases. It does not help that even Moscow's nuclear doctrine remains ambiguous. On one hand, according to the doctrine, Russia's nuclear forces are also intended to serve as a deterrent against aggression against allies. On the other hand, the doctrine suggests that Moscow would only consider using nuclear weapons if an ally were attacked with ballistic missiles or with weapons of mass destruction.⁴²

It is therefore similarly plausible that Minsk primarily instrumentalized the situation to strengthen its ties with Moscow—for both domestic and foreign policy reasons. Domestically, the beleaguered government may have been trying to preempt protests at home by demonstrating that Russia considered Belarus important enough to deploy nuclear weapons there, and would not hesitate to intervene to protect its favored leadership. Furthermore, policymakers in Minsk potentially saw a new level of military strength as a tool to bind the military to Lukashenka, and to demonstrate leadership to various elites throughout society.⁴³

At the international level, Minsk's decision-makers possibly tried to limit Western pressure by moving closer to Moscow, thereby demonstrating that a violent overthrow of the Lukashenka regime could not succeed and that any support for the opposition was therefore futile.⁴⁴ Another possible aim was to

render relations with Moscow more favorable. Lukashenka had already successfully played the role of Russia's anti-Western outpost in the late 1990s. He potentially sought to once again take on this role in order to fend off the Kremlin's demands for deeper integration concessions. In other words, it is plausible that he desired a Russian nuclear deployment in order to make himself indispensable to the Kremlin and thus avert other forms of Russian pressure.⁴⁵

The fact that the opposition in Belarus is weak, that Minsk's dependence on Moscow is already considerable, and that the West's efforts to drive a wedge between Russia and Belarus appear rather limited weighs against this "bringing Russia closer" argument. The domestic political logic is also weakened by the fact that opinion polls show that the majority of the Belarusian people are critical of the deployment of nuclear weapons. The non-participation of Belarusian soldiers in the Russian war against Ukraine, on the other hand, has earned the Lukashenka regime points in the eyes of many citizens, suggesting that keeping one's distance from Russia was a safer way to safeguard the regime at home.⁴⁶ However, an embattled government in Minsk may perceive these restrictions and counter-arguments differently, and take any potential risks to its own survival very seriously.⁴⁷

Moscow's Multiple Motives

The available information also allows only a preliminary analysis of Moscow's considerations regarding the nuclear deployments in Belarus.⁴⁸ The main motives appear to have been Moscow's alliance policy with Minsk, as well as Russia's military considerations in its war against Ukraine and signaling to the West. Negotiating strategies against the United States may have played a secondary role as well.

First, Russia is likely to use these nuclear measures to extend its influence over Belarus, a mirror imaging of the reasoning for Minsk's decisions. Faced with Putin's efforts to restrict or even abolish Belarus' independence, Lukashenka had been trying for over two decades to walk a fine line between East and West—tilting strongly eastwards, but never fully implementing Moscow's designs.⁴⁹ But since the street protests in the summer of 2020 and Russia's assistance in the crackdown on protesters, Minsk has seen no other solution but to rely almost fully on Moscow.⁵⁰ Yet, this does not mean that Belarusian decision-makers shed their fears of closer and closer relations with Russia.⁵¹ On one hand, Moscow's war could drag Belarus into a conflict with the West.⁵² At the very least, Russia could demand that Minsk enter the war on its side.⁵³ On the other hand, a Russian victory over Ukraine, or even the successful integration of parts of Ukraine into Russia, could set a bad precedent for potential future Russian behavior toward Belarus. Given these dynamics, Moscow has a strong interest in restricting Lukashenka's ability to alter Minsk's foreign policy.⁵⁴

The placement of sensitive military facilities on Belarusian territory appears to provide practical, strategic, and symbolic means to achieve this end.

Second, Moscow benefits from Minsk's help in achieving its military and political goals in Ukraine and therefore has a strong interest in alleviating the security concerns of the Belarusian leadership.⁵⁵ Russia used Belarusian territory to invade Ukraine in February 2022. Belarus offered logistical support, trained troops, provided weapons, treated the wounded, and repaired equipment—and some of these support measures continue to this day. In addition, Russia has far-reaching military privileges in Belarus.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Moscow's planners must worry that in the event of a crisis, Minsk might fear Western attacks and restrict Russia's room for maneuver. To a certain extent, it seems plausible that these undesirable developments could be prevented by the deployment of nuclear weapons, or even of nuclear-capable delivery systems.⁵⁷

Third, the relocations could be another signal from Moscow to the West. Russia has sent a number of nuclear signals as part of its war against Ukraine, both through statements and through various exercises.⁵⁸ This signaling was most likely meant primarily to deter Western actors from directly intervening militarily in the theater, and secondarily to persuade the West to reduce its support for Ukraine.⁵⁹ However, in contrast to the purely declaratory nature of allusions and threats, Russia's steps in Belarus can be seen as “costly signals,” as they go beyond the acceptance of normative and diplomatic costs and involve both financial and military costs through the transfer of the Iskander systems, as well as a certain degree of risk through the alleged deployment of nuclear weapons.⁶⁰ In this way, Russia may have wanted to raise the credibility of its nuclear signals, highlighting its determination to accept higher escalation risks than NATO in the war in Ukraine.⁶¹

Finally, Russia could also try to use the nuclear weapons deployed in Belarus as bargaining chips in future arms control negotiations with the United States. In this context, Moscow has already signaled that Russian nuclear weapons will remain in Belarus until the United States withdraws its own nuclear weapons from Europe.⁶² This extreme demand seems unrealistic, especially as the gap between the 100 or so non-strategic US nuclear weapons in Europe and Russia's one thousand to two thousand such warheads is already very large and Western decisionmakers are unlikely to even consider such concessions. Nevertheless, it is quite conceivable that Russia will actually put this deployment on the table as part of negotiations on a limited arms control agreement.

Concerns related to the independent acquisition of nuclear weapons by Belarus do not appear to have played a role in Moscow's decision. In the past,

Russia's steps in Belarus can be seen as costly signals to the West

states have often deployed nuclear weapons abroad to deter their allies from proliferation, such as the United States did in South Korea during the Cold War—especially if the ally was technically capable or politically determined to do so.⁶³ However, there is little to suggest that this is a factor behind the Russian deployments in Belarus: Minsk has expressed no interest in acquiring its own nuclear weapons, and it remains unclear how great the technological challenges would be. Furthermore, Minsk’s overwhelming dependence on Moscow does not support this explanation either.⁶⁴

Implications for European and Global Politics

Neither the risks of escalation nor the diplomatic and military consequences of the Russian-Belarusian nuclear agreement should be overstated. However, the move represents a 180-degree shift in Russia’s position on nuclear sharing in the context of the nonproliferation regime and demonstrates Moscow’s increasing prioritization of other interests over nonproliferation goals, as well as its growing willingness to take nuclear risks.

Impact on the Military Balance of Power and Nuclear Risks

Minsk’s nuclear-capable delivery vehicles and Moscow’s suspected deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus reduce the West’s room for maneuvering, but hardly increase Russia’s offensive capability and have little impact on nuclear escalation risks.

First, in the event of a crisis, such as a nuclear escalation of the war in Ukraine, even a limited conventional attack by the West on Belarus would carry significantly higher risks.⁶⁵ Western planners would probably not be able to completely rule out the possibility of the delivery vehicles in Belarus being paired with nuclear warheads for nuclear use. This would presumably put the above-mentioned bases and nuclear storage facilities at the top of the Western target list. Conversely, Minsk and Moscow, aware of these pressures on Western decision-making, would face “use-it-or-lose-it” pressures that would inevitably increase the risks of escalation. Arguably, the fact that all parties involved understand this dynamic ultimately strengthens Belarusian—and, to a certain degree, also Russian—deterrence.

Second, Moscow’s military options are likely to change only marginally. Russia can already threaten targets throughout Europe, as it owns various nuclear-capable systems with different ranges. Russia already deploys Iskander systems in the western exclave of Kaliningrad. In the event of war, Russia could also move other/additional missile systems, together with other tactical nuclear weapons, from central storage sites to Belarus or to other locations that would be as militarily useful as the bases in Belarus.⁶⁶ On the contrary, Russia’s

ability to wage war is likely to be limited by the allocation of scarce missile systems to less well-trained and less trustworthy Belarusian operators.⁶⁷

In military terms, the Su-25 decision is also of little benefit. The Belarusian aircraft could provide Russia with a degree of redundancy. However, they can only carry gravity bombs and would probably be ineffective against modern Western air defense systems. Moreover, Russia has long been able to use the Belarusian airspace to deploy its own, more effective, fighter aircraft.⁶⁸ Alternatively, the more modern Belarusian Su-35 fighter aircraft could have been converted for nuclear missions, as Lukashenka himself had suggested.⁶⁹ However, this conversion would probably have been more costly and time-consuming.⁷⁰ That Moscow prioritized speed and efficiency over military effectiveness suggests that Russia intended these systems primarily for political rather than military purposes.

Russia probably intended these systems primarily for political rather than military purposes

Third, the probability of a deliberate, inadvertent or accidental use of nuclear weapons is likely to increase only slightly as a result of the Russian-Belarusian arrangement.⁷¹ The Kremlin has repeatedly emphasized that Russia will retain control over any nuclear weapons deployed in Belarus. Nevertheless, a loss of control in the event of a crisis cannot be completely ruled out. On one hand, even if Belarusian forces were able to control and assemble all the physical components of a nuclear warhead and pair them with the delivery vehicles, they would not necessarily be able to deploy it. Russian non-strategic nuclear warheads are protected by permissive action links that require codes to unlock. On the other hand, various experts do not rule out the possibility that these systems could be cracked with sufficient effort. This would somewhat increase the chances of a deliberate nuclear escalation in a crisis, as Minsk would have much more to lose than Moscow in an escalating conflict involving Belarus.⁷²

In turn, inadvertent escalation could occur if, for instance, certain steps are misunderstood by the opposite party and cause it to react in an escalatory manner. It is theoretically conceivable that NATO would have difficulties understanding Moscow's or Minsk's exact intentions if Russian nuclear warheads were transported to Belarus or housed within the country in the context of a crisis or incipient war—although pre-deployed weapons may in fact be less prone to misunderstanding than moving warheads during a crisis. Such steps could be intended purely as signals, but also constitute preparation for nuclear weapons use. If the existent channels of communication failed to de-escalate such a crisis, Western states could consider a military response.⁷³

Such a dynamic would, however, be highly context-dependent. Moreover, as long as Moscow remains in control of any nuclear warheads deployed in Belarus,

such escalatory dynamics are also conceivable with respect to non-strategic nuclear weapons stored in Russia—the additional risks associated with the deployment to Belarus seem minute. It is therefore questionable whether the risk of an erroneous escalation increases solely due to the Russian-Belarusian arrangement. However, the situation would become more unstable if Belarus were to take control of nuclear weapons deployed on its territory.

Finally, the same consideration applies to accidental escalation, which can for example be triggered by a technical breakdown. As in the case of an inadvertent escalation, risks remain comparable to those of weapons stored in Russia—at least as long as Russia does not lower the nuclear safety and security standards of nuclear storage sites in Belarus. However, if nuclear warheads are currently stored in Belarus, Moscow is not meeting its own safety standards. The situation could become much more unpredictable in the event of a crisis.

Legal and Normative Dimensions

Beyond the military concerns, relevant legal and normative questions include whether the presumed deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus is compatible with international law, and what implications this could have for the nuclear non-proliferation regime. In the days of the Soviet Union, Moscow deployed nuclear-tipped intermediate-range missiles, as well as short-range nuclear weapons and gravity bombs, in what was then the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR).⁷⁴ After the collapse of the Soviet Union, both Russia and the West lobbied for the remaining nuclear weapons in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine to be handed over to Russia. In 1994, as part of the Budapest Memorandum, Minsk undertook to return these weapons to Russia in exchange for security assurances from Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom.⁷⁵

The memorandum was negotiated by Lukashenka's predecessor, Stanislav Shushkevich. In July 1993, he had led Belarus as the first post-Soviet country inheriting nuclear weapons toward joining the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and thereby legally assuming the status of a non-nuclear-weapon state. Lukashenka, who was elected president shortly thereafter, had to implement the agreement. Nevertheless, he repeatedly threatened to halt the transfer, temporarily paused the process, and ultimately relented only after significant pressure from both the United States and Russia. The transfer of the last nuclear weapons to Russia took until the end of 1996.⁷⁶

Against the background of the Budapest Memorandum and the NPT, the question arises as to whether a renewed deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus is compatible with international law and Belarus' legal commitments. Given that the Memorandum is only a politically binding document, it is difficult to argue for a legal violation.⁷⁷ The NPT, on the other hand, obliges

nuclear-weapon states not to transfer nuclear weapons or sensitive technologies to non-nuclear-weapon states, while the latter undertakes not to develop such weapons. However, the treaty does not prohibit stationing nuclear weapons in third countries, as long as the actual owners retain control over them. This practice aligns with NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements, which have allowed the United States to store nuclear weapons in five European countries for decades.⁷⁸ The United Nations has acknowledged that the Russian-Belarusian agreement is the first additional nuclear-sharing arrangement since the NPT negotiations.⁷⁹ Despite political statements to the contrary from numerous states, it will be difficult to argue that a mechanism between Russia and Belarus comparable to NATO nuclear sharing is contrary to international law.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, if there are indeed Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus, Moscow's actions appear to contradict its own criticism of NATO over the last decade, and reveal a highly inconsistent diplomatic narrative. Since 2015, both Russia and Belarus have regularly criticized NATO's nuclear sharing as a violation of the NPT—despite the fact that Washington and Moscow had reached a detailed agreement on the compatibility of NATO's nuclear sharing with the treaty during the NPT negotiations in the 1960s.⁸¹ More recently, Moscow justified the transfer of nuclear weapons to Belarus by referring to the Union State that Minsk and Moscow had founded in 1999. However, this justification remains unpersuasive because the Union State is not a recognized subject of international law. At the same time, Putin directly compared the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus with NATO's nuclear-sharing program, thereby undermining his own Union argument.⁸²

Beyond this legal dimension, the normative impact of these developments appears to be moderate. First, Russia's nuclear narratives in its war against Ukraine appear to be a far greater violation of nuclear norms than a nuclear weapons transfer to Belarus. And yet, even these nuclear threats do not seem to have had a substantial impact on non-proliferation diplomacy.⁸³ Second, while Moscow and Beijing have repeatedly criticized NATO's nuclear sharing, this practice has been in place for decades. Hence, it seems unlikely that Russia's emulation of this behavior could significantly influence the nuclear regime.⁸⁴ Finally, regimes are often impacted by the negative actions of states that were previously strong supporters of their existence. Nevertheless, in recent years, and especially since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has prioritized other interests over the non-proliferation goals enshrined in the regime. Thus, if Russia's transgressions in Belarus are

Russia's nuclear narratives against Ukraine appear a far greater violation of nuclear norms

perpetrated by a state that barely supports the regime in the first place, the impact of these actions on the regime should be limited.⁸⁵

For these reasons, Russia's deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus is likely to complicate diplomatic relations within the non-proliferation regime, exacerbating the polarization among NPT states. However, this practice is unlikely to hamper the nuclear non-proliferation regime as a whole.

A Limited Net Impact, For Now

The purported transfer of nuclear weapons to Belarus has a limited direct impact on European security. Although Russia's course of action will cause many in NATO countries to call for the deployment of US nuclear weapons to Eastern Europe, the Alliance would do well to assess these calls on their own merits.⁸⁶

Russia's action in Belarus demonstrate Moscow's increasing willingness to take nuclear risks

However, Russia's actions in Belarus do demonstrate Moscow's increasing willingness to take nuclear risks. Compared to its nuclear-related rhetoric in the war against Ukraine, Moscow's actual transfer of delivery vehicles and its purported deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus would generate much higher costs and risks.⁸⁷ Crucially, if the weapons are indeed in Belarus, Moscow runs the risk that Minsk might at some point take control of these warheads or refuse to return them. Also, both the delivery vehicles

and the storage sites are extremely vulnerable to Western reconnaissance and countermeasures.⁸⁸ In the event of a military crisis and an attack by Western actors, policymakers would face "use-or-lose" incentives, and the risk of nuclear escalation would increase.

The actions of Russia and Belarus have implications for deterrence, nonproliferation, and arms control policies, as well as for scholarship on nuclear politics. On deterrence, despite the limited direct nuclear threat that emerges from the arrangement, NATO is now faced with a Russia that is determined and willing to take greater risks. The Alliance must therefore strengthen its conventional defenses, including air and missile defenses, as well as retaliatory options. European governments should work closely with Washington to develop new conventional strategies for joint escalation management, while advancing their own arms programs.

Regarding nonproliferation, Western diplomats should try to leverage this Russian-Belarusian agreement to put pressure on Moscow. The Alliance's own

nuclear sharing will make it difficult to argue against these measures. Instead, Western actors should urge Moscow to approach its foreign nuclear deployments in a responsible manner and not lower its standards of nuclear safety and security. Since Moscow has historically enjoyed portraying itself as a responsible nuclear-weapon state, such calls might strike a chord.⁸⁹ Even if this approach proves fruitless, the West can still use it to exert diplomatic pressure on Russia in order to resonate with nonproliferation supporters, all of which could help strengthen the nonproliferation regime.⁹⁰

On arms control, there is little in our analysis to suggest that negotiations between Russia and the United States are likely to begin soon, particularly on non-strategic nuclear weapons. In fact, there are virtually no cases of arms control agreements being concluded during ongoing crises, and Moscow's behavior in Belarus suggests a stubborn determination to succeed rather than an interest in a prudent retreat.⁹¹ In the long term, Russia could be forced to return to negotiations by increased military pressure. Ramping up military assistance to Ukraine and investing in NATO's conventional capabilities could deliver such an outcome. Even then, however, scholarly findings on the link between the balance of conventional forces and nuclear strategy in Russia call into question the possibility of getting Moscow to agree on non-strategic nuclear weapons cuts through conventional pressure.⁹²

Last but not least, our analysis has implications for scholarship. The role of nuclear weapons in alliance politics has been the subject of much scholarly debate.⁹³ But Moscow's approach to the nuclear dimension of its alliance commitments remains poorly understood. We conclude here that some of the same mechanisms that scholars invoke to explain Washington's policies can also shed light on the dynamics between Moscow and Minsk. But our analysis also suggests that considerations of political influence between patron and protégé play a particularly important role, a dynamic that has not been thoroughly explored in the scholarly literature on forward nuclear deployments.⁹⁴ This in turn suggests that democratic and autocratic patrons share some reasons for deploying nuclear weapons abroad, but that regime type also matters, with autocracies potentially more likely to respond to the regime security concerns of their protégés. Russia's aggressive policies in Europe make the further exploration of such academic questions, which have real implications, more urgent than ever.

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