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Assessing the Implications of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus

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Introduction

On March 25, 2023, President Putin announced that he would be deploying tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in Belarus.¹ According to President Putin, the urgent trigger for the deployment of TNWs in Belarus came because the British government had decided to give Ukraine armour-piercing shells containing depleted uranium.² President Putin lowered his rhetoric after claiming that these shells have depleted uranium, but he said that it puts forward an added risk for civilians and can make the environment contaminated.³ President Putin said, “We are not handing over (nuclear weapons). And the US does not hand (nuclear weapons) over to its allies. We’re basically doing the same thing they’ve been doing for a decade.”⁴ President Putin also added that “They have allies in certain countries, and they train... their crews. We are going to do the same thing.”⁵ President Putin basically indicated that just like the US has deployed its own nuclear weapons overseas, Russia will do the same. The latest Russian move draws attention to nuclear deterrence.

Belarusian Response

Belarusian President Lukashenko’s regime has been in a weak position, especially since the August 2020 incidents where President Putin had to retain his regime by sending Russian forces to Belarus. President Putin said that President Lukashenko had long asked the Russians to deploy their nuclear weapons in Belarus.⁶ For President Lukashenko, the survival of the regime is most important, and that is why the stationing of TNWs makes him feel secure. The Belarusian Foreign Minister said, “Over the last two and a half years, the Republic of Belarus has been subjected to unprecedented political, economic and information pressure from the United States, the United Kingdom and its NATO allies, as well as the member states of the European Union.”⁷ The Minister also said, “In view of these circumstances, and the legitimate concerns and risks in the sphere of national security arising from them, Belarus is forced to respond by strengthening its own security and defence capabilities.”⁸ President Lukashenko returned the favour to President Putin by allowing Russian troops to use Belarus for the invasion of Ukraine.

Implications for Russia

Russia deploying TNWs in Belarus does not make strategic sense because all missiles in Russia already have enough strike range to hit Ukraine when they are launched from within Russia. So, it is more likely that President Putin is doing nuclear sabre-rattling by playing nuclear deterrence in a classic textbook manner. So basically, what President Putin would like to observe and ensure is that NATO should be deterred from further supplying armaments to Ukraine.⁹ But NATO is hardly

deterred because, since the end of February 2022, President Putin has been playing this same nuclear card, and therefore his threat seems to have not been taken seriously by NATO. President Putin told Russian state broadcaster Russia 1 on March 25 that the Iskander short-range missile could be made nuclear-tipped and that this missile system has already been transferred to Belarus.¹⁰ Russian Defence Minister Shoigu stated on April 4 that the transfer of Iskander-M took place to Belarus and also said that Belarusians have started receiving training since April 3 at a Russian facility.¹¹

US Response

The Secretary-General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, underplayed President Putin's deployment of nuclear weapons as 'nuclear sabre-rattling.' He said, "The announcement by President Putin is part of a pattern of dangerous, reckless nuclear rhetoric, where Russia, President Putin tries to use nuclear weapons as a way to prevent us from supporting Ukraine, intimidation, coercion to stop NATO Allies and partners for supporting Ukraine in their right to defend their own country."¹² The US does not see the need to reposition its own nuclear posture, as it has taken a 'wait-and-watch' orientation. The American National Security Council spokesperson, Watson, said that Washington DC will "monitor the implications"¹³ of President Putin's threat. Watson stated, "We have not seen any reason to adjust our own strategic nuclear posture nor any indications that Russia is preparing to use a nuclear weapon."¹⁴

Conclusion

Russia and Belarus are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (a grouping of seven former USSR states in the form of a military alliance led by Russia). President Lukashenko has been publicly lamenting that he made a grave mistake in the 1990s when his country repatriated Soviet nuclear weapons from the territory of Belarus. Stationing nuclear weapons in Belarus is unlikely to affect the outcome or progress of this war because President Putin has been doing this kind of nuclear sabre-rattling since the beginning. The only difference it would make is that if there is a breakdown of deterrence and Russia strikes Ukraine with a nuclear weapon, then NATO might choose to respond in kind. As a result, these TNWs deployed in Belarus will shorten the response time for NATO to intercept (the Russian nuclear-tipped missiles) with their missile defences in Europe. If that happens, the world will likely face the prospect of a full-fledged strategic nuclear exchange. Therefore, the value of TNWs being useful for 'limited' nuclear warfighting is highly sceptical. The deployment of nuclear weapons in different countries is a risky strategy that major powers, including the US, need to reconsider.

NOTES:

¹ “Putin says Russia will deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus”, Al Jazeera, March 25, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/25/putin-says-will-deploy-tactical-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus>. Accessed on April 23, 2023.

² “Why does Russia want tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus?”, Al Jazeera, March 28, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/28/why-does-russia-want-tactical-nuclear-weapons-in-belarus>. Accessed on May 14, 2023.

³ Ibid

⁴ Jon Jackson, “Russian Ally Testing Troops as Putin Prepares Nuclear Weapons Move”, Newsweek, April 3, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-ally-testing-troops-putin-prepares-nuclear-weapons-move-1792255>. Accessed on May 20, 2023.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Al Jazeera, n2.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Jon Jackson, “Russian Ally Testing Troops as Putin Prepares Nuclear Weapons Move”, Newsweek, April 3, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-ally-testing-troops-putin-prepares-nuclear-weapons-move-1792255>. Accessed on April 23, 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ashish Dangwal, “NATO-Russia Conflict: Moscow Trains Belarus On Iskander-M Nuclear Missiles As RuMoD Confirms Delivery To Minsk”, The EurAsian Times, April 4, 2023, <https://eurasianimes.com/nato-russia-conflict-moscow-trains-belarus-on-iskander-m-nuclear-missiles-as-rumod-confirms-delivery-to-minsk/>. Accessed on May 14, 2023.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Atul Aneja, “Does Putin have a case for deploying tactical nukes in Belarus?”, Khmer Times, April 3, 2023, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501266673/does-putin-have-a-case-for-deploying-tactical-nukes-in-belarus/>. Accessed on April 23, 2023.

¹⁴ Ibid