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Belarus and Russia Conflict: Gas and Oil as Geopolitical Weapons and the Nature of Present-Day Alliances

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## Belarus and Russia Conflict: Gas and Oil as Geopolitical Weapons and the Nature of Present-Day Alliances

*Abstract:*

*The emerging world order is often defined as “multi-polar.” This is rather an oversimplistic model. One of the elements of this new order is the absence of strong ties between allies. Moreover, some allies actually interact with each other on the basic “friend-foe” paradigm, in which the alliance could be combined with hostility. Moreover, conflicts between allies are not excluded. Russia’s relationship with Belarus is an example of such relations.*

*Keywords:*

*Belarus, Russia, geopolitics, gas, oil.*

**\*NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los **Documentos de Opinión** son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.

Belarus, a small Slavic republic of the former USSR, is officially one of the strongest Russian allies. It is in a “union” state with Russia, and in 2015 became one of the founding members of the Moscow-sponsored Eurasian Union. Still, Moscow looks at Belarus not so much as an ally as a vassal, and used gas and oil supplies to impose its will on Minsk. This has led to the sharp deterioration of the Moscow/Minsk relationship in 2016/2017, and reinforces the model of interaction between Moscow and Minsk which had emerged in the early 2000s. According to this model, Belarus continued to be formally Russia’s ally. Still, its support for Russia became limited. Moreover, Minsk does not exclude direct conflict with Moscow. In a way, the Moscow/Minsk relationship provided the template for understanding the emerging relationship within NATO, in which mutual obligations became conditional, and direct confrontation is not absolutely excluded from the equation.

### **From Residual Neo-Sovietism to Traditional Imperialism**

The Russo-Belarusian alliance and creation of the “union state” was mostly due to Moscow’s old Soviet political culture, in which generous economic largesse was provided for geopolitical loyalty. This was one reason why Lukashenko, Belarus’ leader, joined Russia in a “union state.” Still, by the beginning of Putin’s term, the Kremlin model started to change.

One might state that Putin increased the neo-imperialist drive that had already reemerged during the late Yeltsin era, or even before. In this context, not everything was translated into cash, and broader geopolitical designs were taken into account. One could see this in Putin’s behavior in Ukraine and Syria. In both cases, the Kremlin took the financial losses to achieve their geopolitical goals. One could assume here that Putin is much more imperialistic and geopolitically oriented than the Yeltsin administration. Still, the story is more complicated than it looks at first glance. It is true that Yeltsin, following Gorbachev, had been engaged in the process of continuous geopolitical retreat, and the Russian elite was interested only in cash in dealing with the West. Still, in what Russians called “near abroad,” the republics of the former USSR, the Kremlin often acted in neo-Soviet fashion and, for example, provided cheap gas and oil with the underlying notion that republics, the prodigal children, would finally come back and should not be treated too harshly. During Putin’s tenure, the state had changed its approach to what Russians called “near abroad,” and the imperial legacy of the early post-Soviet period was modified.

Yeltsin provided subsidies or catered to the economic interests of the other post-Soviet states in the process of a sort of post-Soviet inertia, reinforced by the vague dreams about possibly reassembling the USSR in the future. The cheap gas and oil were provided even when there was no direct benefit to Russia or any clear rewards for its benevolence. Putin's Kremlin was different. It has a clear drive for imperial expansion. Still, the expansion was tempered by increasing pragmatism, the imperial possession and influence should have brought some tangible geopolitical and/or clear economic benefits, and investment for the sake of the spreading influence without clear returns in some form became limited. More importantly, the Putin era was clearly marked by the departure from the early approach to ex-Soviet republics. They were not runaway, ungrateful children, who were nevertheless seen as a part of the future post-Soviet family, but as true foreign countries. They could and should be under Moscow's sphere of influence. Still, they were contextualized as the foreign entities which were clearly different from Russia and who would never be fully blended with Russia in the Soviet fashion. Consequently, Moscow's policy should not entail excessive largesse backed by nothing but recent memories and/or dreams of a future reunion. Post-Soviet Russia became a nation-state of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, and its approach to the former republics of the USSR was not very different from that of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European imperialists' approach to the major powers' vassals and colonies.

And this pragmatism influenced Moscow's views of Minsk. Moscow was willing to provide some limited support, but not to support the ally regardless of the cost, as was the case with the USSR, which had never argued with its allies and proxies about the price of oil, gas, or any raw material. And in true pragmatic, capitalist fashion, Moscow demanded tangible returns for its investments; at least this practice had emerged in Moscow's dealings with those countries which were part of the USSR in the not-so-distant past, as well as those which had never been a part of the Soviet commonwealth.

The change in Moscow's policy had explained the tensions with Belarus, which emerged in the beginning of Putin's tenure. In the context of this new approach, Putin made more stringent demands toward Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus' strongman, including a certain suggestion that Belarus become a Russian province, while Lukashenko would

become vice-president. Lukashenko rejected this proposal.<sup>1</sup>

After this refusal, it became clear to the Kremlin that even Belarus – closer to Russian than any of the other post-Soviet states – would never be peacefully incorporated into Russia and that it should be treated as a foreign country. Consequently, all economic concessions to Belarus shall be paid by Belarus. Belarus should allow Russian oligarchs to privatize its economic command heights or just become one of Russia's provinces. In any case, Minsk should fully support all of Moscow's foreign policy ventures. If Minsk is reluctant to do this or that, it should increasingly pay more for gas and oil, or suffer from other economic sanctions. All of this led to new gas wars. They have been much bitterer than previous ones, and have inflicted more serious damage on Russo-Belarusian relations than previous ones.

### **Gas/oil wars: gas and oil as geopolitical weapons**

If one would believe the Russian side, it was Belarus which should be blamed for the tension. As was noted, the original agreement between Minsk and Moscow implied that Moscow would take 85% of the custom duties for oil sent by Minsk to foreign markets. By 2006, Belarus decided to change these provisions and Moscow retaliated by increasing the price for gas. Minsk made its own move, and on 1 January 2007, Belarus imposed a \$45 fee for each ton of Russian oil sent abroad.<sup>2</sup> Still, the real reason for the conflict was most likely different from what Moscow asserted. The Kremlin, fully behind Russian oligarchs – the immensely rich tycoons who emerged in the beginning of the post-Soviet era – demanded the privatization of the Belarusian state-run enterprises. This was, for example, the case with Minsk's automobile factory. Lukashenko did not seem to be adamantly against some collaboration, and Minsk's automobile factory and a Russian company had discussed the creation of a joint enterprise. Still, this project led nowhere.<sup>3</sup> The reason was clear. Russian business plainly wanted to absorb one of the major Belarusian factories. And this was the template to deal with the entire "command heights" of the Belarusian economy. The economic control would get along with the increasing

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<sup>1</sup> Sergei Kharitonov, "Venediktov na # RFRM, 'Nichego ne znaiu ob istorii Belarusi Ne bylo takogo gosudarstva'," <http://rfrm.io/asoby>, 16 July 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Novosti, Obzor SMI," <http://polpred.com/news/?ent=198sector=8>, 15 May 2017.

political control and the Kremlin, which was behind the Russian business bid, understood this well. It was clear that the Kremlin clearly pushed Belarus to be an actual appendix to the Russian state. Here Putin behaved not so much as a Soviet leader, but as the European imperialists of the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Minsk disagreed and Moscow employed its major weapon to retaliate: the price of gas for Belarus was raised and when Minsk protested, the Kremlin halted the delivery of gas in 2006. The problems with Minsk had emerged early on. Still, until 2007, Moscow charged Minsk the same price as Russia's nearby Western province.<sup>4</sup>

In 2007, Russia had raised the price of Belarusian gas once again.<sup>5</sup> The Kremlin still claimed that Belarus still had a considerable discount. And if one were to believe Russian observers, in 2008, the price of gas for Belarus was just 67% of the price for other European countries.<sup>6</sup> Still, the price hike was painful and Minsk tried to avoid paying full price for gas, and proposed a substitute. Minsk proposed that Gazprom could participate in various projects in the territory of the country. Still, Gazprom, once again, if one believes Russian sources, was not very interested in the project.

One could note here that the Kremlin had employed the same tactic in dealing with Ukraine which, at that time, was run by Victor Iushchenko, pro-Western and anti-Russian leader. The very fact that friendly Belarus was treated in the same way as hostile Ukraine demonstrated clearly that for the pragmatic Kremlin, there was not much difference between a wavering friend who did not want to be a vassal, and an enemy; and the Kremlin was anxious to squeeze as much as they could from either. Minsk was outraged and tried to get, if not gas, then at least oil from a variety of sources, from Hugo Chavez in Venezuela to Ahmadinejad in Iran. Minsk also engaged in increasing flirtation with China and the West in an attempt to get more cash and to make itself more independent from Moscow. Moscow was also not pleased and Putin most likely thought to replace the unruly Lukashenko with a more pliable puppet; and during 2010, the Kremlin conveyed their displeasure with Lukashenko's re-election clearly enough. Moscow quite possibly was in cahoots with European capitals and Washington. And they were all anxious to stir

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<sup>4</sup> Petr Petrovskii, "Soiuznoe gosudarstvo na poroge integratsionnogo proryva?" <http://eurasia.expert>, 5 July 2017.

<sup>5</sup> "Lukashenko..."

<sup>6</sup> "'Shestaia gazovaia'..."

up trouble in Minsk; the West, of course, believed that it could outmaneuver Russia and place in Minsk a pro-Western regime.

When this design failed the Kremlin immediately resorted to increasing economic pressure and raised the price for gas again. Belarus refused to pay the contract price and owed Russia \$200 million.<sup>7</sup> Besides the problems with gas and oil, Moscow also tried to engage in an economic blockade, limiting Belarus' access to the Russian agricultural market under the excuse that Belarus' produce was not good or safe enough. This was a serious blow to Belarus' economy.

Russia is the major market for Belarusian goods. Belarus sends to Russia 88% of its food exports and 69% of its industrial products. It was surprising that Lukashenko was skeptical in regards to the Russia-sponsored Eurasian Union, for the Union provisions prevented goods and raw materials from circulating freely inside the single market. Already in 2013, he stated that Russia had promised to end all these "exceptions" (*iz'iatii*) after 15 years. Lukashenko stated that if this was the case, he believed that the agreement about the Union would also be signed at that time.<sup>8</sup> Still, Lukashenko decided to join the Eurasian Union in 2015, possibly assuming that antagonizing Russia too much was not in his best interests. Yet neither Minsk nor Moscow regarded themselves as true allies to each other, and by 2016 Moscow and Minsk found themselves at loggerheads again. The crisis, lasting for almost two years, had led to the most serious test of the Russia-Belarus relationship.

The conflict between Moscow and Minsk was not caused by geopolitical ambitions of Belarus or even less "values" differences – the role of which is usually overplayed by the Western media, mostly for public consumption – but Minsk's desire to receive more economic largesse from Moscow and, of course, the desire to prevent Russian oligarchs from taking over "command highs" of Belarus's economy. Moscow understands this well, and was in dire need of geopolitical allies, and it would have provided this help if it had enough resources. Yet it does not have them.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the falling gas and oil prices and increasingly shrinking market for Russian

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Novosti. Obzor SMI."

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Klaskovskii, "Belarus'-Rossiia: pokholodanie nadolgo," <http://naviny.by/article>, 16 February 2017.

gas and oil and, of course, Western sanctions for what the West regarded as Moscow's meddling in Ukraine had led to a sharp deterioration of Moscow's financial position, and created additional problems. The Kremlin had much less largesse to subsidize its presumed allies, even if it wished to do so.<sup>10</sup> As a result, Moscow did not provide Minsk with the expected subsidies on oil/gas. Minsk responded by showing Moscow that its loyalty was not unquestionable and, while formally a military ally with Russia, Minsk could engage in its own geopolitical game. Moreover, Minsk does not exclude direct confrontation with Moscow, if the Kremlin were to decide to take over Belarus in the Crimean fashion.

### **Minsk's failure to recognize Crimea**

Lukashenko's disagreement with Moscow's actions in Ukraine is one of the clear signs of Minsk's problems with Moscow. He failed to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea, called Ukraine a friendly country, and in the beginning of the conflict, when the tensions between Kiev and Moscow were quite high, and Russia's full-fledged invasion seemed to be imminent, Lukashenko stated that he was strongly against Russia's actions. He also added that Belarus would never be a land from which one could invade Ukraine. He even berated Kiev for not fighting for Crimea. He stated that Ukraine indeed believed that Crimea was their land, and they should have fought for it, to the last drop of blood.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Minsk had engaged in military sensitive dealings with Ukraine. According to some reports, Belarus wanted to buy from Ukraine information on how to build cruise missiles (*krylatye rakety*). As the author of the quoted article claimed, this know-how was developed by both Ukrainian and Russian engineers. Still, Minsk did not bother to ask Russia for permission.<sup>12</sup> Finally, as a highly symbolic gesture, "Lukashenko attended Poroshenko's inauguration in June 2014 and returned again to Kiev in December of the same year on a brief working visit."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Belarus-Rossia: pokholodanie nadolgo," <http://naviny.by/article>, 16 February 2017.

<sup>11</sup> "Lukashenko russkii mir – propagandistskaia glupost'," <http://www.bbc.com>, 4 August 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Il'ia Kupavin, "'Nelegal'nye' rakety: Belorussiaia khochet perekupit' u Ukrainy rossiiskie chertezhi," <http://rueconomics.ru>, 14 December 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Igar Gubarevich, "Belarus and Ukraine cooperate in the face of Russian pressure," Belarus Digest, 27 July 2017.

While Lukashenko was not in support of Russia's engagement in Ukraine from the very beginning of the crisis, he continued this policy later. For example, he refused to recognize the two republics in East Ukraine as legitimate states even when Moscow had implicitly done so by accepting their passports.<sup>14</sup> Official Minsk's rather negative approach to East Ukrainian states, actually Russia's proxies, if not *de jure*, then *de facto*. Minsk's position most likely was taken into account by Belarus' pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian nationalists, such as members of the group *Pogonia*, who fought on the Ukrainian side against the pro-Russian Donetsk People's Republic.<sup>15</sup>

### Rapprochement with Europe

Lukashenko's rapprochement with the European Union was another way of distancing Minsk from Moscow. In 2015, he amnestied political prisoners and Belarusian authorities tried to tread softly in their treatment of those Belarusian demonstrators who protested against the new taxes. While flirting with the West, Lukashenko has also released several prominent political prisoners over the past year in a nod to the West. "On March 1, 2016, as part of his attempt to continue to warm relations with the EU, the Belarusian interior ministry announced a softer stance on protests – it would no longer detain protestors, but that police would file charges and protestors would be forced to appear in court and pay a fine, but no longer serve jail time. This change, as much as anything else, set the stage for the events of the past month that have the potential to reshape both Belarusian domestic politics as well as its foreign policy."<sup>16</sup>

On March 9, 2016, Lukashenko met "with EU Special Representatives for Human Rights Stavros Lambrinidis" and "expressed his desire to increase ties with the European Union."<sup>17</sup>

In October 2016, Lukashenko even accepted the National Plan of Action for Human

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<sup>14</sup> "Ukhat," *Zavtra*, 22 February 2017, and "Belorussiiia zaiavila o nedeistvitel'nosti pasportov DNR i LNR," *Izvestia.rus*, 23 February 2017.

<sup>15</sup> A. Uvarov, "Evraziiskie 'soiuzniki 'Rossii Temnye piatna na belykh perchatkakh," *Iondsk*, December, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Goyer, "'Near Resolution' in Belarus: Lukashenko's balancing act and Putin's fear of another Maidan," *Forbes.com*, 13 May 2017.

<sup>17</sup> "Belarus warms ties with the West," <https://www.stratford.com>, 6 April 2016.

Rights (*Natsional'nyi plan deistvii po pravam cheloveka*). Brussels did not ask for this plan, and Lukashenko demonstrated a sort of preventive positive step toward the EU. He clearly sent a message to Brussels that if the EU continued to improve its relationship with Belarus, Minsk would take additional steps. Moreover, it would engage in pro-Western initiatives, even if Brussels did not ask Minsk to make them. As a matter of fact, Lukashenko's pro-Western drift became clear for Moscow, and it was one major reason why the Kremlin was increasingly unhappy with Lukashenko.<sup>18</sup> The quoted author also noted that Lukashenko's tactics might work and that he could create the impression that his regime had become increasingly liberal, even without true opposition in parliament.<sup>19</sup>

Brussels reciprocated, and, as one Russian observer noted, with an air of irony, Lukashenko almost lost his title as the "last dictator in Europe."<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the rapprochement with the EU continued, and in February 2016 Brussels abolished sanctions for Lukashenko, his officials and Belarusian state companies.<sup>21</sup> The détente had led to visits from several European officials to Minsk, including those from nearby Poland, whom Lukashenko warmly greeted.<sup>22</sup> Lukashenko also visited several European countries.

Some of Lukashenko's visits were especially important, and signified Belarus' readmittance to the European commonwealth. There seemed to be clear signs of this when Lukashenko had had visited Italy after being persona non grata in Europe for many years. He even visited the Pope and took his youngest son, to whom he was especially attached. Lukashenko's drift to the West became clear, and he finally abolished visa requirements for the citizens of most of the Western countries. At the same time, European delegates emerged in Minsk almost "every day."<sup>23</sup>

All of this had been done at a time when the relationship between the West and Russia

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<sup>18</sup> Artem Shraibman, "Ustalost' ot balansirovaniia Kak Minsku stanovitsia vse trudnu i s Rossiei, i s zapadom," <http://carnegie.ru>, 3 November 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Artem Shraibman, "Parlament dlia Brusseliu Kak Lukashenko pridumyvaet novye ustupki Zapadu," <http://carnegie.ru>, 6 September 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Artem Shraibman, "Premiia za neloiial'nost' Pochemu Rossiia opiat' dala Belorussii \$2 mlrd," <http://carnegie.ru>, 30 March 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Polina Khamshiashevili, Vladimir Dergachev, Anton Feinberg and Irina Parfent'eva, "Iz-za chego Aleksandr Lukashenko ssoritsia s Rossiei," <http://www.rbe.ru>, 3 February 2017.

<sup>22</sup> "Lukashenko otkazcelsia vybirat' mezhdru Rossiei i Evrosoiuzom," *Zavtra*, 23 March 2016.

<sup>23</sup> "Ogranichennye otnosheniia," <https://www.gazeta.ru>, 3 February 2017.

became sour. In response, Moscow reinstated formal borders between Belarus and Russia, returning to the situation which had existed before Belarus and Russia became members of the “union” state.<sup>24</sup> These actions antagonized Minsk even more, leading to Lukashenko’s angry statement that there is nothing but “political offence.” He also added that Belarus had never violated any agreement with Russia.<sup>25</sup>

There were even hints that Belarus could end its military alliance with Russia. Lukashenko, of course, rejected the rumors about Belarus’ possible withdrawal from various geopolitical and military blocs sponsored by Russia, as absolute nonsense.<sup>26</sup> Still, Moscow took these rumors seriously, especially, due to the clear problems in cooperating with Minsk as military/geopolitical allies. While Lukashenko’s approach to Ukraine and flirtation with the West could well bother Russia, Lukashenko’s guarded approach to the Minsk/Moscow alliance most likely bother Moscow more than anything else.

### **Minsk/Moscow military cooperation under question**

Moscow’s readiness to tolerate Minsk’s intransigence has been in many ways conditioned by the assumption that Minsk is still an important and, in general, reliable military ally. Still, even this notion became increasingly questionable. These problems should be placed in more general context. After the end of the USSR, Russia had lost and abandoned most of its military bases. The trend continued throughout the beginning of Putin’s tenure. Still, the increasing tensions with the West, especially clear after the germination of the crisis in Ukraine, pushed Moscow to reconsider the military plans due to increasing possibility of direct confrontation between Russia and NATO in Europe. The military bases in Belarus became strategically important. In addition, the presence of Russian military bases in Belarus had other benefits, albeit, of course, additional leverage in controlling Minsk. Finally, the bases could be used as a launchpad for taking over the country, if Moscow decided to do this for this or that reason. One should remember here

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<sup>24</sup> Some Russian observers, however, claimed that it was Minsk which actually reinstated border control in September 2014. See: Polina Khamshashvili, Vladimir Dergachev, Anton Feinberg and Irina Parfent’eva, “Iz-za chego Aleksandr Lukashenko ssoritsia s Rossiei,” <http://www.rbe.ru>, 3 February 2017.

<sup>25</sup> “Lukashenko rasskazal o polozhenii Belorussii i ob otnosheniakh s Rossiei,” <http://tass.ru>, 3 February 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Evgenii Kaliukov, “Lukashenko otvetil ugrozoi no ugrozu Medvedeva povysit’ tseny na gaz,” <http://www.rbe.ru/politics/09/03/2017>, 9 March 2017.

the Crimea scenario. Moscow legally had a naval base in Crimea which it used as a plan for sending troops and quick absorption of the peninsula. All, or at least some of these considerations had led Moscow to think about military bases in Belarus. The first time this idea was talked about was in April 2013, when Sergei Shoigu, Russia's Minister of Defense, proposed it to Lukashenko. Lukashenko was not enthusiastic. Still, Moscow ignored this and even sent a delegation to Belarus to find a place for Russia's air force base and General Cornell Viktor Bondarev, the Russian Air Force Commander in Chief, proclaimed that the aerodrome near the town of Lide was the most appropriate place. Under Moscow's direct pressure, Lukashenko ordered Belarus' military brass to prepare the place for the base. Still, the very tone with which Lukashenko addressed the military folk sent them a clear signal that they should not rush to help the Russian Air Force to find the place. While Lukashenko procrastinated, the Russian side became also not sure where it planned to place the base. In March 2014, Bondarev stated that the base would be placed not near Lide, but Baranovich. Later, the plan for the base was changed again and it was decided that the place would be near Bobruisk. These changes in location were possibly encouraged by Lukashenko as a way to procrastinate, and when he found out that Moscow was indeed going to build an air base, he announced clearly enough that he saw no need for a Russian base in Belarus.<sup>27</sup> Lukashenko even tried to use the public's discontent in the winter and spring of 2017, as an excuse to avoid commitments to build the Russian base.

"With an eye on Western opinion, Lukashenko has allowed a limited number of small, unsanctioned protests, such as those last year that accompanied the debate over whether Russia would be allowed an air base on Belarusian territory. (Minsk was able to dodge that demand on Putin's part by agreeing to purchase new Russian warplanes for the Belarusian military, which would then be used as part of the Single Air Defense System, and by agreeing to participate in an Integrated Regional Anti-aircraft Defense System)."<sup>28</sup> Belarusian officials also confirmed Minsk's reluctance to see Russian bases on Belarusian soil. This was, for example, the case with Vladimir Makei, Belarusian Foreign Minister, who visited Latvia in summer 2016.

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<sup>27</sup> Aleksandr Alesin, "Razmeshchenie rossiiskoi avialbazy v Belarusi: o tom, chego ne bylo," <https://www.belrynok.by/ru/page/opinions/4852>, 6 April 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Goyer, "Near Resolution in Belarus..."

“Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei declared that the deployment of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces in neighboring countries poses no direct threat to Belarus. He suggested that Minsk is not happy about this deployment, but it understands the motivation behind it. Responding to questions about the potential Russian airbase in Belarus, Makei pointed to the resounding ‘no’ expressed by Lukashenko months earlier and added that Minsk’s position has not changed.”<sup>29</sup> It became clear that despite Moscow’s prodding and arguments that Belarus should allow Russia to have a base on its territory, Minsk refused and provided its own argument. Lukashenko stated that Russia should give Belarus military plans and it would itself protect the airspace of the “union state.” Lukashenko’s reluctance to provide space for the Russian air base is easily understood. The presence of Russian air bases “creates a serious problem for national security about which everybody talks.”<sup>30</sup> The presence of Russia air bases could lead to what Belarusian observers called “Donbass scenario.” It implied that Russia could send air base troops to these bases and take over Belarus, or at least remove Lukashenko from power. Lukashenko understood this since the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, and this would not just lead to an adamant refusal to see a Russian base in Belarus, but also to “strengthening special forces and changing cadres in military and law enforcement (*silovye*) institutions.”<sup>31</sup> The implications of these changes are clear: all of them should be led by the people dedicated to Lukashenko and law enforcement/special forces should be strong enough to protect the regime from any threat, including those which come from Russia. One might be reminded that Lukashenko remembered well that the Kremlin was quite likely engaged – together, of course, with West and East Europe – in anti-government demonstrations in 2010, the goal of which was his removal from office. All of this certainly shaped his mind and approach to Putin’s plans to create a Russian military base in Belarus.

## Conclusion

What is the conclusion from the narrative? It could be manifold. First, and the most

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<sup>29</sup> Ioffe, “Minks props up currency, diversifies foreign policy..”

<sup>30</sup> Denis Luvnikovich, “Minsk boitsia ‘Iskanderov’,” *gazeta.ru*, 16 May 2016.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

obvious, is the change in Moscow's geopolitical behavior. Present-day Russia is not the USSR, and not only because present-day Russia is much weaker than the USSR, but also because Russian political culture is quantitatively different from that of the USSR. The latter could provide almost unlimited economic and military aid to the countries which the Kremlin regarded as allies. There was often not much asked in return besides assurances of friendship and loyalty. The present-day Russian elite is much more cautious and calculating in dealing with its allies, such as Belarus. It requires from them almost immediate and clear "payment" for these benefits. These purely "transactional" geopolitics make the Russian/Belarus alliance conditional and unstable. On one hand, Minsk has assured Moscow that it is on Russia's side and participated in "Zapad 2017" maneuvers. On the other hand, the same Belarus did its best to prevent Russian bases from emerging on Belarusian soil, and engaged in activities – such as a good relationship with Ukraine – which clearly harmed Moscow. In any case, all sides have limited expectations from each other. There is, of course, a temptation to see such behavior as related only to Minsk and Moscow. Still, it is not the case. The template could be well applied in explaining the relationship between NATO allies, including the relationship between Washington and European capitals.

If one were to take a closer look at the Russia/Belarus relationship, it is quite similar to the geopolitical philosophy of the current Trump administration. Trump's approach to allies is "transactional" and follows the business deal model, requiring this or that direct compensation for Washington's efforts. There is no plan for unconditional support. Consequently, the USA's allies increasingly approach Washington in the same way. All of this implies that in case of direct confrontation in Europe and possibly elsewhere, the USA would need to deal with uncommitted and possibly wavering allies who might well strike a deal behind Washington's back. At the same time, Washington could face the same enemy which allies/proxies might be also not on its side without reservations. All of this could make conflict much more complicated and unpredictable than before.

What are the practical implications for the USA in dealing with both Russia and Belarus? As was demonstrated by our narrative, Moscow is not made up of insane imperialists who are bound to invest whatever it has for building empires and engaging in "pre-emptive wars." Moscow's pragmatism implies that Moscow could and should be accommodated.

It could be accommodated, for the Kremlin's appetite is limited to influence in the adjunct

areas of Eastern Europe, mostly Ukraine, Belarus and Syria. It has no global ambitions, and its elite, connected with the West, is ready to compromise. Moscow should be accommodated for several reasons. First, the USA could not engage in simultaneous conflicts with China, North Korea, Iran, ISIS and Russia at the same time. Secondly, U.S. allies in Europe are not firmly behind the USA, as was the case during the Cold War. For example, the USA has serious tensions with Germany, and even more so with Turkey – both important NATO members. Last but not least, the USA continues its deindustrialization and actual economic decline in not just relative but absolute terms, and this decline could not be covered up by the “service bubble” for very long. Russia’s accommodation should be a part here of a radical change in geopolitical patterns, which the USA has followed throughout the post-Cold War era. Otherwise, the USA would follow one of two scenarios. First, the inability to contain the array of power would just accelerate the USA’s declining influence, especially if the threat of major war (as in the case with North Korea) would not change the adversaries’ behavior. Secondly, the conflict could also lead to a major war with unprecedented consequences for the USA and the global community. While the present-day conditions create serious problems for the USA, they also create an opportunity, as the case with Belarus demonstrated clearly. In contrast to the Cold War, the USA’s adversaries are not firmly attached to each other. The USA should take this opportunity. The attempt to dub Lukashenko as the “last dictator” of Europe should be ended, and broad cooperation with Minsk should be launched. In short, the case of the Minsk-Moscow relationship demonstrates the new realities of the post-Post-Cold-War era, to which Washington should adapt.

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\* **NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Defense Department.