

Poland to Host US Military Bases on Its Territory, Intrigue to Provoke Russia and Break Russia-Belarus Relationship

It might sound counterintuitive at first listen, but Poland's proposed hosting of a permanent American base is partially designed to aggravate Russian-Belarusian relations.

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Featured image: A U.S. Army infantryman waits atop an M2 Bradley fighting vehicle for the start of a live fire training exercise at Presidenski Range in Trzebian, Poland, March 26, 2018. (Spc. Dustin Biven/Army)

Poland made the news this week for all the wrong reasons because of its offer to pay between \$1,5-2 billion to [host a permanent American base](#) on its territory. It's difficult to explain this as anything other than what it looks like, which is a vassal paying tribute to its lord, but there might be another reason behind this move as well. As counterintuitive as it may sound at first listen, this plan is also partially designed to aggravate Russian-Belarusian relations by provoking Moscow into putting heavy pressure on Minsk to coordinate a joint response, ideally one that the Kremlin would like to see result in the revival of the two CSTO mutual defense partners' [failed talks](#) from a few years back to host a Russian airbase in the frontline state.

Behind-The-Scenes Intrigue Of Russian-Belarusian Relations

Those negotiations fell through for publicly unexplainable reasons that probably in hindsight have to do with Lukashenko's ambition to "balance" between East and West, a thin tightrope that he's been trying to walk for the past couple of years ever since the 2014 success of the US-backed urban terrorism spree commonly referred to as "EuroMaidan" in neighboring Ukraine. Since then, Belarus has become a lot bolder in asserting its interests vis-à-vis Russia, betting that it's now become "too important to lose" for Moscow to continue "playing games with" at what its leadership believes to be at the expense of their independent national interests. Whether it's over the failed talks to host a Russian airbase or continual trade disputes within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAU), Russian-Belarusian ties aren't as perfect as their governments make them seem.

Having recognized this "inconvenient fact", they're also nowhere close to horrible either, and Belarus is one of Russia's actual allies in the sense of being doubly incorporated into two Moscow-led integration organizations, the CSTO and the EAU. This makes it obligatory, from an institutional-legal standpoint, for Belarus to support its Russian partner, though therein lies the core of their never-ending disagreements and Lukashenko's power "balancing", as he refuses to - as he sees it - "submit" to whatever the Kremlin tells him

and instead is trying to gradually “diversify” his foreign policy by “opening up” to the West. It’s this ongoing transitional phase, coupled with the one-man leadership in Minsk, which makes Russian-Belarusian ties so sensitive because it means that Moscow’s junior partner is less prone to “do what he’s told” than before.

Setting The Trap

Reverting back to the lead-in topic at hand, Poland’s plans to permanently host a US base on its territory are a military-strategic provocation for Russia, and accordingly, should also be interpreted as such for the CSTO and its westernmost Belarusian member, too. The problem, though, is that Minsk – for whatever its public statements on the topic may be – probably doesn’t really see it that way because of the presumed series of “gentlemen’s agreements” that it’s reached with its newfound “Western partners”, which is why its Foreign Ministry said that [it is not discussing](#) the opening of a new Russian military base within its borders. It did, however, ambiguously leave this possibility open in the event that the US base is indeed built, but this might just be a “face-saving” signal of “friendship” to Russia than any serious intention.

That said, the “knee-jerk” reaction that one would expect from Russia would be for it to utilize its CSTO mutual defense alliance with Belarus in doing exactly what Minsk said it’s not interested in, which is open up a base in the Polish-neighboring country just like it unsuccessfully tried to do a few years ago, and it’s precisely this scenario that Poland is counting on for several reasons. The first is that Warsaw knows that this move would reverse all of Minsk’s “progress” with its “Western partners” and make the country more strategically dependent on Moscow, which is something that Lukashenko is trying to avoid and actually explains why he undertook this “[gradual pivot](#)” to begin with. Secondly, the concerted but clumsy exertion of Russian pressure on Belarus would likely have the opposite effect of what Moscow expects and could inadvertently advance Minsk’s strategic reorientation.

Although it’s sometimes misleading to evaluate global affairs from a “zero-sum” perspective, in this instance it can be instructive if one takes stock of the situation in the former Soviet Union and concludes that Russia has “lost” Georgia, Ukraine, and recently, [Armenia](#), with Belarus potentially “up for grabs” depending whether Russia’s response to the potential US base in Poland leads to it uncomfortably pressuring its ally to roll back its “Western pivot” out of the organizational solidarity that it’s obliged to practice. Chances are that Lukashenko would balk at this because he’s already concluded that his and his nation’s interests are best served through “balancing”, which is ironic because he’s essentially trying to “balance” the country that [envisions its 21st-century geostrategic role](#) as being the supreme “balancing” force in Eurasia, but such are the curiosities of international politics at times.

Concluding Thoughts

Right now it’s much too early to make any firm prognosis about the future of Russian-Belarusian relations in light of Poland’s plans to permanently host a US military base on its territory, but what can be understood at this moment is that ties aren’t as perfect as they may initially appear to be, though nor are they anywhere near as bad as their most diehard critics make them out to be either. In any case, it’s obvious that their relationship will be tested as Russia works out what it hopes will be a joint response together with its Belarusian

CSTO military ally, but there's no telling whether Lukashenko will agree to whatever President Putin proposes given his recent predisposition for exploiting his country's geography in order to "balance" East and West for ultimate gain.

Russia will have to proceed very cautiously and be aware of the strategic trap that Poland has set for it in trying to make Moscow overreact and unintentionally chase away one of its last remaining post-Soviet allies. While the "knee-jerk" reaction to the provocative US-Polish move would be to reciprocate by opening up a Russian base in neighboring Belarus, decision makers should reflect on whether this is the wisest option in a practical sense, as it would risk straining the bilateral relationship with Minsk given the likelihood of Lukashenko rejecting it.

Instead of going for a symbolic and highly publicized move that would play to the expectations of the global media and Moscow's intended international audiences, it might be better to do away with the "muscle-flexing" and instead calmly announce that the new Kinzhal hypersonic missiles already deployed within the country's borders will be aimed at this enemy base. This revolutionary technology is capable of more than making up for any perceived advantages that would derive from a base in Belarus because this munition could be shot at any adversary at a moment's notice and strike it sooner than anything else could. It would of course be preferred if these weapons could be based in Belarus, but there's nothing preventing them from being placed in Kaliningrad instead and even closer to Poland's borders than expected.

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