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END NOTE

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT LUKASHENKA WARMS TO NATO

By Taras Kuzio

In a highly surprising development, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is warming up to NATO. Lukashenka became president of Belarus in 1994 at the same time NATO began developing its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program in former Soviet and Eastern bloc countries. Since then Belarus has, along with Turkmenistan and Russian protectorate Tajikistan, which signed up for PfP only a few months ago, been the least disinterested of CIS states in cooperation with NATO.

The small number of joint Belarusian-NATO events ended in 1998 after a dispute with European Union countries over the location of their embassies in Belarus. Meanwhile, the United States increasingly applied a policy of diplomatic isolation of Belarus. In December 2001, relations between the United States and Belarus were described by the Belarusian Foreign Affairs Ministry as "worsening," and political contacts were said to be "at a complete standstill." Belarus's only contact with NATO was low-key, through the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), established in 1997 to replace the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) created after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The EAPC has 46 members (the 19 full-fledged NATO members plus 27 partners), all of which cooperate with NATO through PfP at different levels.

Under Lukashenka, a Sovietophile and pan-Eastern Slavic ideology produced an anti-Western and anti-NATO foreign policy that attracted advocates among Russian nationalists and communists and, at times, among even Russian democrats. The peak of this "cold war" between Belarus and NATO was in 1999-2000 as NATO was carrying out its bombing campaign of Kosova and Serbia, and Lukashenka visited Belgrade to offer his support to Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

After the election of Vladimir Putin as Russian president in March 2000 a gradual rapprochement between Russia and NATO began that gathered momentum after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States. The creation of an international alliance against terrorism, with the United States and Russia at its core; the establishment of a NATO-Russia Council; Ukraine's decision to seek NATO membership; and the expected expansion of the Atlantic alliance and the EU have all forced Lukashenka to change his policy toward NATO.

The first indications of this Belarusian change of heart came in June when the Belarusian parliament changed legislation to allow Belarusian armed forces to participate in peacekeeping duties abroad, except in "hot spots." The measure for the first time gave Belarus the possibility of participating in NATO peacekeeping operations. At the large annual military exercise "Berazina-2002" at the Barysau military camp, Lukashenka indicated his willingness to invite NATO and U.S. troops to take part in future exercises. "If you wish to participate in such exercises to any extent, we are ready to invite appropriate units, observers, participants -- anybody you like," Lukashenka said.

Five additional activities were added to the Belarusian PFP program in 2002-03. These include the planning, organization, and administration of programs in military research and technology; mine clearance; preventing the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons; small arms and light weapons; and military topography. The new PFP program makes provisions for the first time for joint exercises with the Defense Ministry and Emergency Situations Ministry. The first possible joint exercises could take place as early as this winter in Belarusian areas badly affected by the 1986 Chornobyl nuclear accident.

In July 2002, Lukashenka said at a meeting of his Security Council that Belarus is considering expanding cooperation with NATO in light of Russia's and Ukraine's steps toward closer NATO ties. Nevertheless, Lukashenka refused to consider either full NATO membership or a special bilateral partnership for Belarus. "Russia and Ukraine ran to NATO, seemingly, but this does not mean that we have to run after them," he said.

At the same time, Lukashenka accepted that it is time to modify Belarusian foreign policy, "under the conditions of military-political and Euro-Atlantic integration." In addition, earlier this month Syarhey Martynau, Belarus's permanent representative to NATO, officially invited NATO to participate for the first time in the country's next large military exercise planned for 2004. Like Lukashenka, Martynau reiterated Belarus's principled continued opposition to NATO expansion. "Belarus cannot disregard the new reality," he said, adding, "at the same time, we must not allow new demarcation lines to affect our borders." In other words, Lukashenka has moved toward a more pragmatic view of NATO similar to Putin's. "We must take the current situation into account, adjust our policy, and get used to this reality," Lukashenka warned his Security Council.

However, it remains to be seen whether Lukashenka is sincere in his rapprochement toward NATO. The new Belarusian military doctrine adopted in February does not regard any state as a potential adversary. At the same time, two of the specified "external military threats" continue to be "expansion of military blocs and alliances" and "interference in Belarusian internal affairs." All international organizations of which Belarus is a member, or of which it aspires to join, have a right to comment on the internal affairs of member states. But defining that right as an "external threat" harps back to the Soviet era when the USSR refused to accept that its internal affairs could be the subject of international attention under the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe's Helsinki accords. In addition, classifying the expansion of military blocs and alliances as a "threat" is a clear allusion to NATO, because Minsk does not view the expansion of the CIS Collective Security Organization as a "threat."

Belarus will not seek NATO membership under Lukashenka as he has ruled out any "radical" steps. "Partnership," rather than "confrontation," is what Minsk now seeks. In this regard, the Russian daily "Izvestiya" is probably correct in suggesting that the adjustment in Minsk's position -- like Ukraine's recent statement of its intention to seek NATO membership -- was undertaken in response to the speed with which Russia has moved ahead in its relations with the United States and NATO since 11 September.

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