

FOREIGN POLICY AND SECURITY STUDIES

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DEFENCE SYSTEMS IN LITHUANIA AND BELARUS: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

SINCE GAINING STATE INDEPENDENCE, the paths taken by Belarus and Lithuania have essentially diverged, among other things, in the field of security and defence. The Republic of Lithuania took its decision on membership in the European and trans-Atlantic institutions without delay and began implementing the required reforms in order to become a fully-fledged NATO and EU member. Belarus, in the meantime, chose to integrate with Russia, a step that led to its return to the old policy of containment, which in general determines the trend in the reform of its military forces.

The article studies the trajectory of approaches to security and defence in Belarus and Lithuania since the two countries obtained independence, and attempts to offer a comparative analysis of the two neighbouring states' defence systems.

Lithuania. The Dimensions of the Military Reforms

The military reforms in Lithuania have gone through several stages. The first stage was characterised by creation of military forces from the ground level, when the Lithuanian Voluntary Defence Forces and former Soviet officers formed the core of the Lithuanian Army. At this stage, defence planning was rather eclectic. The main priorities of the defence policy at the time were laying the foundations for democratic control and de-politicising the military (A Brief History of the Restoration...).

In 1994, Lithuania officially applied to NATO. The same year, the country joined the new NATO programme Partnership for Peace, which had been launched in order to help the new independent states with their military reforms and increase operational compatibility between their armies and NATO forces. In 1996, Lithuania sent its troops to Bosnia and Herzegovina under the colours of the Alliance (Establishing Modern Army).

The same year, Lithuania passed the Law on the Fundamentals of National Security, which outlined the purposes of national security and basic principles of military defence. The Law on the Fundamentals of National

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Security stated that the concepts of all-embracing and unconditional self-defence and civil resistance were the guidelines for defence planning. The concepts determined a threat-assessment approach to planning. In other words, the Lithuanian military forces and society were supposed to be prepared for a worst-case scenario, i.e. a large-scale territorial aggression on Lithuania and its sovereignty. In the circumstances when NATO membership was a matter of the distant future and the situation in the neighbouring countries which could have an impact on the national security was far from stable or predictable, such an approach was viewed as the most adequate (Paulauskas: 126–127).

In 1999, the first round of NATO enlargement since the collapse of the USSR took place and the Membership Action Plan (MAP) concerning the next candidates, including Lithuania, was adopted. It provided an impetus for a considerable change in the planning principles. Although all-embracing self-defence and civil resistance still remained the central core of defence planning, NATO's recommendations were a factor in a gradual reform of the defence policy.

The prospective NATO membership and the related guaranty of collective defence made the necessity of threat-based approach to planning not so apparent. For this reason, the Lithuanian leadership had to shift to a capabilities-based approach to defence planning in order to use limited resources in the most effective way. In practice, this meant concentrating on clearly defined top priorities, instead of developing the whole spectrum of military forces (Heinemann-Gruder, 2002b: 20).

In the end, a number of significant international events, such as 9/11, a rapprochement between Russia and the USA, the 2002 transformative NATO summit in Prague and an invitation to join NATO resulted in another important change in Lithuanian defence planning.

After the National Security Strategy was adopted in 2002 (National Security Strategy, 2002), Lithuania continued revising its National Defence Strategy. Approved in 2004, it reassessed threats to security and the strategic context in which Lithuania found itself. Basing on the threat assessment, the strategy determined the missions and purposes of the Lithuanian military forces.

Alongside the revision of the defence strategy, the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence, assisted by an American group of experts, initiated a reform of the structure of the military forces and adopted a scenario-based approach to planning (Lithuania's Security and Foreign Policy Strategy).

This approach is essentially about determining the most likely scenarios of threat development and facilities required to eliminate the threats. Once the necessary forces have been established, the next step is to find out their most serious shortcomings so that further defence planning is aimed at doing away with them as much as possible (Paulauskas: 130).

Thus, the invitation to join NATO, the reassessment of threats and the new approach to defence planning enabled Lithuania to give up soon the concept of territorial defence which the country had adhered to ever since restoring its independence. The shift facilitated reorganisation of the military forces so that they could accomplish new missions.

Collective Defence instead of All-Embracing Self-Defence

The guaranty of collective defence accounts for the significant change in the Lithuanian defence policy before and after the 2002 NATO summit in Prague. The principle of collective defence, provided for in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, lies in a collective repulse of an external invasion on a NATO member by joint forces of all the Treaty.

Considering the new reality, Lithuania has revised its concept of all-embracing and unconditional self-defence which was at the core of the containment strategy. At present, in case of aggression, the mission of the national military forces would be to strengthen NATO collective defence operations, rather than just defend the country's territory.

Proceeding from these assumptions, territorial units were supposed to be reorganised, the number of reserve forces was going to be reduced and the concept of general conscription was to be reconsidered. The reform was grounded on quite an obvious presumption that Lithuania with its limited resources would not be able to take an active part in most of NATO operations, at the same time maintaining numerous forces of territorial defence that lacked mobility. For this reason, Lithuania chose to stake on deeper specialisation within NATO and to withdraw from territorial defence (Heinemann-Gruder, 2002b: 28).

A Change in the Nature of Threats and New Functions of the Military

In the 20th century, the main purpose of military forces was about containment and territorial defence against potential invaders. When the "cold war" was over and the USSR split up, the nature of threats to security changed radically. At present, the most significant threats come from non-state actors, rather than foreign armies. The former make use of unconventional methods of waging war, which makes traditional containment measures inefficient. These actors do not pose a threat to a country's territorial integrity, but target unprotected civil buildings and infrastructure and civilians. That is why prevention has become actually the only method to combat non-state actors and regimes that support terrorists.

The change in the nature of threats did not only result in the transformation of the strategic situation in the region, but also contributed to a shift in the purposes of the military, i.e. defence of the national territory gave way

to defence of public buildings and infrastructure as well as police missions. Now, the military had to learn how to respond to crises and take part in peacekeeping operations.

This kind of transformation requires that the army should be prepared for a number of new activities. Firstly, inside the country, they need to co-operate closely with civil authorities and the police in case of terrorist attacks and other emergencies that might require the military forces to interfere. Secondly, the army is supposed to learn how to take part in crisis-response operations, within multinational missions. And thirdly, in peacekeeping operations they should be able to co-operate effectively with the local civil society whose members can often be hostile to the peacekeeping forces (Paulauskas: 133).

How the Lithuanian Military Forces Got Adapted to the New Situation

For the above reasons, in its new military doctrine, which was adopted in 2004, the following principles laid the foundations for military planning in Lithuania:

- absence of threat of a military attack;
- a large-scale conflict in the Baltic region is bound to be preceded by a long escalation period;
- Lithuania will not have to defend its territory alone;
- NATO crisis-response forces are deployed in 15 days;
- there is no need for universal military forces;
- threats must be combated where they emerge (The Military Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania).

The whole Lithuanian strategic concept was changed, too. Until 2004, it was based on containment and territorial defence, whereas the principles of collective defence and specialisation of the military forces made the foundation of the new 2004 document. In addition, the new Defence Strategy outlined the basic principles and purposes of the military reform in Lithuania. The most important of them are as follows:

- to further develop the capability and improve the quality of the military forces instead of creating new territorial structures and raising their numbers;
- to create smaller but more mobile units that can be deployed faster;
- to achieve higher standards for collective defence and other joint missions with NATO forces;
- to keep defence plans in balance with the existing resources (Ibid.).

These principles provided a base for the development of the Lithuanian army reform plan, which included the following:

- a response brigade (including the HQ, two mechanised infantry battalions, two motorised infantry battalions and an artillery battalion) was going to be created by 2008;
- a deployable and supportable infantry battalion (Rookla battalion) was going to be created for the whole spectrum of NATO missions;
- territorial units were going to be freed from territorial defence tasks;
- a flexible logistic system was going to be created; it should be able to support any operation within the country or abroad;
- the training system was going to be reorganised;
- anti-terrorist capabilities were to be enhanced;
- the most advanced weapons and technologies were to be bought (Defence Reform).

The final vision of the Lithuanian army following its re-organisation and modernisation is that of a small, modernised, well-equipped and trained, mobile and deployable army that is able to take part in the whole spectrum of NATO missions (Defence Reform).

The information given above shows that the Lithuanian military forces have undergone a profound transformation since the Republic of Lithuania restored its sovereignty. NATO membership resulted in threats being reviewed and fundamental principles of defence planning being reconsidered. Having guaranties of NATO collective defence, Lithuania gave up the containment concept and all-embracing defence, which released resources for further modernisation of the military forces and deeper specialisation within NATO framework. When Lithuania renounced territorial defence, it allowed the country to take a more active part in peacekeeping missions abroad.

At the same time, the Lithuanian leadership has certain reservations concerning NATO defence guaranties.² For example, when a Russian fighter fell in Lithuania in September 2005, it stirred a big discussion whether NATO would be able to respond promptly to an invasion of Lithuania. The same year, the Lithuanian President in his interview to a German paper aired fears about Belarusian tanks that might attack Lithuania (Heinemann-Gruder, 2002b).

Having delegated responsibility for the country's defence to NATO, the Lithuanian leadership cannot be completely confident that state security is granted once and for all, particularly considering NATO's uncertain development prospects. For this reason, Lithuania continues to pin its hopes on the

² NATO agreed to spread the plan for the defence of Poland to the Baltic States as late as in 2010, in other words, in six years after Lithuania joined the Treaty.

USA as its main defence guarantor and belongs to all coalitions the USA has formed. Such a strategic choice explains the official Vilnius's quite chilly attitude to the European security and defence policy, as well as the prospects of establishing a European army within the EU framework, which are regarded as a counterbalance to NATO and American domination in the area of European security.

In the aftermath of the Georgia – Russia war in August of 2008, a number of right-wing Lithuanian political figures, projecting the Georgian situation on Lithuania, began talking again about the need to go back to the practice of comprehensive territorial defence and conscription. Yet, so far these voices have not gained enough weight to change the situation in the defence area of the Republic of Lithuania.

Belarusian Defence Dilemmas

Belarus chose a completely different path. Unlike the Republic of Lithuania, the Belarusian political elite in the early 1990s did not reach a consensus on integration into the European or trans-Atlantic institutions and reformed the Belarusian military according to their own vision of the strategic situation.

In contrast with the Baltic States, Belarus did not have to build its military from the “ground level”. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Belarus obtained an impressive legacy of about 1,500 military units with more than 240,000 strong; 81 strategic nuclear missiles and huge arsenals of various weapons. Belarus automatically gained the status of the most militarised state in the East European region. For that reason, the country began creating its national military by reducing the numbers of military units and weapons.

In accordance with the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, from 1992 onwards Belarus liquidated over 1,800 tanks, 1,500 armoured cars and 130 military aircraft.³

In addition, led by its publicly declared intention to achieve a non-nuclear status, on 26 November, 1996 the Republic of Belarus fulfilled ahead of schedule its obligations to withdraw Russian strategic forces from its territory. At the OSCE summit in Lisbon, Belarus came up with a proposal to create a nuclear-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe.

By 2000, the Belarusian military had a staff of a bit more than 100,000, including over 80,000 military men. The army consisted of three types of forces, namely land forces, air force and air defence, as well as formations, military units and structures that were subordinated directly to the Centre and did not belong to any type of military forces.

At the early stage of state sovereignty, Belarus officially took a position of neutrality and non-alignment. The status was consolidated by the country's

³ Source: the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus (www.mod.mil.by).

Constitution, adopted in March 1994. The legislation forbade the Belarusian Army to take part in military operations abroad.

After Aliaksandr Lukašenka was elected president in 1994, Belarus staked its future on speedy integration with Russia and establishing a union state, which also included its military component. Ever since, Belarus's neutral status has no longer been in line with the Belarusian government's international policies, so it has ceased to be mentioned and the country accepted security guaranty from the Russian Federation.

Belarus belongs to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which positions itself as a regional security organisation, which is an alternative to NATO. In order to join their forces in providing regional security, Belarus and Russia took a decision to set up a joint regional group of the Belarusian and Russian military. In October 1999, Ministers of Defence of both countries signed an agreement on creating such a group in the west.

The legislation providing for Belarus – Russia military co-operation consists of a whole corpus of documents, the principal ones being the Treaty between the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation on Military Co-operation, the Belarus – Russia Agreement on Joint Efforts to Provide Security in the Battlefield, the Concept of Belarus-Russia Joint Defence Policies, the Security Concept of the Belarus-Russia Union and the Military Doctrine of the Union State.

In 2009, the two countries completed long negotiations that lasted for years upon creation of a Belarus-Russia joint regional air defence system and signed a bilateral agreement on the matter. Belarus also joined the agreement on creating collective crisis response forces within the CSTO framework.

Defence Concepts and Visions of Threats

Although Belarus has a security guaranty from Russia, it does not make haste to abandon territorial defence and form expedition corps instead of conventional military forces. Probably the reason is that the Belarusian leadership does not see Russia as a dependable defence or the only permanent ally. In this case Belarus, like Great Britain centuries ago, has permanent interests rather than permanent allies. This accounts for the intention to strengthen the effective military forces in all dimensions instead of specialising in certain areas of defence.

Belarusian military experts may recognise that the strategic situation in Europe has changed dramatically, but giving up containment strategy or all-embracing defence is not yet on the agenda. Belarus's self-isolation and its political collisions both with the West and the Russian ally do not add to the Belarusian government's sense of security. Besides, their memories of the events in former Yugoslavia and Iraq and their ex-leaders' fates are fresh enough to influence their assessment of threats and possible responses.

Thus, the Concept of National Security of the Republic of Belarus, adopted in July 2001, unequivocally speaks about an actual military threat posed by “*certain states (coalitions of states) that try to resolve international problems by means of [...] military force*” (The Concept of National Security of the Republic of Belarus). The Concept goes on to clarify which exactly states and coalitions are referred to, “*NATO’s eastward enlargement, the new strategic concept declared by the North Atlantic Treaty that allows for the use of military forces without sanctions of the UN or the OSCE, establishment of the EU Rapid Reaction Forces [...] have made the military and political position of the Republic of Belarus considerably more complicated*” (The Concept...). In other words, the Concept does not only declare the presence of a military threat but also states its source quite precisely.

The Military Doctrine of Belarus, adopted in 2002, in its assessment of the military and political situation pointed out the lack of effective tools to prevent a military threat and defend the interests of all the actors of international relations in Europe. The Military Doctrine named “*intervention into domestic affairs of the Republic of Belarus, attempts at infringing on its interests in solving international security problems, enlargement of military blocs and alliances at the expense of military security of the Republic of Belarus and counteraction to collective security systems that the Republic of Belarus belongs to*” (The Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus) as main external threats to the country’s military security. In other words, just like the Concept of National Security, the Military Doctrine declares that there is a military threat posed to the Republic of Belarus.

Military Reform in Belarus

Military priorities proceed from this assessment of threats and strategic situation. In November 2001, the Belarusian president authorised the Concept of Development of the Military Forces of the Republic of Belarus until 2010, the Programme to Complete the Reform of the Military in 2001–2005 and the plan of their development until 2006.

According to these documents, the purpose of the military reform was to bring the army in sync with the present military and political situation, the nature of modern warfare and military combat, the degree of possible military threats and the country’s economic potential.

Towards this aim, the military reform included the following dimensions: a strategic containment system was to be created, the command system was to be enhanced, the structure of the Belarusian Army was to be optimised, an information support system was to be established and the practice of bringing the troops up to strength was to be improved.

In order to find the necessary resources to modernise the army, it was decided to reduce the military to a considerable extent, maintaining the same funding.

As a result, by 2006 the Belarusian military was 65,000 strong, including about 50,000 military staff and 15,000 civilian support staff with 1.4% of GDP allotted to the military budget.⁴

It can be argued that at present the Belarusian military has in general shifted to the European recruitment model, undergone a profound reform, military equipment has been modernised and a number of automated command systems have been set up.

Co-Operation with NATO

Apart from implementing the military reform, Belarus demonstrates its intention to participate in peacekeeping actions. In 2002 – 2003, Belarusian Parliament passed a number of laws to regulate the issues of sending Belarusian troops to take part in peacekeeping actions. Proceeding from these pieces of legislation, the Belarusian Council of Ministers passed its resolutions and the Minister of Defence issued orders that shaped the peacekeeping contingent and peacekeeping support staff training system (The Law of the Republic of Belarus...).

Belarus takes part in the *Partnership for Peace* (PfP) NATO programme, which enables the Belarusian Minister of Defence and Head of the General Staff to participate in meetings of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council on a regular basis. Since 2003, heads of the rear and armament HQs have been taking part in conferences of NATO national directors for armaments and heads of procurement. Representatives of the Belarusian military take part in NATO committees for air defence and air traffic management on a regular basis. These events for the most part consist of language courses for military men, special training, participation in the PfP workshops and exercises.

In 2005, it was the first time a Belarusian military unit had participated in a PfP tactical exercise, where it was submitted to NATO operational command. Considering that in 2002 to 2004 the parliament adopted pieces of legislation that set the procedure for the Belarusian military's participation in peacekeeping operations, it can be expected that in the future Belarus will take a more active part in NATO and PfP exercises.

When Belarus joined the planning and force assessment process aimed at achieving operational compatibility with joint NATO forces, it was an important landmark in Belarus – NATO co-operation.

Thus, co-operation with NATO is growing year by year, which does not go well, however, with the state propaganda machine that presents NATO to

⁴ Source: the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Belarus.

the audiences inside the country as an aggressive military bloc which intends to change the government in peaceful Belarus the way it did in Yugoslavia. In our opinion, there are several reasons for that. Firstly, the leadership of an authoritarian state like Belarus has to maintain a certain level of consolidation in the society and discipline, as well as justify infringements on civil liberties, which would be impossible without producing an image of an external enemy. Secondly, the anti-NATO rhetoric is a tribute to Belarus's alliance with Russia. Limitations imposed by the diplomatic etiquette and a great power status do not allow Russian leaders to say in person things that their Belarusian counterparts can say. By criticising its nominal ally's enemy, the Belarusian regime performs its duty as an ally of Russia, which, however, does not prevent it from taking an active part in PfP or promoting bilateral contacts with NATO.

Belarus seems to think of NATO as plan B in case the Belarus-Russia alliance no longer meets Belarusian national interests, so that it can have another security guarantor. The Belarus – NATO relations are on the one hand a way of blackmailing Russia and an attempt to avoid the country's total isolation. The latter is particularly true because NATO is perhaps the only western institution that does not bother the Belarusian leadership with constant rebukes for human rights abuses or threatens to impose sanctions on Belarus.

To sum up, the two models of defence system development in Lithuania and Belarus demonstrate the ways in which the neighbouring countries that used to have similar starting points have taken totally different trajectories according to their different visions of the military and political situation and threat assessment. Having found itself in international isolation, Belarus is forced to hold on to the old containment concept, further developing all types of its military forces in order to be able to withstand a possible invasion. Strategically, such a line of conduct can hardly be recognised as reasonable for a small European state situated between two major geopolitical centres, even though it may cherish someone's feeling of self-importance.

In our opinion, the Republic of Lithuania has given an example of a more effective and strategically well-grounded adaptation to the existing reality of European security. Its experience is worth studying more carefully, for sooner or later Belarus is bound to abandon its line of conduct and follow in its neighbour's footsteps to NATO and the EU.

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