The Nuclear Component of the Union State

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Abstract
As traditional forms of allied relations become increasingly irrelevant in the new international reality, Belarusian-Russian integration can serve as a unique example of close and flexible interaction that does not compromise the parties' state sovereignty. This article considers the alliance's (military and non-military) nuclear component by analyzing Russia's new nuclear doctrine and the legal framework for its deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus. Russia's first-ever implementation of expanded deterrence provides the Union State with more cohesion and strategic depth, and the Union State's transformation into a nuclear alliance is a step towards international agency.

Keywords: Union State, Russia, Belarus, tactical nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence, Russian nuclear doctrine, Belarusian military doctrine.

Military alliances of the 21st century differ significantly from those of the 20th. Today, only NATO remains as a hegemon-led bloc. But it is going through a partial decoupling, caused less by a European quest for greater independence and more by a major shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities. As the European Economic Community, the EU economically underpinned the Atlantic bloc. But after the Cold War, it failed to become an independent geopolitical player, a 'United States of Europe.' Today, it seeks agency on a military-ideological basis, using the image of Russia as an external enemy, but with highly questionable results.

Associations that emerged in the former Soviet space—the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—are fairly loose (in truth, incohesive) structures. Unlike Western institutions, they lack bloc discipline and a common ideology. Nevertheless, they perform certain useful functions. The CIS is primarily a historical association with a humanitarian profile; the EAEU is an advanced form of customs union; and the CSTO (the only military organization of the three) is a platform for political consultations and security cooperation, but not a traditional military alliance.

The Cold War was largely fought on the periphery of the world system, while its center was dominated by the stasis of iron curtains, frozen fronts, and impregnable walls. But the 21st century, at least since the mid-2010s, has become an era of great-power competition, dynamism, and sharp turnabouts. The Western alliances still exist, but in practice they rely upon small groups of 'activists' that are ready and able to participate in military conflicts. And Washington, when seeking states to pit against its adversaries, turns mostly to those with which it is not even in formal bilateral or multilateral alliance: Ukraine (against Russia), Israel (against Iran), Taiwan (against China). A supportive echelon is drawn from selected allies in Europe and Asia: Germany, Japan, Poland, Australia, and others.

Outside the Western world, the largest powers—China, Russia, and India—eschew blocs, preferring more flexible forms of 'unlimited' (but also nonbinding) strategic partnership. China, India, and other BRICS and SCO countries are essentially maintaining a benevolent neutrality towards Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine. The CSTO's members, formally considered allies by Russia, hold a similar position.

Major non-Western states (especially Russia and China) are often suspected by their neighbors—with or without justification—of seeking regional hegemony. These suspicions can prompt the neighbors to turn to more distant powers, especially the U.S., whose provision of 'global security,' as an offshore balancer, underpins its hegemony (i.e., 'global leadership').

Russia's security is seriously threatened by Western use of its neighbors to pressure and (in the case of Ukraine) weaken it. This threat has not yet been fully eliminated. Yet Russia also has two neighbors with whom it has formed full-spectrum military alliances that truly strengthen its security: Belarus and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

With the DPRK, Russia has a classic bilateral alliance that envisions military assistance if one of the parties finds itself at war with a third state. Historically, this alliance dates to the Red Army's liberation of northern Korea at the end of World War II, and to Soviet aid to Pyongyang during the Korean War. From the very beginning of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine, Pyongyang supported

Moscow, sending troops in 2024-2025 to help repel the Ukrainian invasion of Kursk Oblast. Under 2024's Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Russia has similar obligations to the DPRK and provides various assistance to it.

The Russian-Belarusian alliance, on the contrary, is something unique: it is realized within the *sui generis* Union State, and it features a nuclear dimension. These characteristics warrant special consideration.

THE UNION STATE

The Union State, formalized in 1999 by a treaty signed eight years to the day after the Belovezhya Accords, was conceived as a close-knit confederation of Russia and Belarus, and also as a political model and legal framework for reintegrating other former Soviet republics. The agreement provided for a single economic space, a single currency, and a common parliament and cabinet. But this did not happen, and Russian-Belarusian relations developed along interstate lines. That which was meant to be unified instead became common, joint, or coordinated. The Union State never acquired international legal agency, instead becoming a union of states.

It is, nevertheless, an exceptional phenomenon in the post-Soviet space. Belarus quickly (from 1994) managed to reject the ultranationalist path that was chosen by many other republics, the path of building an independent state defined in opposition to Russia. Belarus did not discard the rich historical heritage that it shares with Russia but did establish its own state ideology, as well as a national identity that coexists with—neither opposing nor dissolving into—the Russian one.

Modern Belarusian statehood has developed and crystallized within the framework of friendly and increasingly close relations with Russia. Politically, as Moscow's closest partner, Minsk is very sensitive regarding its sovereignty. Economically, it benefits enormously from the common market with Russia. Despite the huge differences in size, population, and economic and military capabilities, Belarus and Russia exemplify equal and mutually beneficial relations between neighbors.

Belarus, positioning itself as a European country, strives to maintain contact with the West wherever possible, notwithstanding long-term European and American sanctions. (In 2025, the U.S. lifted sanctions

on Belaruskali and Belavia—although the practical effect for Belavia is limited by the continuation of EU sanctions—and the Belarusian government released and deported several groups of people convicted of crimes against the state.) For many years, the Minsk Dialogue facilitated such contacts. After the Maidan in Kiev, the Russian Spring in Crimea, and the start of civil war in the Donbass, Minsk hosted negotiations between the belligerents, leading to the Minsk Accords on a ceasefire and political settlement.

After an attempted Western-backed color revolution in Belarus in 2020, Minsk amended (but did not eliminate) the multi-vector nature of its foreign policy, and now seeks additional partners to the East. Since 2024, Belarus has been a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China is its second most important strategic partner after Russia. Minsk is also developing ties with the Arab monarchies and Iran. Since 2023, Minsk has hosted annual international conferences on Eurasian security. In 2024, the foreign ministers of Russia and Belarus, Sergei Lavrov and Maxim Ryzhenkov, jointly proposed a set of ideas for a Eurasian Security Charter.

Belarus is not directly involved in the SMO, but Russian troops did operate from its territory at the beginning. Minsk does not officially recognize territorial changes in the former Soviet space, be they in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea, Donbass, or Novorossiya. Although, in 2022, Belarus voted against the UNGA resolution condemning the referendums on incorporating the Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporozhye, and Kherson regions into Russia. Belarus performs some intermediary functions via Ukraine's embassy in Minsk: in 2022, it hosted the first rounds of direct Russian-Ukrainian negotiations. POW exchanges between Russia and Ukraine also take place mainly on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border.

NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine has important implications for Belarus as Russia's ally. Poland is rapidly militarizing and it hosts a U.S. brigade; a German Bundeswehr brigade is stationed in neighboring Lithuania; officials and others in NATO countries are making threats against Russia's Kaliningrad region. All this requires Russia and Belarus to strengthen their military alliance.

MORE THAN A MILITARY ALLIANCE

Belarus lies astride Central-Eastern Europe's main geostrategic axis between Berlin and Moscow. Numerous Russian-Polish wars, Charles XII's campaign, Napoleon's invasion, and both World Wars proved Belarus to be Russia's most important line of defense.

This is equally true today, as Belarus is bordered by NATO members Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia to the north and west, and by Ukraine to the south. For its part, Russia serves as Belarus's political and military ally, its most important economic partner, its strategic rear, and the guarantor of its sovereignty and independent development.

Belarus and Russia form a united line of defense. The indivisibility of their common security space means that Russia considers any attack on Belarus to also be an attack on Russia. Indeed, Moscow would be directly threatened by any invasion of Belarus and by any Western political aggression that forces 'regime change' upon Belarus. Hence President Putin sent Russian security forces to Belarus's border during its political crisis in 2020: pro-Western forces' rise to power in Minsk was absolutely unacceptable for Moscow.

The Belarusian-Russian military alliance has a solid foundation: a shared civilization; linguistic similarity; the ubiquitous use in Belarus of the Russian language (which Belarusians consider their own); similar though not identical cultures and worldviews; common traditions and Orthodox faith for majorities in both countries. For two hundred years (1793-1991), Belarusians and Russians lived in one state. Importantly, Belarus's western regions, incorporated in 1939, were never a stronghold of nationalism like those of Ukraine are.

Memory of the Great Patriotic War is deeply embedded in the consciousness of both Russians and Belarusians. The Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk and the war memorial in Khatyn tell of Belarus's enormous loss of life: a third of its population. The Red Army's liberation of Minsk on 3 July 1944 has been celebrated since 1996 as Independence Day. This distinguishes Belarus from all other former Soviet republics, where the main state holiday celebrates the proclamation of independence (de facto from Russia).

Belarusians value peace above all. But they understand that their sovereignty, independence, and security can only be guaranteed by friendly, allied, and equal relations with Russia. Anything else would inevitably turn Belarus into a target for Western interference and an arena for the West's struggle against Russia, as in the clear and tragic cases of Georgia and Ukraine.

The Russian and Belarusian economies are closely interconnected: since Soviet times, Belarus has been the 'assembly shop' of the machine-building industry. The Belarusian and Russian military-industrial complexes are well-integrated. For example, the Minsk Wheeled Tractor Plant supplies Russia with the special chassis for the launchers of its Topol-M and Yars ICBMs, Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, Bastion and Bal coastal missiles, Uragan rockets, S-400 anti-air missiles, etc.

The strategic cultures of Russia and Belarus have common roots. The USSR's Belarusian Military District, one of the most powerful in the Soviet military, formed the basis of the Belarusian Armed Forces. The defense policy and military thought of Russia and Belarus are based on a similar vision and common principles. The Union State's first military doctrine was adopted in 2001, and the most recent in 2021.

Communication between Russian and Belarusian leaders is exceptionally frequent and trusting. Top officials of the Defense Ministry, Foreign Ministry, and security agencies meet regularly. A regional group of forces has been active since the 1990s. The two countries regularly hold joint exercises, of which the largest and best known is *Zapad*.

The Russian-Belarusian military alliance is entirely defensive in nature. Since independence, Belarus has strictly limited its army's foreign deployment. Its 1992 military doctrine provided for deployment only within UN peacekeeping operations. When ratifying the CIS Charter in January 1994, Belarus added stipulations that its forces could be deployed to other members' territory, and other members' forces deployed to its territory, only with the approval of the Belarusian parliament.

This provision was later reconceptualized. Belarus's Constitution, after amendment approved by a referendum on 27 February 2022, states that "the Republic of Belarus precludes military aggression

from its territory against other states" (Constitution, 2022, Art. 18). Current Belarusian legislation (Law on the Armed Forces) prescribes procedures for the armed forces' participation in collective security operations and international peacekeeping. In January 2022, a Belarusian military contingent took part in the CSTO's peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan.

Initially, there were no Russian military bases in independent Belarus. In 1992, the Belarusian Military District, in its entirety, transformed into the Belarusian Armed Forces. Russia retained only strategic nuclear weapons (soon removed from Belarus), the Vileyka naval communications center, and the Volga early warning station in Baranovichi. Russian proposals for an air base in Belarus, made in the later 2010s, were rejected.

But the military-political situation's sharp deterioration in the early 2020s, due to the Ukraine crisis, prompted Belarus and Russia to strengthen their joint defense, including through its endowment with an expressly nuclear dimension.

THE ALLIANCE'S NUCLEAR DIMENSION

Belarus is a non-nuclear state party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Belarus's aspirations to become a nuclear-weapons-free zone and a neutral state were formalized constitutionally in August 1991. At the time of the Soviet Union's breakup, Belarus hosted strategic nuclear forces totaling about 180 formations, units, and institutions with a combined strength of about 40,000 personnel and 1,120 nuclear warheads (Maltsev, 2003, p. 80).

Under the Agreement on Joint Measures on Nuclear Weapons, signed on 21 December 1991 in Almaty, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine pledged to join the NPT as non-nuclear states and to transfer Soviet tactical nuclear weapons to Russia. In May 1992, Belarus became a party to the Soviet-American Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) by signing its 'Lisbon Protocol.' Since 1992, Belarus also participated in the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. In July 1993, Minsk joined the NPT as a non-nuclear state. In November 1996, the last RS-12M Topol ICBM was removed from

Belarus to Russia. In the 1990s, Belarus promoted a nuclear-weapons-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe.

The situation changed after the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. Back in late 2021, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said he was considering stationing Russian nuclear weapons in the country in response to possible actions by NATO, specifically the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Poland. He repeated this warning shortly before the start of the SMO. The 27 February 2022 referendum removed the Constitution's provisions for Belarus's neutral and nuclear-weapons-free status.

Russia has been prompted to strengthen its nuclear deterrence by the further escalation of the military confrontation in Ukraine, by NATO's plans to turn Poland into a leading military force, by the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the UK after a 20-year hiatus, by French statements about possibly extending their nuclear umbrella to Poland, and by discussions (including in Germany) of "European nuclear deterrence" based on the French and British arsenals.

As part of this deterrence, Russia deployed non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs) in Belarus, as announced by President Putin in March 2023. According to official data, by the beginning of 2024, two Russian Iskander-M battalions—with a 480 km range, reaching almost all of the Baltics, Poland, and Ukraine—had been deployed. Russia also helped convert Belarusian Su-25 aircraft to carry the (nuclear-warhead-capable) Kinzhal hypersonic missiles.

This was Russia's first foreign deployment of nuclear weapons since the USSR's collapse. But it differs from Soviet deployments in Eastern Europe and (in 1962) Cuba in that Belarus participates in nuclear planning and has nuclear delivery vehicles (though their use still requires Russian approval). In May 2023, the Russian and Belarusian defense ministers, Sergei Shoigu and Victor Khrenin, signed the documents regulating the deployment.

This situation resembles that of NATO, which presents itself as a nuclear alliance. However, the Union State is much more than a military alliance of individual states. The security of the Union State as a whole, and of Belarus in particular, is more important to Russia than

Atlantic solidarity and distant European states are to the U.S. Russian and Belarusian security is inextricably linked not only by treaties, but physically and organically.

By the middle of 2023, facilities for the maintenance and secure storage of nuclear weapons had been built in Belarus, and the first weapons arrived shortly thereafter. In 2024, the Belarusian military was trained in the use of NSNWs. In 2025, Belarus selected and prepared sites for stationing Russia's intermediate-range nuclear-warhead-capable Oreshnik missile. Yet Belarusian officials emphasized that these measures were purely defensive (Belta, 2026). Two S-400 battalions were also stationed in Belarus in response to NATO's actions (RBK, 2023; RIA Novosti, 2023).

In sum, Russia's deployment of NSNWs in Belarus is one of its most important steps, since the start of the SMO, to reinforce its nuclear deterrence.

In the middle of 2024, the Russian General Staff supervised an exercise involving Iskander missiles and Kinzhal-armed Su-25s to practice the use of NSNWs. The Belarusian military joined in at the second and third stages of the drills to practice joint planning and the coordinated use of nuclear weapons.

DOCTRINAL INNOVATIONS

Shortcomings in Russia's concept of nuclear deterrence, which became obvious during the conflict in Ukraine, prompted President Putin in November 2024 to amend the nuclear doctrine. In the "Fundamentals of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence," Moscow for the first time declared its determination to defend Belarus with nuclear weapons if necessary (Fundamentals, 2024, Art. 18). The new doctrine provides for nuclear weapons' use not only in response to an adversary's use of nuclear weapons or other WMDs, but also in the event of conventional aggression against the Union State that critically threatens its members.

The indivisibility of Russian and Belarusian security has also been declared in the "Security Concept of the Union State" (December 2024) and the Treaty on Security Guarantees Within the Framework of the Union State (active since March 2025). The latter calls for the

parties' enhanced joint protection of sovereignty, independence, and constitutional order—referencing foreign-backed pro-Western forces' thwarted color revolution in Belarus in 2020.

Article 6 of the Treaty terms nuclear weapons an important factor in preventing military conflicts, including nuclear ones, "as well as a means of deterrence, the use of which is an extreme and forced measure." The Treaty replicates the Russian nuclear doctrine's nuclear guarantees to Belarus, thereby creating a legal basis for the deployment of Russian military bases and NSNWs in Belarus. In addition, by stipulating that Russian nuclear weapons deployed to Belarus will be used by agreement between the parties, the Treaty provides for Belarusian participation in Russian nuclear planning and the general implementation of Moscow's nuclear policy.

Thus, doctrinal amendments and bilateral treaties have legalized the practice (effective since 2023) of deploying Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus. Close cooperation with Belarus has, for the first time in the post-Soviet period, extended Russia's nuclear deterrence to another state—doctrinally, legally, and operationally. This also constitutes a major shift in Russia's geopolitical and nuclear deterrence.

Any military aggression against Belarus will inevitably lead to Russia's military response, which under certain conditions may involve nuclear weapons. Belarus can rely on Russian nuclear protection with more confidence than Western allies can count on U.S. nuclear protection, which is not even mentioned in their treaties of alliance.

NUCLEAR ENERGY

The Russian-Belarusian alliance's nuclear dimension also includes cooperation in nuclear power. One of Russia's largest investment projects in Belarus has been the construction of the "Belarus" nuclear power plant in Ostrovets, Grodno Oblast. Today, nuclear energy supports Belarusian energy security and technological-industrial development. Yet the road to this point was not easy.

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, the Soviet government considered various plans for a nuclear power plant in Belarus, but did not implement them for various reasons. The 1986 Chernobyl accident,

which did the greatest damage to Belarus's southern regions, sharply worsened Belarusian attitudes toward nuclear energy, freezing nuclear plant plans for decades.

It was not until the mid-2000s that Minsk, driven by the Belarusian economy's demand for energy and by the situation on the international energy market, decided to build a nuclear power plant with Russian help. In 2007, President Lukashenko signed a decree greenlighting the project. The relevant intergovernmental agreement was signed in March 2011. Russia provided Belarus with a $10 billion loan to finance the construction.

The nuclear power plant was designed and built by Russia's Rosatom, which chose a standard Generation III+ reactor for the project. Its two units became commercially operational in mid-2021 and late 2023. With a total capacity of 2,400 megawatts, they can meet about 40% of the country's electricity needs, making Belarus a world leader in nuclear energy's share of electricity generation.

The nuclear sector has supported economic growth and technological development. In September 2025, Belarus decided to build a second nuclear power plant with Russia's support and assistance. Thus, the Union State is strengthening its nuclear dimension, not only militarily but also in terms of civilian energy.

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Nuclear cooperation between Russia and Belarus attests to their deepening integration. Russia's nuclear guarantees reinforce not only the Union State's military alliance but the Union State itself. The parties' security becomes truly unified, foreign policy planning and implementation are coordinated, and economic cooperation proceeds within an increasingly unified economic space.

By coalescing, the Union State is becoming more than a union of states. This places higher demands on Russians and Belarusians, requiring deeper mutual understanding, the harmonization of national interests, the development of common positions, and the implementation of agreed plans. For the outside world, this alliance of differently sized neighbors contributes to a new equality-based order, which may be particularly valuable for Eurasia's security architecture.

The deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus is not just a response to the escalating Ukraine crisis. It is the first implementation of Russia's expanded deterrence, and grants a nuclear dimension to the Union State, increasing the cohesion of its common security space. Significantly, the Union State's transformation into a nuclear alliance is a step towards international agency.

Moscow and Minsk need the closer and deeper coordination of foreign and defense policy, given the military and political instability in Western Eurasia, and especially given the Ukraine crisis, which is unlikely to end after an agreement is signed and ceasefire implemented. Ukraine will long trouble Russian and Belarusian security as a source of instability and threats. As previous forms of allied relations become increasingly irrelevant in the new international reality, Belarusian-Russian integration can serve as a unique model of close and flexible interaction that does not compromise sovereignty.

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