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RUSSIA'S TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN BELARUS

CONSOLIDATING A SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

Russia's plan to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus is another step in its creeping attack on Belarus's sovereignty. The decision is also an indication of Russia's increased reliance on nuclear deterrence in the face of its degraded conventional forces.

Russia's recent announcement about storing nuclear warheads in Belarus spells disaster for the sovereignty of Belarus. Although Russia's plans for modifying Belarusian attack aircraft to make them nuclear capable and the transfer of nuclear-capable Iskander-M systems to Belarus were already known, the previously publicized information suggested that the nuclear warheads would remain stored in Russia.

The logic behind Russia's decision to store warheads in Belarus is not immediately apparent, since Russia has storage sites available near the Belarusian border, and using them would likely be a better option for the security of the warheads. Moreover, since Belarus has not had nuclear weapons stored

on its territory since they were removed in the 1990s, additional infrastructure needs to be built.

However, the goal of Russia's decision appears to be the creation of just enough insecurity, which Russia can exploit to secure its grip on Belarus. At the same time, arming attack aircraft with nuclear weapons is a sign of Russia's increased reliance on nuclear deterrence due to the poor state of its conventional forces, weakened by the war in Ukraine.

By storing nuclear warheads in Belarus under Russian custody, Russia will create a permanent pretext for sending its Armed Forces to occupy Belarus in order to ensure the security of its warheads. For example, if Belarus faced the prospect of another popular revolution,

similar to the mass demonstrations after the falsified 2020 presidential election, Russia could justify invading the country by claiming that it needs to ensure that its nuclear weapons do not fall into the wrong hands. A similar justification could be used to occupy Belarus if Lukashenko or his successor tried to break free from Russia's hold.

Moreover, by assigning a Russian nuclear mission for the Belarusian Air Force, Russia is continuing the integration of the Belarusian Armed Forces into those of its own. Although the arrangement whereby Belarus would operate Russian nuclear weapons outwardly resembles NATO's nuclear-sharing program, it is not comparable to it: The goal of NATO's nuclear sharing is to ensure that US security

interests remain coupled with those of European NATO allies, who will also have more say in how they will ultimately be defended. Russia's nuclear sharing with Belarus, however, is just another step in its creeping attack on Belarus's sovereignty.

Russia may want to use a nuclear-capable attack aircraft to compensate for its degraded conventional warfighting capability by relying on nuclear deterrence. These aircraft, even if nuclear-capable, can only support frontline operations, taking a role similar to tactical nuclear weapons during the Cold War. However, the system is unreliable in this role, as demonstrated by the solid performance of Ukrainian air defences in the war.

Russia currently has no capability to defend itself against NATO by conventional means, and by assigning a nuclear-armed attack aircraft as a means of frontline defence, Russia is signalling that a war against it may quickly turn nuclear. Such a signal enhances the deterrent value of these nuclear weapons beyond their questionable military utility. Moreover, by forward-deploying these systems and their warheads in Belarus, Russia is creating a use-it-or-lose-it

scenario for these nuclear weapons, signalling to NATO that a war precisely in Belarus risks nuclear escalation.

By purposefully creating such a risk, Russia's political goal of dominating Belarus aligns with its military rationale for relying more on nuclear deterrence. Russia is drawing the frontline of its defence on the western border of Belarus and, in doing so, is attempting to use its nuclear umbrella to consolidate Belarus under its dominance. This is in line with Russia's current National Security Strategy, which discusses spheres of influence in the section concerning Russia's national defence.

Forward-deploying tactical nuclear weapons may also indicate that Russia will lower its doctrinal nuclear threshold when its updated Military Doctrine is published. Russia could adopt a declarative policy similar to that of its 2000 Military Doctrine, which stated that Russia may use nuclear weapons in situations critical to its national security (rather than in the face of existential threats as the current nuclear doctrine states).

The current doctrine was based on the belief that Russia's conventional forces were strong enough to

decrease its reliance on nuclear deterrence. This is no longer the case, duly undoing the original rationale for the current policy. At the same time, the lowered threshold would provide a new pretext for using nuclear threats to defend its hegemony over Belarus and conquests elsewhere. NATO's nuclear deterrence would, however, continue to limit the effectiveness of these threats.

Russia's decision to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus will not dramatically improve its ability to strike NATO's territory with nuclear weapons, since Russia can already use the Belarusian airspace to launch intermediate-range missiles. It has also already deployed Iskander-M systems in Kaliningrad.

There is a military rationale for deploying nuclear weapons in Belarus, but the current plans represent a graver threat to Belarus than to NATO. Storing nuclear weapons in Belarus establishes a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus and provides a pretext for increasing it later. As such, it is another step in Russia's campaign to ensure that Belarus can never choose Ukraine's path and escape from Russia's sphere of influence. /