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Formalizing the Vassal State? Belarus, Russia, and the Implications of the New Security Agreement

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Introduction

In March 2025, following Aliaksandr Lukashenka's visit to Moscow, a new security agreement titled *Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Security Guarantees Within the Union State* came into forceⁱ. The importance of this security treaty would be easy to overlook, considering that it is well-understood that *de facto* Belarus is clearly already embedded in the security sphere of Russia. After all, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 began from the territory of Belarus, with no visible objections from Belarus about the use of their state territory. Similarly, since the Belarusian sham elections of 2020, it has been widely acknowledged that Russia would be ready to use any means necessary to keep Belarus in its sphere of influence, were Belarus to go suddenly adrift due to domestic turmoil. These factors demonstrate that Russia is ready and capable to intrude on the sovereign rights of Belarus beyond the realm of legal norms and bilateral agreements.

Official treaties play a crucial role beyond being a mere formality, as they serve to expand the legal space for state interaction and legitimise actions taken within their framework. While the Union State format has been central to Belarus-Russia relations since 1999, experts have consistently highlighted the intrinsic asymmetry of these relationsⁱⁱ. Despite formal parity, vast disparities in economic and geopolitical weight ensure Moscow's dominance. Consequently, the treaty framework, rather than mitigating this power imbalance, in many cases serves to reinforce Russia's strategic advantage over Minsk.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse the Belarus-Russia security treaty, assessing how and whether its provisions affect relations between Belarus and Russia in the security and defence dimension, as well as evaluating its implications for Belarusian sovereignty, regional security and other key aspects within the current geopolitical context.

Dissecting the Belarus-Russia security treaty

The security treaty that now formally binds Belarus and Russia has been shaped by the turbulent years since 2020 and by the ongoing war in Ukraine. While it builds on previous agreements between Minsk and Moscow, the specific commitments laid out in this pact reveal a significant deepening of their integration across several crucial areas. This section breaks down the key themes of the treaty to understand how they work together to solidify Belarus's role within Russia's strategic plans and what this means in practice.

1. Blurring the lines between external defence and internal regime security

A significant feature of the treaty is its broadened definition of security threats warranting mutual support. Article 2 of the treaty extends mutual obligations beyond traditional military aggression to cover "infringement on security" targeting the "constitutional order" of either party, explicitly including threats from non-state "terrorist and extremist organisations and groups". While ostensibly aimed at countering "unconventional threats" from the West, this formulation clearly provides legal basis for Russian involvement in preserving the existing political system in Minsk under Lukashenka, potentially legitimising intervention against any possible internal dissent that is framed as external interference.

This effectively formalises Russia's role as a guarantor in the assumed post-2020 political order in Belarus, which arguably could be in Lukashenka's interests. However, embedding this commitment within the core of the security treaty further degrades Belarusian sovereignty, as it provides legal justification for external intervention over matters fundamentally considered internal political affairs. This arrangement clearly serves Moscow's interests by consolidating its control over Belarus even further.

Following the pattern of formal legality that Russia has applied to justify its full-scale invasion in Ukraineⁱⁱⁱ, the current Belarus-Russia security treaty establishes a framework that allows Russia to readily construct legal justifications for interventions into Belarus's internal affairs, should Moscow deem such actions necessary based on its own assessment or interests, particularly during anticipated periods of turbulence like a post-Lukashenka transition. This, in turn, further solidifies the Kremlin's grip, providing *de jure* legitimacy derived from the treaty for the *de facto* power the Kremlin already wields in shaping Belarus's future trajectory.

In this case, it is noteworthy to mention that during Lukashenka's recent visit to Moscow in March 2025, he delivered a rather long and gruelling address to the Federation Council of Russia, touching upon many topics, including Belarus's potential incorporation into Russia:

“When will Russia become part of Belarus or vice versa, Belarus become part of Russia? It will be unlikely to happen in the near future. If in this respect we try to break through an open door, we will destroy everything that has been built. We need to move forward slowly, implement something step by step, as we do now^{iv}.”

It is reasonable to assume that the need for Lukashenka to make such a claim indicates that Minsk understands the threat emanating from Russia and the need to balance its increasing dependence on Russia.

2. Reinforcing mutual security and defence commitments in favour of Russia

At the heart of the new treaty is a mutual commitment to security and defence that closely resembles a bilateral equivalent of NATO's Article 5. The agreement legally binds both Russia and Belarus to treat an armed attack on one as an attack on the Union State as a whole, emphasising the indivisibility of the Union State's defensive space, effectively linking Belarus into Russia's strategic defence perimeter.

This formalisation of mutual defence extends beyond previous Russia-Belarus military cooperation and is more specific and binding than what is found in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) framework^v. It also seems to indicate Russia's increasing preference for bilateral partnership and defence mechanisms, in which it can dominate both the terms and the execution, as seen in recent cases of similar treaties established with North Korea and Iran. While a security partnership between Belarus and Russia is in force already in the CSTO format, the new security treaty makes it possible to bypass the collective decision-making structures of the multilateral alliance.

In this sense, the treaty reinforces existing mutual defence commitments, but it also creates lower potential intervention thresholds and theoretically enables Russia to take more rapid action. While phrased reciprocally, the profound asymmetry in military

capabilities between the two states means this clause primarily binds Belarus to Russia's strategic decisions while also guaranteeing swift Russian support to Belarus. This has two main implications. Firstly, as previously mentioned, this could enable Russia to intrude on the "constitutional order" of Belarus, and it introduces a political and legal basis for using Belarus as a staging ground for military activities. Secondly, it can be argued, considering the broad scope and language of the treaty, that Russia could have reasonable legal ground to request the support and direct military involvement of Belarus in its war against Ukraine or other military endeavours in the future. Although currently such a scenario does not seem politically feasible because the Belarusian population has been widely against direct military involvement in the war against Ukraine^{vi}, and going against that could create risks to internal stability without any credible military gain. Moreover, it is safe to assume that, at least in the short-term, the involvement of Belarus directly in this conflict is highly unlikely as it would be seen as an escalation and would go contrary to the current efforts of the Kremlin to achieve strategic gains through political means. But this rationale may not necessarily align with the calculations and the perspective of the Kremlin, as certain indications have pointed towards Moscow's willingness to pressure Belarus into direct involvement in this conflict^{vii}.

Beyond these operational scenarios, the very act of formalising this defence commitment serves an immediate (and likely more significant) purpose: it amplifies deterrence messaging towards the West and signals Russia's readiness to escalate tensions in the region, using Belarus as a key component of its hardened geopolitical posture.

3. Conditioning Belarus for a permanent Russian military footprint

A notable and potentially far-reaching provision in the treaty is the introduction of Russia's right to establish permanent military bases and installations and station troops on Belarusian territory. While Belarusian territory has long been an integral part of Russia's security domain, with the Russian military enjoying access with minimal restrictions especially since 2022, this treaty transforms what was a *de facto* presence into a *de jure* one. It provides Russia with long-term legal grounds to maintain and expand military infrastructure within Belarus, under the cover of joint defence planning and activities. This formalisation, occurring under conditions of Belarus's heightened dependence on Russia, significantly constrains Minsk's ability to control the presence of a foreign military on its own territory, even further degrading its sovereignty and solidifying its role as a forward operating area for Russia. After all, it is safe to assume that the introduction of such a specific norm is not without reason and is going to be exercised by Moscow. The Russian strategic military exercise ZAPAD 2025, approaching in September this year, would serve as a convenient cover to push for increased Russian presence on the territory of Belarus, drawing from the alleged lessons of the exercise. Given such activities and a potential permanent Russian presence in the region, this would likely entice heightened alertness from NATO's Eastern flank members, especially Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, which share borders with Belarus.

4. Co-opting Belarus through Russia's nuclear strategy and deterrence

Another noteworthy development is the treaty's formal integration of Belarus into Russia's nuclear posture. It explicitly extends Russia's nuclear umbrella in line with Russia's nuclear doctrine, and it references a specific procedure "established by the Parties" for deciding

on the use of Russian nuclear weapons deployed on Belarusian territory. Despite numerous previous statements by Belarusian officials asserting that Belarus, and specifically Lukashenka, would possess decision-making authority in the matter of using Russian tactical nuclear weapons stationed on the territory of Belarus, this is, to put it lightly, highly questionable.

From a legal standpoint, while Russia's nuclear doctrine references an attack on Belarus as a condition for nuclear weapon use, it grants no decision-making authority to Belarus regarding their employment. On the contrary, the doctrine clearly states that "The decision to employ nuclear weapons is made by the President of the Russian Federation"^{viii}. From a political perspective as well, there is little rationale for the Kremlin to transfer control of its arms to Minsk, a point explicitly confirmed by statements from Vladimir Putin^{ix}. Practically, doing so would only complicate the already complex decision-making chain of command for the use of nuclear weapons. Operationally, the stationing of tactical Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil arguably serves a limited distinct military purpose, as their effective range is long enough to be employed against targets in the West from the territory of Russia itself. Therefore, the purpose of this move can be assessed as mainly strategic and political in nature: it escalates Russia's nuclear posture and signalling, thereby deterring and psychologically affecting the West, while simultaneously indirectly subjugating Belarus even further.

Impacts on the regional security landscape

The examined Belarus-Russian security treaty, combined with the potential permanent deployment of Russian forces and weaponry onto Belarusian soil, has a practical impact on security dynamics across Eastern Europe. For the countries on the NATO's Eastern flank, especially Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, the treaty represents a degradation of their security environment. The formalisation of Russia's military presence, including potentially permanent rights regarding bases and advanced weapons systems, transforms Belarus from a buffer state into a permanent forward operating base for potential Russian aggression. This, in turn, significantly reduces warning times, impacts defence planning, and indicates the need for an adjustment to NATO's defence posture.

From Kyiv's perspective, the treaty locks in Belarus's status as a co-aggressor and a persistent military threat from the north. The legal framework provided by the treaty justifies the continued presence and build-up of Russian forces capable of launching offensive operations, threatening Ukraine.

On a broader European level, the treaty reinforces the continent's division into opposing military blocs. It formalises Belarus's complete absorption into Russia's security sphere, eliminating any lingering possibility of Minsk pursuing even limited strategic autonomy. The combination of a highly integrated military posture, forward-deployed Russian forces, and the ongoing tensions related to the war in Ukraine creates a volatile security environment. Therefore, the risk of unintended escalation due to border incidents, hybrid warfare provocations originating from Belarus, or miscalculations during large-scale military exercises has been significantly increased. The treaty, by consolidating Russia's control over and forward presence in Belarus, contributes directly to increased instability across the region.

Policy recommendations

The formalising of Russia's military presence in and control over Belarus impacts regional security, affecting the countries within the Baltic region, Ukraine, and NATO. This shift calls for a clear and resolute response to counteract the resulting security threats.

1. Formally recognise Russia's military absorption of Belarus

NATO must formally recognise the *de facto* military absorption of Belarus by Russia in the next update of its Strategic Concept or in a policy document of similar weight. This document must explicitly state that any military aggression originating from Belarusian territory will be treated as an act of aggression by the Russian Federation and Belarus, warranting a full Article 5 response. This principle must be mirrored in the national security doctrines of all member states bordering Belarus.

For the NATO Alliance, this is a critical step to eliminate the strategic ambiguity that Moscow intends to exploit. It sends a clear signal to both Moscow and Minsk that any attempt to use Belarus as a proxy to attack NATO countries will fail, pre-emptively closing a dangerous loophole in the Alliance's deterrence posture and ensuring the consequences of such an attack are clear and unavoidable.

2. Address the military threat from territory of Belarus to Ukraine

Russia has already used Belarus as a launchpad for its full-scale invasion, demonstrating the strategic threat posed to Ukraine's northern flank. The new security treaty formalises this danger, transforming what was a temporary staging ground into a permanent, integrated military front for Russia. This creates an enduring threat for the future of Ukraine and regional stability. Even in the scenario of a ceasefire in Ukraine, Russia's military presence in Belarus will remain a threat to Kyiv, forcing it to divert critical resources to guard its northern border and undermining its long-term security.

Therefore, the United States and its allies must ensure that any future ceasefire or peace agreement includes a framework of specific and verifiable security guarantees regarding the territory of Belarus. The focus should be on negotiating a security architecture that mitigates the offensive threat from Belarus while strengthening Ukraine's capabilities to counteract that threat. Any settlement that fails to address Russia's military posture in Belarus would be fundamentally flawed, as it would render any security guarantees for Ukraine incomplete, effectively locking in a permanent threat and ensuring the instability of any future peace.

3. Signal a clear commitment to the defence of NATO's Eastern flank

The new security treaty transforms Belarus into a permanent forward operating base for Russia, fundamentally degrading the security of bordering NATO Allies. The potential consolidation of Russian forces on the Eastern flank significantly reduces strategic advance warning times and raises the risks of any potential aggression, placing Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia under constant military pressure. Although these new dynamics do not dramatically shift the threat calculus of NATO, as the threat from Russia is not new, it is

nonetheless important to reiterate the importance of strengthening defence and deterrence on NATO's Eastern flank by enhancing its forward defence and operational readiness.

Any steps by Russia towards consolidating its military presence in Belarus and on its borders with NATO must be met with an equal response and a clear commitment to the defence of NATO's borders, ensuring that the security of its Eastern flank is non-negotiable. To set an example, NATO should conduct regular, large-scale snap military exercises on the Eastern flank. These no-notice exercises would test and demonstrate NATO's ability to rapidly deploy its forces, as well as maintain strategic uncertainty for Moscow, forcing it to divert its resources to more actively monitoring NATO. More importantly, they would also counteract Russia's own tactic of using large-scale exercises as a cover for aggression.

4. Increase cohesion in countering grey-zone threats from Russia and Belarus

The regimes in Minsk and Moscow have a proven track record of using hybrid tactics and grey-zone warfare against bordering countries, as demonstrated by the weaponisation of migration since 2021. If not properly addressed, such methods will certainly be used in the future to destabilise the security situation, which could escalate into a conventional conflict. The new security treaty exacerbates these risks, creating a more dangerous and unified front of hybrid aggression.

Therefore, to counter this shared threat, the countries bordering Russia and Belarus should enhance their operational cohesion by establishing a joint intelligence and operations centre or other collaborative initiatives. Such a framework would coordinate a unified response to combat disinformation, the weaponisation of migration, and other forms of hybrid warfare launched by Russia and Belarus. Crucially, it would also serve as a support cell and unified voice for the border states, informing and accelerating policy formulation and decision-making on hybrid threats within the EU and NATO.

5. Ensure sanctions thoroughly target the Belarusian military-industrial complex

While Belarus has long supported Russia's war effort, the new security treaty formalises its complicity, transforming the Belarusian military-industrial complex into a legally integrated and permanent support element for Russia's military. This integration provides Moscow with essential manufacturing, repair services, and a channel to circumvent sanctions. By failing to address this issue, the West enables the creation of a long-term, unified military-industrial threat on NATO's Eastern flank.

The United States, the EU, and their allies must impose comprehensive, sector-wide sanctions that treat the Russian and Belarusian military-industrial complex as a single entity. This strategy must go beyond targeting just the final assemblers of military hardware and focus on dismantling the entire cross-border supply chain. This includes sanctioning smaller Belarusian sub-component manufacturers and other companies and entities across the supply chain. By taking action against this entire ecosystem, the West could impede the production that fuels the war in Ukraine today and degrade the industrial capacity that will also threaten NATO's borders in the future. Therefore, these sanctions must persist even after the end of Russian hostilities in Ukraine.

Conclusion

The examined Belarus-Russia security treaty does more than just reaffirm existing ties: it crystallises a new phase in the relationship between Russia and Belarus. While Belarus's *de facto* integration within Russia's security sphere was already profound, this treaty provides an essential *de jure* framework, formalising the already deeply asymmetric structure.

Key elements, such as extending security guarantees to cover internal political stability, serve to legitimise Russia's potential involvement under the guise of protecting the "constitutional order". The strengthened mutual defence pact, given the vast power imbalance, effectively binds Minsk to Moscow's strategic leadership while streamlining avenues for Russian military action. Moreover, the explicit green light for a permanent Russian military presence and the unprecedented inclusion of Belarus within Russia's nuclear strategy clearly define Belarus primarily as a strategic instrument for Moscow.

In essence, while Lukashenka has maintained control through heightened repression, ensuring his continued governance of Belarus, this has come at the direct cost of national sovereignty - a trade-off clearly demonstrated and legally reinforced by the treaty examined in this policy paper.



ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2024) *Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Беларусь о гарантиях безопасности в рамках Союзного государства* [Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus on Security Guarantees Within the Union State]. Retrieved: 25.04.2025. Available: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/62699/
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- ^{iv} Комсомольская Правда (2025) *Александр Лукашенко выступает в Совете Федерации РФ: прямая трансляция* [Alexander Lukashenko speaks at the Federation Council of the Russian Federation: live broadcast] [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved: 25.04.2025. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29N7UNVWEol>
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