



Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing No. 44: Nato Expansion Flashpoint No. 1: The Border between Poland and Belarus

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Executive Summary

The decision to invite Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join NATO creates the prospect of far-reaching, dangerous security obligations for the United States in Eastern Europe. Part of NATO's expanded defensive perimeter will lie along the border between Poland and Belarus. That should greatly concern all Americans, because Belarus is a political and economic volcano waiting to erupt. The repressive, erratic regime of Alexander Lukashenko and the country's moribund economy provide ideal conditions for the same type of armed chaos that has engulfed such countries as Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Zaire.

If Belarus explodes, Poland is going to expect help from its NATO allies to contain the effects and protect Polish security. At the very least, that would mean a Bosnia-style morass for NATO. Even worse, Belarus is Russia's last remaining security ally in Eastern Europe, and the two countries are closely linked politically and militarily by a treaty approved in the spring of 1997. A NATO military presence along the Polish-Belarusian border, much less any attempted coercion of Belarus by NATO, risks a collision with a nuclear-armed Russia. The dangerous situation in Belarus is one reason among many why the U.S. Senate should reject the proposal to expand NATO.

Introduction

Leaders of the 16 NATO powers have made the momentous decision to invite Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join the alliance. According to the proponents of enlargement, that step is a low-cost, low-risk initiative to reduce tensions, promote stability, and improve the security environment throughout Europe. The reality is quite different. If NATO moves eastward, the United States and the other current members of NATO will be undertaking new and potentially far-reaching security obligations. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty declares that an attack on one member is an attack on all and obligates signatories to assist the victim. No amount of "feel good" rhetoric about enlargement's being useful in encouraging stability and fostering democracy should be allowed to disguise the reality that NATO is first and foremost a military alliance.

Moreover, Article 5 obligates signatories to help repel a threat to the territorial integrity of an alliance member from any source--not just an expansionist great power that might threaten to dominate all of Europe. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott tacitly acknowledged that point during a Voice of America interview. "If there were to be instability and conflict of any kind, whatever the origin of it, in Central or Eastern Europe, it would be a threat to the Continent as a whole." In that regard, it should be noted that one portion of NATO's expanded security frontier will be the border between Poland and Belarus. That is especially worrisome since Belarus is a political and economic volcano waiting to explode.

There is little evidence that NATO leaders have thought about the problems that may arise, given Belarus's unstable domestic political situation, its horrendous economy, the unpredictable behavior of President Alexander Lukashenko, and the recent movement of Russia and Belarus toward greater political and military integration. Such factors should be carefully examined before the legislatures of the existing NATO members vote to expand the alliance.

While foreign policy analysts have addressed ethnic conflicts and border disputes as possible destabilizing factors in such places as Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Ukraine, few have drawn attention to the extremely unstable situation in Belarus, Poland's eastern neighbor. Given Poland's desire to join the "old NATO," in which Article 5 plays a central role, U.S. senators and West European parliamentarians should carefully consider a contingency in which NATO would be called upon to contain a Bosnia-style situation on Poland's frontier.

Russia's movement toward integration with Belarus has dramatically raised the stakes of any NATO action involving Poland and Belarus. Although a closer relationship between an evolving democratic Russia and a retrograde authoritarian Belarus would appear counterproductive for Russia, NATO's eastward expansion has caused the Russians to pursue such an alliance, which, although undesirable in several respects, offers clear strategic advantages. Thus NATO's expansion threatens to create a new and potentially very dangerous division of Europe along the Polish-Belarusian border.

Polish Worries and Objectives

Recent opinion polls of attitudes toward NATO expansion in Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic indicate that only the Polish population overwhelmingly supports joining NATO; the Czech and Hungarian citizens are largely ambivalent. While that result is partly attributable to the Polish government's intense campaign for membership, it is also a reflection of the public's beliefs (1) that their country's security is tenuous and (2) that NATO can and will guarantee Poland's security. The disparity in attitudes between Poland and its neighbors would seem to arise from the vastly different security scenarios that face the three countries: Hungary and the Czech Republic do not perceive the kind of looming threat that confronts Poland on its eastern border.

Polish officials are not only uneasy about the political and economic instability in Belarus, they are deeply concerned about the growing ties between Moscow and Minsk. The comments of Poland's deputy minister of defense, Andrzej Karkoszka, are typical. Citing statements by Russian officials that they considered Belarus's borders nonexistent, Karkoszka noted that such a policy means that Poland's defensive frontier "is no longer hundreds of kilometers from Russia, but right next to us. If the political situation in Russia deteriorates, we are at risk."

The most probable danger that Poland faces is not that Belarus might launch a military invasion (with or without Russian instigation) but that political upheaval or economic chaos in Belarus might produce turmoil that would spill over the Belarusian-Polish border. At the very least, those developments would cause massive refugee flows. Moreover, civil strife in Belarus could easily lead to armed incidents with its western neighbor, and Poland would understandably expect protection from its new NATO allies. In the event of such a containment operation, NATO would need to station sizable forces for an extended period along the Polish-Belarusian border. The political connection between Russia and Belarus complicates matters further. While the Founding Act, signed in May 1997 by President Clinton and Russian president Boris Yeltsin, anticipates occasional security contingencies and provides for "reinforcement . . . , when necessary, in the event of defense against a threat of aggression and missions in support of peace," it is unclear what magnitude of troop deployments and military infrastructure development Moscow would tolerate. Moreover, in the event that NATO and Russia find themselves confronting the need for a nation "rebuilding" mission in Belarus--similar to the ongoing effort in Bosnia--how might Washington react if Moscow attempts to absorb Belarus, citing the May 1997 Union Treaty between the two countries as a legal foundation?

Political Tensions and Economic Chaos in Belarus

Concerns about the stability of Belarus are not merely academic. After winning a sham November 24, 1996, referendum to adopt a new constitution, President Lukashenko has consolidated his power and suppressed attempts by parliament to remove him. Claiming a mandate for a new constitution that gives him nearly unlimited power, Lukashenko used the militia to replace parliament with a group more to his liking. The new constitution extends his term to 2001, gives him control of key judgeships and political positions, and grants him lifelong immunity from

prosecution. Opposition newspapers have been outlawed, although some continue to be printed in small quantities in Lithuania.

Despite the crackdown, a vocal nationalist faction, the Belarusian Popular Front, continues to oppose the president. After 10,000 demonstrators affiliated with the BPF protested in downtown Minsk on March 15, 1997, several of its leaders were arrested. Western pro-democracy groups, such as the Soros Foundation, have also felt Lukashenko's wrath. According to Peter Byrne, who until recently headed the Soros Foundation office in Minsk, "What we have witnessed is the consolidation of a dictatorship." The U.S. Department of State contends that the situation has deteriorated to the point that it is "impossible to refer to what is left in Belarus as a democracy." On March 21, the Clinton administration suspended a \$40 million aid program, initially designed to help implement disarmament under the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, because of the Lukashenko regime's failure to respect human rights.

The current political atmosphere in Belarus is extremely volatile. The three most vocal opposition parties, the BPF, the Party of Communists (an anti-Russian, communist splinter group), and the Belarusian Labor Party, all are categorically opposed to cooperation with the Lukashenko government. They also refuse to recognize the current constitution and parliament, maintaining instead that the 1994 constitution and the legitimately elected 13th Supreme Soviet, dissolved by Lukashenko, remain the governing authorities.

With the exception of Russia, no state has recognized the legitimacy of the Lukashenko regime's power grab. Recent attempts by the Council of Europe to mediate talks between Lukashenko and members of the ousted parliament bore no fruit, since Lukashenko refuses to depart from the framework of his new constitution, while opposition leaders maintain that they are still the legitimate representatives of the people. The government refuses to hold parliamentary elections "any time soon" and has taken steps to muzzle the opposition.

Lukashenko's new puppet parliament recently passed a law on demonstrations that provides up to two years of correctional labor or prison for "violations of the authorized course of the protest action." Fines will also be assessed for "emblems, symbols, and posters whose content is intended to harm the state and public order." A Belarusian court has already fined (retroactively) former lawmaker Hendadz Karpenko some \$720 for organizing the aforementioned March protest in Minsk. In short, Lukashenko will probably continue to rule by force, or the opposition coalition will stage its own coup. No peaceful resolution to the stalemate is in sight.

Not only did Lukashenko's power grab come straight from the Marxist-Leninist playbook, his economic views are similarly anachronistic. The former collective-farm manager expresses strong approval of state ownership and in general believes the Soviet economy functioned well:

- They call me a communist and a socialist but what I think is this: We had a country, albeit a ramshackle one. . . . Why did we begin to tear the economy apart, sell it off, "restructure" it? Why? State ownership existed. We could have disposed of the inefficient enterprises which were not all that important to the people and which functioned badly within the framework of state ownership.

Perhaps even more disturbing than Lukashenko's respect for the Soviet economic system is his inability to recognize the problems plaguing the Belarusian economy today:

- People criticize us: "They have 80 percent in state ownership." I do not know how much state ownership we have; this does not interest me. What interests me is the efficiency of this or that enterprise. If they have profit and profitability, people are paid their wages on time--fine! There can be no question of wholesale privatization and sale into [private] ownership.

Lukashenko's Soviet-era economic policies have led Belarus into economic ruin. By continuing to finance the deficit through direct credits from the central bank, the administration has sent inflation through the roof. Belarus's inflation topped 152 percent in 1996, compared to Russia's rate of 22 percent. Accordingly, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have suspended all loans to Belarus. Anders Aslund, a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, characterizes Belarus, in relation to Russia, as a "province of 10 million people in a total economic mess."

Lukashenko desires greater integration with Russia as a first step on the road to economic recovery. He also yearns to restore the importance Belarus enjoyed within the Soviet economy, when it functioned as the machine shop of the union, transforming raw materials into tractors and other high-value-added products. In that era Belarus enjoyed a high standard of living relative to the other Soviet republics. Lukashenko hopes that restoring old ties--especially the flow of cheap oil and gas from Russia--will resuscitate the economy: "The resources came from Russia, were processed in Belarus, and it was not the raw materials that were sold, but finished goods which were dispatched to the West. And that is how we earned foreign currency. That made sense,. . . didn't it?"

Not surprisingly, then, Lukashenko expressed dismay at Russia's last-minute decision (under pressure from the IMF) to scale back plans for economic integration with Belarus in early 1997. He now calls for a "military-political alliance" while hoping for eventual "synchronization of [economic] reforms."

The Russian-Belarusian Agreement

Although most Western advocates of NATO expansion dismiss the treaty between Moscow and Minsk as a hollow document because of the evisceration of the economic and monetary provisions by liberal Yeltsin aides, they forget that both countries still stand behind the political and military provisions. Paul Goble, deputy director of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty notes, "Lukashenko has described the union between his country and Russia as the necessary response to NATO expansion." Goble states the obvious, that "this kind of talk makes the countries neighboring Belarus--the Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine--all the more nervous."

Top Russian leaders affirm that the security provisions, as yet somewhat inchoate, will form the basis for extensive military integration. The provisions that have thus far been made public--and there are continuing rumors that the accord contains secret provisions--emphasize general security cooperation and joint border patrols. From Moscow's perspective, Belarus is, at the very least, a security buffer between an expanded NATO and Russia. That is a point emphasized by Russian leaders across the political spectrum. Former Duma member Oleg Rumyantsev asserted in the pages of the Moscow Times, "The unification of the two states is entirely justified given the unpardonable expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization." Viktor Ilyukhin, chairman of the Duma's security committee, was even harsher, accusing the Central Intelligence Agency of trying to destabilize Belarus, undermine the Lukashenko government, and torpedo the close cooperation between Moscow and Minsk. The United States was pursuing that course because Belarus does not fit into the NATO project of creating a "sanitary zone sprawling from the Baltic to the Black Sea." Russians remain hypersensitive to any indication that the West seeks to recreate the cordon sanitaire--the bloc of hostile, anti-Russian states in Eastern Europe that the Western powers helped establish and support during the period between the two world wars to isolate the Soviet Union.

With the union agreement, Belarus also becomes a potential forward staging area for Russian forces if relations with NATO deteriorate. There is already extensive communication and cooperation between Russian and Belarusian military leaders, and there have been some joint military exercises. It would not be a huge step for Russia to send military personnel to help Belarus patrol its borders or to seek basing rights for a small number of army or air force units. Such a presence could, of course, be easily expanded in a crisis.

Former Defense Department official Sherman Garnett, now a senior scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, points out that some Russian officials clearly want the Union Treaty "to intimidate Poland, Ukraine, and the Baltic states." He concedes that Russia has not yet redeployed conventional or nuclear forces. "But those would be warning signs to look for. So would the appearance of Russian troops in border patrols on Belarus' border with its neighbors." It is worth recalling that the Union Treaty explicitly authorizes joint border patrols.

The Heritage Foundation's Ariel Cohen and Evguenii Volk are more alarmist about the military implications of the Union Treaty than is Garnett.

- As a result of the treaty with Belarus, Russia's tanks again may be on the borders of Poland, which soon will join NATO, while Russian tactical nuclear weapons may target European capitals from Belarusian soil. Moreover, Russian troops in Belarus may be inserted in a giant bulge into Eastern Europe along the Polish, Ukrainian, and Baltic borders.

One does not have to be as overwrought as Cohen and Volk--much less subscribe to their conclusion that the treaty indicates that "the winds of imperial aggrandizement once again blow from the Kremlin"--to conclude that the union agreement is not simply a mild diplomatic reaction to NATO enlargement. Rather, it constitutes a substantive first step toward an alliance with which both countries hope to counter what they perceive as NATO's encroachment into their security zone.

Lukashenko's desire for closer ties with Russia is motivated in part by his country's fiscal woes. However, NATO expansion has also played a role in forming his desire for a more permanent political-military union. Whereas in March 1995 Lukashenko declared that he did not favor political unification with Russia, he now sees the Union Treaty as the first step toward eventual unification. Faced with the expansion of a powerful military alliance to their borders, the two old allies have turned to each other.

Although Lukashenko's true motives for favoring greater military cooperation with Russia are uncertain, the cost of security requirements is high for a country whose gross domestic product has shrunk 45 percent since the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is unrealistic of advocates of NATO expansion to believe an old-school Communist will willingly reduce armaments and refrain from seeking a protector as a Cold War-era alliance approaches. Because the two countries previously had highly integrated defense systems (for example, the military center Baranovichi, located on Belarusian territory, was to function as the long-range early-warning antiballistic missile facility for the entire Soviet Union), it would be counterintuitive for them not to cooperate. For reasons of both economy and operational efficiency, there is a powerful incentive for military integration.

While the Yeltsin administration backed away, in the short term, from a costly economic integration, a political-military union is backed by diverse elements in the president's cabinet (Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin, Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, and Security Council Secretary I. P. Rybkin) as well as Communists such as Gennadiy Zyuganov and Gennadiy Seleznev. In fact, a majority in the Duma view the treaty as a first step toward eventual unification. (That step, incidentally, would place NATO along a nearly 300-mile stretch of Russia's frontier, with all the potential for misunderstandings and tensions such a situation would entail.) Duma chairman Seleznev promised and delivered a speedy ratification.

Belarus: Moscow's Default Ally

In short, the political class in the Kremlin wants a substantive union, and while the position of the Communists is clear, the motives of Yeltsin's closest advisers are less so. If the administration is truly a liberal one, how can it overlook the human rights abuses, the lack of economic reform, the authoritarian leader, and the absence of an independent constitutional authority in Belarus? The answer would seem to be that, faced with NATO expansion, Moscow is forging closer ties with the only leader of a former Soviet republic in Europe still loyal to Moscow. Whereas Ukraine and the Baltic states are clamoring to get into NATO, Luka-shenko has taken Russia's position. His professed loyalty outweighs his failure to establish a "democratic order."

That point was graphically illustrated by an incident in late July and early August 1997. When three reporters from the Russian television network ORT had the temerity to criticize Lukashenko's treatment of political dissidents, the Belarusian dictator had them jailed on espionage charges. His government subsequently arrested and fined 15 Russian and Western reporters who protested the plight of their colleagues. Yeltsin initially reacted strongly, at one point even threatening to cancel the Union Treaty. When Lukashenko remained adamant, however, the Russian president quickly caved, minimizing the incident and jocularly calling his counterpart "young, quick-tempered and not as good at sweating criticism as I am." More revealing, Yeltsin stated explicitly that the arrest of the Russian journalists "will not affect our cooperation and relations."

Moreover, Moscow probably senses that Lukashenko's unpredictable nature may be a future source of trouble and seeks to contain any instability by having a hand in governing the region. Insuring stability in Russia's western neighbor is vitally important to Moscow's immediate economic security. Russian oil and gas, the largest sources of the Russian state's hard currency revenues, flow to Western Europe through Belarus. The strategic value of those pipelines has increased dramatically in recent years as Russia's ability to control the Caspian oil reserves has diminished. The 12-partner, 40 percent American-owned Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AICO) currently favors pipeline

routes that would bypass Russia altogether. Options include a route through Azerbaijan and Georgia to the Black Sea port of Supsa and a route to Turkey's big Mediterranean oil port at Ceyhan.

Regardless of which route the AIOC eventually chooses, the new pipeline will be the first export route for ex-Soviet oil not under Russian control. While the Russian giant petroleum firm Lukoil has a 10 percent stake in AIOC, Moscow realizes that it no longer calls the shots in the region, leading Prime Minister Chernomyrdin to complain that foreign oil companies were undermining the "energy security" of Russia and other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In view of the economic importance to Russia of Belarus's pipelines alone, the Kremlin is willing to overlook those aspects of the Lukashenko administration, such as his disturbing attitude toward human rights and the rule of law, which make him unsavory to Western palates.

That Kremlin officials seek an alliance with Belarus despite the numerous human rights abuses must baffle Western observers. But for all Russian officials, other than the most liberal members of Grigory Yavlinsky's Yabloko faction, the decision is clear: a strategic alliance with a loyal neighbor outweighs human rights concerns, particularly when other neighboring states are rushing to join an encroaching military alliance.

Lukashenko and unreconstructed Russian Communists and nationalists openly speak of restoring a Soviet-type union based on a "Slavic nucleus," which "will be followed by Muslim and other peoples." The contrast with the attitude of Moscow's other neighbors is striking. Even Ukrainian officials seek no renewed "Slavic brotherhood." Instead, they have pursued a strategy of steadily drawing closer to NATO. Since June 1995, Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma and minister for foreign affairs Hennadiy Udovenko have advocated ever closer relations with the North Atlantic Alliance. On May 29, 1997, they initialed a special Ukraine-NATO charter to institutionalize that relationship.

Such actions have not gone unnoticed in Moscow. Seleznev, who leads the ruling Communist bloc in the Duma, has warned that the Founding Act between Russia and NATO would be put at risk: "If some of our former union republics, including the Baltic countries, start to strive toward joining NATO at all costs, then we will be ready to review the provisions of the agreement which is now being signed. . . . And if things go too far then I would not exclude the possibility that the deputies themselves will pose the question of its annulment."

If Ukraine or the Baltic states eventually join the alliance, the entire Founding Act, which advocates of NATO expansion hope has mollified Russia, may shatter. As NATO moves east, Moscow, with no hope of retaining the loyalty of its other erstwhile European satellites, sees an alliance with Belarus as an important insurance policy. Russian policymakers have taken that step even knowing that they have alienated other CIS leaders, such as Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev, who feel slighted and believe any such military integration should occur multilaterally, within the established political framework of the CIS.

Kremlin officials are also concerned about guaranteeing the security of Kaliningrad, the Russian province on the Baltic between Poland and Lithuania. I. P. Rybkin, secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council, has stated, "Those who treat hardships and problems currently experienced by our state as impotence in the face of military threat are wrong. . . . NATO's military domination in this region and the reduction of the zone of the Baltic Fleet's operation is inadmissible." Rybkin and others have repeatedly stressed Russia's plans to build up its military presence in the region. According to Rybkin, Russia currently "hardly uses a quarter" of the quotas set by the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty's flank restrictions. Lieutenant General Yevgeniy Bolkhovitin, commander of the Kaliningrad Group of the Russian Border Troops, expressed his fears regarding the enclave's southern border with Poland: "We will strengthen this portion of the border with powerful mobile units. I am surprised at Poland's position: they suggest we set up a 'transparent' border, but in fact they are concentrating their troops, increasing their strength, and modernizing them." It is worth noting that the quickest, most direct land route from the Russian heartland to Kaliningrad runs through Belarus.

The extent of Moscow's cooperation with Minsk may be heavily influenced by IMF managing director Michel Camdessus. Since IMF loans are viewed by Moscow as essential to Yeltsin's austerity program, the Russian president may be ultimately captive to the IMF and his close circle of liberal advisers, who will in all likelihood succeed in keeping Yeltsin from undertaking such grandiose plans as economic unification with Belarus. However, both the Yeltsin administration and a majority in the Duma possess the political will to abide by the treaty's military measures.

Through the treaty, Russia will be able to expand and dominate military operations on Belarusian territory, thereby creating new implications for any future NATO commitments to and presence in Poland.

The Powder Keg on the Polish-Belarusian Border

Admitting Poland to NATO involves two related dangers. One is that Poland's highly unstable neighbor may suffer the fate of other states with repressive political systems and moribund economies: a violent convulsion. We have witnessed that development in such places as Somalia, Yugoslavia, Liberia, Afghanistan, Georgia, and Zaire. It should be noted that, in every case, the chaos created serious problems for neighboring states. If fighting erupted in Belarus--and the ingredients are all in place for a conflagration--it is highly unlikely that Poland would remain unaffected.

Yet there would be multiple risks to NATO if it took action to stabilize its new member's eastern border. In addition to the prospect of being sucked into a Bosnia-style morass, there would be the danger of a confrontation with Russia. Belarus is a weakened Russia's last strategic ally in Europe. Russian leaders would undoubtedly be alarmed by any NATO military initiatives involving Belarus, whether those actions were for the purpose of containment or the more ambitious objective of nation building.

Moscow's reluctant acquiescence in the first round of NATO enlargement was conditioned on what Russian officials considered solemn promises in the Founding Act. One crucial provision states that NATO "reiterates that in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its collective defense and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces." Moscow might well view the deployment of NATO troops in eastern Poland to deal with instability in Belarus as a violation of that pledge. Yet if the alliance failed to act, Poland (and the other new members) would have reason to question the credibility of the security commitments they had been given.

Even the possibility of the United States' becoming entangled in a political and military quagmire on the frontier between Poland and Belarus should be ample reason for the Senate to reject the administration's plan to enlarge NATO. The danger that such a development could result in a confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia reinforces that point. If expansion is approved, the United States risks being blindsided by a conflict that advocates of NATO enlargement never anticipated and that would have no relevance to the security interests of the American people.