

Belarus'- Russian Military Relations (1991-1998)

Dr S J Main

Introduction

Ever since the formal dissolution of the USSR at the end of 1991, the various states of the former Soviet Union (FSU) have sought ways of re-establishing their political, cultural and economic identity, freed, at long last, from being lumped all together - as had been the case when the USSR existed - as "Russian." However, it can be argued that of all the former republics of the USSR, the one that has done most NOT to escape the embrace of the re-constituted Russian Federation is the Republic of Belarus' (formerly known as Byelorussia). It is not an exaggeration to state that none has pushed the idea of a rejuvenated Union, on the territory of the FSU, quite as vigorously as Belarus', under its democratically-elected President, Aleksandr Lukashenko (who also happens to be his country's Commander-in Chief). For his own political purposes, Lukashenko has been consistent in his desire to achieve the closest possible union between his republic and that of President Yeltsin's Russian Federation and, particularly in the area of military cooperation, the military establishments of both republics are doing much to achieve this. This paper will examine the nature of the recent and unfolding military relationship between the two republics and explore its possible future development.

Belarus': Background Information

Belarus' is situated at the heart of Europe, bordering Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Latvia. Its capital city is Minsk (also spelt Mensk) which has a population size more than double that of Glasgow's at 1.7 millions. In terms of its physical size, it is over 207,000 sq. kilometres, making it slightly larger than Austria, Portugal or Greece. Its total population at 10.7 millions is a little more than double that of Scotland. The ethnic breakdown of the population - always an important factor in this area of Europe - reveals that the overwhelming majority of the people are ethnic Belarussian (77.9%), followed by Russians (13.9%), Poles (4.1%), Ukrainians (2.9%).¹ As can be inferred from the ethnic breakdown, its people are Slavic in terms of faith, language and culture and, in many respects, this helps to explain why so many of them feel a natural kinship towards Russia and the Russians: although Belarussian is the official language of the Republic, 60% of the population speak Russian in their daily life.² In terms of its previous history, Belarus' has little to mark it out as an independent state apart from a few months in 1918 under German tutelage. This is in marked contrast to the situation of, for instance, Ukraine where feelings of nationalism run stronger and deeper. Thus, in overall terms, even before 1991, there was very little feeling of Belarussian national identity: polls carried out in the republic in the early 1990s showed that 37% of those asked confessed no knowledge of Belarussian culture.³ In economic terms - an important factor in determining the pace and scope

of military reform - growth in GDP was 3% down in 1997, compared to 1996, and the 1997 annual inflation rate stood at between 30-35%. Average monthly income (September 1997) stood at \$88; the unemployment rate was 3.9% (September 1997).⁴ Although these figures may not look particularly impressive by Western standards, relatively speaking, Belarus' is far from being the weakest economy in the region and, unlike in Russia, the state has made efforts to ensure that basic services are provided and that arrears in wages and salaries are cleared up as soon as possible.

Earlier military cooperation between the two states: the Byelorussian Military District, 1926-1991

Since the formal creation of the USSR in 1922 (which included the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, BSSR), the territory of the BSSR was one of the strategic outposts for the Red Army looking west. As such, for a large part of the history of the USSR, the Byelorussian Military District (MD) - formally created in October 1926⁵ - was an important military asset to the USSR's overall defence capability and enjoyed much of what was best, in terms of men and equipment, that the USSR had to offer. From 1925 onwards, important annual manoeuvres were held on its territory, thereby making the Byelorussian MD, in the words of one authoritative source, the "experimental base" for the Red/Soviet Army.⁶ The first mechanised units of the Red Army were trained here (1928), as were the first air defence units and airborne troops (early 1930s). French and British Army officers attended the manoeuvres held in the Byelorussian MD in 1936 and were impressed by what they saw there.⁷

"In the post-war period, the years in the Byelorussian MD and the Soviet Armed Forces, as a whole, continued to see the mastering of new weapon systems and military technology, improving the forms and means of conducting military operations."⁸ Following on from the experience gained from the pre-WW2 manoeuvres, the Byelorussian MD was the scene for many important exercises involving units from the Warsaw Pact, thereby maintaining the MD's reputation as the training ground not only for the Soviet Army, but also for the armies of the Warsaw Pact nations. The military exercises, "Dnepr" (1967), "Dvina" (1970), "Berezina" (1978) and "Zapad-81" (1981) were all held on the territory of the Byelorussian MD. In February 1968, in recognition of its "major contribution to strengthening the defensive might of the Soviet state and its military defence", the MD was awarded the Order of the Red Banner, the highest military decoration of the Soviet state.⁹ A quick examination of the list of Commanders and Chiefs of Staff of the Byelorussian MD reveal a number of important figures in the history of the Soviet Armed Forces, including A I Kork, A I Yegorov, I P Uborevich, S K Timoshenko, M M Zaitsev, N V Ogarkov.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, the present Minister of Defence of the republic of Belarus', A P Chumakov, is also a former Chief of Staff of the Byelorussian MD (appointed in August 1988).¹¹ He held this appointment until 1991, making him the last Chief of Staff of the Byelorussian MD before the collapse of the USSR. After three years in China, Chumakov then spent the next year attached to the Russian peace-keeping contingent in Pridniester, before being appointed Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus in December 1995. He was appointed MoD in January 1997.¹² Thus, all in all, the military ties between the two republics run long and deep.

Belarus'-Russian military cooperation (1991-1998)

There have been a number of stages in cementing Belarussian-Russian political, economic and military ties following the re-establishment of the republic's independence at the end of 1991. On 20th July 1992 (two months after the re-creation of the Russian Armed Forces), Belarus' signed a package of 24 agreements, consisting of 19 economic accords and 5 military agreements, with the Russian Federation. The 5 military agreements were largely concerned with the country's strategic forces, as well as the technical and material maintenance of both sets of forces, officer training, etc.¹³ At this point in time, Belarus' had inherited a lot of military equipment from the FSU, not least because, as outlined above, the Byelorussian MD had been, to all intents and purposes, the training base for the Soviet Army and, at the end of the latter's existence, the MD had been home to 250,000 military personnel, with the best equipment that the USSR had to offer.¹⁴ In this particular context, it should be noted that one of the very first actions that the Belarussian government undertook, on obtaining independence, was to declare itself a nuclear-free power and subsequently instructed the Russian government to withdraw all the former USSR's nuclear weapons from Belarus', a process that began in 1992 and ended in November 1996, when the last SS-25 was removed from the territory of the republic.¹⁵ It is a moot point whether, in the light of continued NATO expansion into Eastern Europe - especially if it involves republics of the FSU - Belarus' will remain a non-nuclear power. For the time being, however, it is.

Six months of intense debate followed in the Supreme Soviet (SS) of Belarus' (the equivalent of the UK's parliament and then a body which was allowed to debate legislative matters freely and critically). The package was eventually ratified by the SS on 4th February 1993. For its part, the Russian *duma* ratified all 5 military agreements on 27th April. Commenting on the basic provisions of the Russian-Belarussian accords, the then Russian Deputy Defence Minister, former Commander of 40th Army in Afghanistan, Boris Gromov, noted that the package created a fundamental new basis for mutual military relations "in the interests of both states...for military security, specific features of the structure of their armed forces in the transitional period and their ties in the military sphere."¹⁶ Slightly earlier, Belarus' also signed a number of agreements with other CIS states, in particular with Ukraine. In December 1992, both republics signed an agreement concerning the training of one another's cadets and officers at each other's military schools and academies.¹⁷

As implied earlier, the whole process of Belarussian-Russian integration has been given a sharp boost, certainly from a Belarussian point of view, with the election of Aleksandr Lukashenko as the republic's president in the spring of 1994. Both his popularity and power were further enhanced in November 1996, with the adoption of, in effect, a presidential constitution, granting him more power over the republic's SS which, in the eyes of many, has now become no more than a rubber stamp for decisions already taken by the presidential administration.¹⁸

It will come as no surprise to learn that Lukashenko's first visit abroad, as president, was to Moscow in August 1994. Yeltsin paid a return visit to Minsk in early 1995 and, in the official Russian delegation was "Russia's best ever defence minister", Pavel Grachev.¹⁹ There can be little doubt that amongst the topics up for discussion would have been Moscow's and Minsk's planned joint action if NATO announced its plans to

expand into Eastern Europe. On 8th December 1995, Grachev made a follow-up visit to Minsk for two days and held talks with the then Belarussian Defence Minister, General Maltsev: "to discuss the current state of affairs and the prospects for military and military-technological cooperation between the two states, ways of solving outstanding problems."²⁰ Both sides stressed the importance of strengthening relations between Russia and Belarus' and imparting renewed impetus to bilateral military cooperation in the interest of mutual national security. At the close of the visit, Grachev and Maltsev signed a further 20 documents, including a schedule for the withdrawal of Russian command and control facilities from Belarus to be completed by 1996; cooperation between the two Defence Ministries; military aspects of the draft agreement of the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (signed on 15th May 1992); military-technical cooperation; preparation of joint air defence missions (an important indication of where part of the future lay in deepening military cooperation between the two states); training of military personnel; scrapping of military hardware (Belarus' is the only republic of the FSU which has a facility for crushing old tanks), etc.²¹ Thus, on the eve of the signing of the Treaty establishing the Commonwealth of Sovereign States (in effect a new union agreement between Russia and Belarus'), on 2nd April 1996, there was already a significant body of military agreements between the two states. By this stage, as well, the mechanisms were also in force for joint combat duties of the Belarussian and Russian Air Defence Troops. In a subsequent interview of the Commander of Belarussian Air Defence Troops, Lieut-Gen Valeriy Kastenka, the latter stated that: "on 1st April last year [the interview was conducted in April 1997] we started joint combat duty with the forces and means of the Russian Air Defence Troops. Taking part in this from the Russian side are detachments and units of the Moscow air defence area and the air defence army in the northwest of Russia. The combined system protects the borders of Belarus' and the border of Russia in the western direction."²²

The April 1996 Treaty also envisaged both sides adopting a common foreign policy, integration of their country's respective transport and energy systems (particularly beneficial to Belarus', given its existing huge debt to Russia for gas alone of \$1.27 billion²³), synchronisation of economic reform, etc. The Treaty also created a ruling Supreme Council, including both heads of state and government, an executive committee and a joint parliamentary assembly, modified since to ensure that decisions reached are actually put into effect.²⁴ As Lukashenko put it, "the historical error of 1991" had been put right.²⁵

Further evidence of increased military cooperation between the two states was revealed in May 1996, when a joint session of the Defence Ministry collegiums of the Russian Federation and the republic of Belarus' was held in Moscow on May 14th.²⁶ According to the officially released bulletin of the meeting, the agenda contained "a dozen issues" and the package of documents signed included measures to "ensure the fulfilment of the 2nd April 1996 Treaty on the Establishment of the Union; determine the deadline and the procedure for the elaboration of guidelines for the development of the armed forces of Russia and Belarus'; plan joint functions in operational training and the use of military infrastructure facilities in the interests of ensuring regional security; draft a treaty determining the guidelines for the development of military cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus', and a concept of a concerted military policy; train personnel in the military higher schools of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus'; continue the work on the elaboration of principles for the

establishment and operation of a joint regional air defence system of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus'.²⁷ Within the next year, a lot of these steps were to be put into effect.

Russia then seized the initiative. In January 1997, Yeltsin sent a letter to Lukashenko stressing the need for the fuller implementation of the integration programme and accepted Lukashenko's idea of holding referenda on uniting the two states, after which a common government would be formed.²⁸ Needless to say, referenda were not held, although negotiations did take place concerning the way ahead. On 2nd April 1997, a day which Lukashenko had earlier declared a public holiday in Belarus', a follow-up treaty was signed between the two republics and the Commonwealth became the Union, with a Charter.²⁹ On 22nd May, in Moscow, Lukashenko openly admitted that, in his opinion, both Russia and Belarus' should sign a formal military alliance: "it would be logical to assume that we need a military alliance to guarantee our joint policies."³⁰

Although the Charter falls well short of being a formal military alliance between the two republics, nevertheless it does contain a number of important provisions concerning the security of both member-states. Thus, according to Article 11 of the Charter, signed on 23rd May 1997, in the area of mutual security, the following tasks were agreed upon:

"(a) to take, if necessary, joint measures to avert a threat to the sovereignty and independence of each of the member-states of the Union;

(b) to coordinate the activity of the member-states of the Union, in the field of military development and the development of their armed forces, to jointly use the military infrastructure and to take other measures, with due account of the interests of the member-states of the Union, for maintaining their own defence capability, and the Union's defence capability;

(c) to work out and place a joint defence order and to ensure supplies on its basis and use of arms and armaments and military hardware; to create a joint system of technical support for the armed forces of the member-states of the Union;

(d) to carry out a coordinated frontier policy...;

(e) to combat corruption, terrorism and other crimes."³¹

On 19th December 1997, the Russian Minister of Defence, Marshal Igor Sergeyev visited his opposite number, Col-Gen A P Chumakov, in Minsk on a one-day official visit to Belarus'. The meeting was of more than symbolic value and ended in the formal signing of a Treaty of Military Cooperation between the two states.³² Other than the Treaty, a number of military agreements were signed which, all in all, tie in both military establishments ever closer together. According to Sergeyev, the agreements "allow [us] to plan and carry out a whole range of measures, including operational and military training."³³ For his part, the Belarussian MoD spoke about how he saw "an increase in the military capability of our army only in mutual cooperation with the army of Russia."³⁴ The two men also discussed the passing - by the executive committee of the Union - of the "Concept of a joint defence policy", as well as the need

to create a joint Collegiate of both ministries of defence, work out programmes for training Belarussian soldiers in Russian military schools, etc.³⁵ In April 1998, the Treaty was sent for formal ratification by the Russian *duma*.³⁶

In discussing the "Concept of a joint defence policy", the deputy-chief of the Main Administration of Special Programmes, attached to the executive committee of the Union, Maj-Gen Aleksandr Bevzo, stated the following: "Not one state, not one union of states, do Russia or Belarus' consider the opponent...the Union between Russia and Belarus' is attractive in that, by its very essence, it is designed to improve the standard of life of its peoples, [promote] the steady socio-economic development of the member-states which means, in turn, it must have the mechanism to ensure the security of the dynamic development of the economic and social spheres. Namely from these principles do we understand the need to create a common defence space."³⁷

Despite what was discussed and agreed upon, one issue which would appear not to have been touched was the possibility of re-deploying nuclear weapons on Belarussian soil, in the eventuality of such weapons being deployed on the territory of the new NATO members - Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic. Even if this was thought not to be likely in the immediate future, it would be difficult to countenance such restraint on the part of the Belarussian, or Russian, political and military leadership were NATO to expand further in the East - and begin to incorporate ex-Soviet republics - or nuclear weapons were to be deployed on the territory of ex-Soviet republics. Both states simply do not have the conventional military force to counteract any unfriendly large-scale military activities on their western borders. Russia will have to rely on the deterrent value of its nuclear umbrella for quite some time to come - and underneath its protection will also be found Belarus'.

Since the signing of the Treaty in December of last year, further concrete steps in the military sphere have been taken between the two states, not least being the holding of joint command and staff exercises in the Moscow MD in March of this year, led by Moscow MD Commander, Gen Leontiy Kuznetsov, and representatives from the Main Staff of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus³⁸. Interestingly enough, these exercises took place when Russia is in the process of adapting to a new system of operational control of its forces, attaching greater emphasis to the MD as the main element in its operational-strategic command, ie the MD Commander during this so-called "special period", in the interests of defence, has operational control of all types and units of the "power structures" in his MD (Federal Security Service units, Internal Forces units, Border Guards, etc). Thus, it would appear that in the foreseeable future, the Main Staff of the Belarussian Armed Forces, along with the Moscow MD Commander, will move towards a joint command structure of troops in the region.³⁹ This would be a major step towards the further re-integration of both defence forces. Further proof of this was the recent announcement concerning the intention of both states to create a single regional air defence system "ready for action by the year 2000", according to Lieut-Gen V Kastenka. "The main purpose of the single Russian-Belarussian air defence system is to monitor airspace in the western direction, to guard and defend it."⁴⁰ It was also revealed recently that Belarussian PVO Troops have been allowed to hone their skills, so to speak, at the Russian PVO target range at Ashlyuk in Astrakhan *oblast'* and will hold further joint exercises with their opposite numbers from both Russia and Kazakhstan in September of this year.⁴¹ Thus, the process of cooperation between the two countries seems set to become a process of

complete and formal re-integration - especially if NATO continues to expand further eastwards in Europe after 1999, with the inclusion of former Soviet republics. The possibility that both nations may pool their resources and operational commands still further would appear to be borne out by recent remarks made by Lukashenko himself in an address to the Belarussian parliamentary assembly in early May 1998. In the section devoted to foreign and defence policy, he stated that: "the nature of the military-political relations between our countries is predetermined by the communality of fundamental views that our nations share and the necessity of joint defence from potential and real threats. Both our nations spoke as one in relation to the enlargement of NATO and consider it our task to maintain stability in Europe. The Supreme Council of the Union has approved the Concept of a joint defence policy for Belarus' and Russia. Ministers from both countries have signed the Treaty of Military Cooperation and the Agreement on Joint Maintenance of Regional Security in the Military Sphere. Objective reasons have led us to adopt such measures, not least the enlargement of NATO and the desire of certain circles to turn it [NATO] into the dominating system on the European continent...work is also being carried out on a draft defence doctrine for the Union, ensuring the necessary conditions for the creation of regional groups of forces, the defence infrastructure, unifying the security system of both countries."⁴² Lukashenko's remarks have been further underlined by a recent statement made by Maj-Gen A Bevzo. In a statement to *Interfax*, he admitted that both states "will be able to start the formation of a regional army group once the legislatures of the two countries ratify the 1997 agreement on joint provision of regional military security...if a political decision to this effect is made, a common defence area may be set up eventually." He also stated that "the appropriate agencies of the two countries are now taking stock of their military infrastructures and are choosing the sites where joint security systems will be on alert."⁴³

Conclusion

It would now appear that there is now an unstoppable momentum for the two defence forces to become so intertwined that formal re-union between the two becomes a matter of when, rather than if. Joint doctrine, joint defence space, even joint operational command - all these factors seem to be pointing to the inevitable: the creation or, rather, the formal re-unification of the two defence forces to defend both Russia and Belarus' equally. Certainly, as stated earlier, Lukashenko would appear to be very much in favour of a military alliance between the two republics and, no doubt, there are sections within the Russian military who would be delighted to get their old training grounds back in Belarus'. However, as has been the case with other aspects of the Union, Russia seems to approach this whole area with considerably less speed than Belarus' would like, certainly than Lukashenko. Even in Bevzo's last quoted statement above, he was quick to point out that before a regional army group could be set up, the political will has to be there first. Belarus' may be very keen on the idea, but if Russia is not, then formal unification of the two defence forces will not happen.

This has not escaped the attention of Belarussian analysts. In one comment on the process of military integration between the two states, one of their experts wrote: "to what extent does military union with Belarus' or deep integration with it in the military sphere meet the security interests of Russia? On the one hand, this can considerably enhance the position of Russia, for example in terms of air defence and provide an

opportunity to use the airfields, communication facilities and other components of the infrastructure. On the other hand, a long line of close contact between Russia's and NATO's forces will emerge."⁴⁴ In other words, from a Russian point of view, if Belarus' was to remain separate, then this could have a positive effect on NOT encouraging its neighbours to opt for NATO membership in a bid to bolster their own security (after all, if there are no foreign troops in Belarus' why should there be foreign troops in Poland? Similarly, if there is no significant Russian military presence in Belarus', would any of the Baltic republics really need to join NATO?) Having no Russian forces in Belarus' would also assist in ensuring that tension in that part of the world could not easily be raised if the need arose.

Thus, in conclusion, it would appear that, on the surface of things, the process of military cooperation between the two republics is so far advanced that both sets of politicians are being presented with a *fait accompli* but, as long as Russia achieves the security that it requires without formal political unification, there is less chance that full and complete military integration of both defence forces will occur, despite Lukashenko's best attempts. However, this situation could change radically if, after a second wave of NATO enlargement, Russia decided to retaliate more decisively than it has done after the first wave of enlargement. Certainly, the way would be open for Russia to ease its apprehension surrounding military unification and quickly embark on a process that would see a joint unified force protecting the common defence space of both Russia and Belarus'. This could then lead to the re-deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on Belarussian soil - a development which would not be in anyone's long-term interests, but one that would be comprehensible given the poor state of the conventional military force that Russia and Belarus', even as a unified force, would present.

Endnotes

-
1. Ustina Markus, "Belarus' chooses dictatorship", *Transition*, 7/2/1997, 2628; 26.
 2. Ingmar Oldberg, "Sunset over the Swamp - the independence and dependence of Belarus", *European Security*, vol.6, no.3, 110-130; 112.
 3. Stephen R Burant, "Foreign Policy and National Identity: a comparison of Ukraine and Belarus", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.47, no.7, 1125-1144; 1133.
 4. Markus, *ibid.*, 26.
 5. Sovetskaya voennaya entsiklopediya, vol.1, M.1990, p.362-363; 362.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. See the account of the manoeuvres of 1936 in The Russian Outlook, (L.1947) written by Lieut-Gen Sir Gifford Martel, pp. 13-33.
 8. Sovetskaya..., *ibid.*, p.363.

-
9. Ibid.
 10. Ibid., 362-363.
 11. Ibid., 363.
 12. *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 14/1/1997- "v Belorussii novyy ministr oborony."
 13. R A Woff, The Armed Forces of the former Soviet Union, vol.2, L.1996, E2-34.
 14. *Vo slavu Rodiny*, 21/2/1998 - "ratnyy trud veteranov ne vycherknut' iz nashey pamyati."
 15. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), SU/2779 S1/5.
 16. ITAR-TASS, 27/4/1993.
 17. *Vo slavu Rodiny*, 30/1/1993.
 18. M McMahon, "Aleksandr Lukashenko, president of Belarus", *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, vol.13, no.4, December 1997, 129-137; 129.
 19. Woff, ibid., E2-34.
 20. Ibid.
 21. Ibid.
 22. SWB, SU 2900 S1/1, 23/4/1997.
 23. Markus, ibid., 27.
 24. SWB, SU/2577 B/1, 3/4/1996; Markus, ibid., 27.
 25. SWB, SU/2577/D/1, 3/4/1996.
 26. *Military News Bulletin*, no.7, July 1996, (Moscow), p.3.
 27. Ibid.
 28. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 15/1/1997.
 29. *Rossiyskiye Vesti*, 3/4/1997.
 30. FBIS-SOV-97-142, 22/5/1997.
 31. *Military News Bulletin*, no.6, June 1997, p.2
 32. *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 23/12/1997 - "oboronnyy soyuz Rossii i Belorossii ne protivorechit Dogovoru o kollektivnoy bezopasnosti SNG."

-
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. *Rossiyskiye Vesti*, 22/4/1998 - "dogovor o voyennom sotrudnichestve mezhdru Rossiey I Belorussiey napravlen na ratifikatsiyu."
37. *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 24/2/1998 - "Rossiya i Belorussiya: perspektivy oboronogo soyuza."
38. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17/4/1998 - "voyennoye sotrudnichestvo konkretiziruetsya."
39. Ibid.
40. SWB, SU/3204 S1/3, 18/4/1998.
41. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17/4/1998, ibid.
42. Aleksandr Lukashenko, "Soyuz dvukh' - ne zastyvshhee ponyatiye", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8/5/1998.
43. SWB, SU/3239 S1/3, 29/5/1998.
44. A Rozanov, "Belarus'-Rossiya: voenny aspekt integratsii," *Belarus' v mire*, No.4 (7), dekabr' 1997, 14-16; 14. An article published in *Izvestiya* speculated that with close military cooperation with Belarus', the Russian MoD could save up to \$2-\$3 billion in not having to build from scratch a whole new air defence system in Russia's western direction (M Verger, Yu Latynina, Yu Nevezhin, "Kto platit za ob'edineniye", *Izvestiya*, no.7 (24860), 15/1/1997).