

Tools of coercion and control Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus

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Nuclear weapons in Belarus are again on the international agenda, almost thirty years after the last nuclear weapon left the country following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. What do we know of Russian President Vladimir Putin's plans to deploy non-strategic¹ nuclear weapons to its close ally Belarus, and how should we interpret them?

Uncertain deployment

Much remains uncertain regarding the scope, timeline and realisation of the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons to Belarus. President Putin announced the deployment in March 2023, stating that storage facilities in Belarus were to be upgraded to receive the weapons by 1 July the same year, and that the transfer of warheads would be concluded quickly thereafter. Later statements adjusted the timeline, so that deployment would be initiated at the end of the summer and completed before the end of 2023.

By August 2023, U.S. and Ukrainian intelligence had indicated that, however without presenting supportive evidence, nuclear weapons had arrived in Belarus. Belarusian oppositional networks monitoring railroad traffic have made similar observations. However, other indicators suggest that limited storage capacity in Belarus may limit the speed and quantity of the deployment. In *June 2023*, researchers who follow the Russian nuclear complex used satellite imagery to point to Belarus's insufficiently upgraded storage facilities for hosting nuclear warheads.

Two Belarusian weapon systems would likely be relevant for nuclear missions: the surface-to-surface ballistic missile system, Iskander-M (ss-26), with a range of up to 500 km, and the Soviet-era ground-attack aircraft Su-25 (Frogfoot). Belarus received the first Russian-made Iskander-M systems in December 2022 and it is unclear how many will be delivered in total. However, Belaruski Hajun, an oppositional network monitoring military activity in the country, assessed in early September 2023 that Belarus possessed at least six Iskander-M

launchers, or equal to one and a half battalions. The Belarusian Ministry of Defence has claimed that more are on their way. Russia says it has refitted 10 Belarusian Su-25s to carry nuclear payloads and trained Belarusian pilots accordingly. While neither Putin nor Belarusian leader Aleksandr Lukashenko have specified how many of Russia's estimated 1 800 non-strategic nuclear weapons would be up for transfer, the limited number of likely carriers gives an indication.

Whose weapons?

President Putin has claimed that Russia is undertaking the same arrangement as the U.S. maintains within the NATO nuclear sharing framework. He has also stressed that the deployment to Belarus would not violate Russia's obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Taken together, it indicates that Russia has reinterpreted the Non-Proliferation Treaty and no longer holds nuclear sharing to be in violation of it. However, it is also an example of Russian 'whataboutism', where Russian policy is justified by referencing alleged Western precedents. The comparison to nuclear sharing has been rejected as misleading by Nato.

Irrespective of Lukashenko's claims to the contrary, a forward deployment would not mean that Belarus gains control of Russian nuclear weapons. The decision to cross the nuclear threshold will remain with the Russian president. Moreover, the Russian body responsible for nuclear logistics – the 12th Main Directorate of the Russian Ministry of Defence – would remain responsible for storage and maintenance in Belarus. While the

¹ The division of nuclear weapons into "strategic" and "non-strategic/tactical" systems is far from clear-cut and often misleading. President Putin used the term "tactical" when describing the deployment. In Russian terminology, tactical nuclear weapons often refer to a subset of non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Lukashenko regime claims that Belarus is now able to operate the Iskander-M system independently, an important question is whether Belarusian soldiers would indeed perform a nuclear mission should Russia order it, or if Russian personnel would assume command in such an event. The evolution of the Belarusian Armed Forces towards being something of a subsidiary to the Russian Armed Forces, specialised in logistics and territorial defence, could point to the latter.

Tools of coercion and control

The military gain of deploying Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons to Belarus is limited. It could provide some redundancy for Russia, somewhat shorten adversaries' warning times, and put major Ukrainian cities in range from Belarus, something that Kyiv must take into consideration. It is not, however, a game changer. Many of these targets are already in reach from nuclear systems deployed in Russia. Moreover, Russia can deploy nuclear-capable weapon systems to Belarus with ease and speed, as demonstrated during the war. Repeating this would be easier than equipping and training the Belarusian Armed Forces. Additionally, the old Su-25 aircraft would likely be ineffective when faced with modern air-defence systems.

The announced deployment foremost serves a political purpose. It is part of Russia's wartime nuclear intimidation campaign against the West. There is a hierarchy of threats, ranging from a relatively measured rhetoric from President Putin to outright calls for nuclear strikes from key propagandists. By recurrently raising the spectre of nuclear escalation in Ukraine, Moscow aims to coerce Western leaders and electorates to cease support of Ukraine. However, if realised, the deployment suggests an escalation of Russia's intimidation campaign. It would be the first time during the war that such statements are accompanied by a significant change in Russia's nuclear posture.

The deployment is also about Russian control of Belarus. By relocating its nuclear weapons to Belarus, Moscow would demonstrate that it will not let go of the country, which during the war has fallen further under Russia's sway. Although framed as a response to Belarusian demands, the deployment is driven by Moscow's priorities. In fact, the decision was likely foreseen in the drafting of the new Belarusian constitution, initiated after the 2020 public protests. The new constitution removed the nuclear-weapons-free status that Belarus declared in the 1990s.

But the Lukashenko regime may yet see benefits. It has long sought the subsidised transfer of advanced Russian weapons systems, now seemingly realised through the delivery of the Iskander-M system and the long-range air-defence system, S-400 (SA-21). Hosting Russian warheads would also lend more credibility to Russia's extended nuclear deterrence to cover Belarus, something the Belarusian regime might seek as tensions with the West rise.

So what?

The announced deployment of nuclear weapons to Belarus appears primarily political, with limited military gains. It serves a political purpose even if left unimplemented. It is about raising the stakes in Russia's nuclear sabbat-rattling and coercing the West to stop its support to Ukraine. Looking forward, Russia may seek to use any nuclear footprint in Belarus as a bargaining chip in potential peace talks or arms-control negotiations. But the deployment is also about controlling Belarus, the only former Soviet republic that has not sought to use Russia's war against Ukraine to increase its independence vis-à-vis Moscow. It makes it even harder for Minsk to pursue another foreign policy, should it seek to do so in the future. The possible benefits to Minsk come at the price of lost sovereignty. Importantly, the deployment would lock Belarus even tighter to Russia's confrontation with the West and its war against Ukraine. ■

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This briefing expands on the chapter "*Shifting Balances: the war and Russia's neighbours*" in the recent FOI report *Russia's War against Ukraine and the West: The First Year*. The entire report may be obtained from www.foi.se or via the following QR code:

