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Will Russia Send Nuclear Arms to Belarus?

If the deal goes through, the weapons are unlikely to leave.

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The announcement on June 25 by Russian President Vladimir Putin that he has agreed to transfer Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) to Belarus is unsurprising. Since at least 2016, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has sought the transfer of this weapon to modernize and improve Belarus's conventional ground-launched missile capabilities. In addition, Russia is attempting to further complicate NATO defense plans on the Alliance's eastern flank, especially as NATO continues to strengthen its defense posture there in response to the Ukraine war.

But unexpectedly, Russia will supply Belarus with the 'M' version of the Iskander rather than the export 'E' version that Moscow has provided to Algeria and Armenia. The E version has a reduced range and payload to comply with the guidelines of the multilateral Missile

Technology Control Regime (MTCR). Under these guidelines, the export of missiles with payloads over 500 kilograms and ranges over 300 kilometers is subject to a "strong presumption of denial" and only occurs in exceptional circumstances. Rather awkwardly, Russia is the current MTCR chair.

Although Belarus has upgraded some elements of its conventional ground-launched missile capabilities in the last decade, Minsk's missile inventory mostly consists of Soviet-era systems. Beyond six modern Polonez-M multiple-launch rocket systems, the IISS estimates that Belarus currently possesses 36 9K79 Tochka-U (RS-SS-21 Scarab) platforms. The latter is an SRBM with a 120-kilometer range that has been in service with various former Soviet republics since 1975. These systems appear to be split across three different brigades consisting of 12 launchers each. Somewhat confusingly, Belarus's order of battle lists only a single missile brigade – the 465th – that is stationed near Asipovichy.

The prospective transfer of Iskander-Ms, which have a 500-kilometer range, offers Belarus a fourfold increase in the stand-off capability of its ground-launched ballistic-missile arsenal (see Figure 1).

"*While Russian missiles can already range Poland and the Baltic states from Kaliningrad oblast, Iskander basing options in Belarus could hold at risk new targets in Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and could provide coverage of Russian occupation forces in Moldova.*"

The Iskander-M will also provide Belarus with enhanced precision-strike capabilities as its 5–10-meter circular error probable – a measure of a weapon system's accuracy – is around 10 times more accurate than the Tochka-U.

It is unclear how many Iskander-Ms Russia will transfer to Belarus and how they might affect its order of battle. While Minsk would probably prefer that Russia transfer enough Iskanders to replace its Tochkas on a one-to-one basis, Moscow probably will prioritize deliveries of the missile to its own armed forces given the extensive use of the Iskander in the war in Ukraine. Belarus as a result might initially be forced to operate both the Iskander and Tochka concurrently. Given the age of the Tochka and the apparent absence of expansive construction work at the 465th Missile Brigade to accommodate additional launchers and crews, Belarus probably will seek to replace rather than augment its older equipment.

The Tochka-U and Iskander-M are both dual-capable systems, meaning they can be fitted with either conventional or nuclear payloads – a feature Putin noted when announcing the agreed transfer. It is uncertain, however, whether Iskander is "hot-swappable" like China's DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile, which has a warhead that can be accessed by its crew and replaced quickly with either a nuclear or conventional variant. If the Iskander's warheads are not easily interchangeable, Russia would either have to retain the fully assembled missiles within its territory and deliver them to Belarus in a crisis or transfer them to Belarus for storage. Although Belarus hosted 22 nuclear storage facilities in the Cold

War, imagery analysis of these sites shows that none are in a state of readiness.

A nuclear surprise in the skies

More surprisingly, Russia announced that it plans to "upgrade" or "retrofit accordingly" (их можно было бы соответствующим образом дооборудовать) Belarusian Sukhoi Su-25 Frogfoot ground-attack aircraft to enable them to deliver nuclear weapons. Putin also said that Russia could train Belarusian aircrew for this role.

The IISS estimates that the Belarusian Air Force possesses 22 Su-25s, though it is unclear how many of them Russia is proposing to modify and how many aircrews will be trained in nuclear-weapons delivery.

The Su-25 has significant limitations in this role, and this raises questions about the credibility of Russia's and Belarus' announcement. Designed as a close air support aircraft, the Su-25 would probably be limited to deliver a nuclear weapon only in free-fall mode. This would be similar to the role played by NATO dual-capable aircraft that are assigned to the Alliance's nuclear mission. The survivability of the Su-25 would, however, be far poorer than that of the NATO types assigned to this role.

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Belarus operates four Su-30 SM Flanker H aircraft, which would be better-suited for nuclear-weapons delivery due to their longer range, larger payload and better flight performance. Therefore, it is unclear why the less-capable Su-25 was chosen instead. It could be that Russia and Belarus were more concerned with the signal that the Su-25 announcement would send than the actual credibility of retrofitting them, which might indicate that signalling rather than credibility is more important for Moscow and Minsk.

New aims: Belarus in the middle

Despite Belarus' interest in the Iskander, Russia had rebuffed earlier transfer suggestions due to a combination of factors, including prioritization of deliveries to the Russian Armed Forces, cost and a possible limited production capability of only about 50 missiles each year (an estimate based on the number of missiles and launchers delivered to the Russian Army from 2013–18.) Several recent developments, however, appear to have changed Russia's calculus.

Firstly and most importantly, Lukashenko appears to have surrendered to Putin's long-standing demands to accept permanent Russian forces on his territory. Secondly, Lukashenko's desired changes to Belarus' constitution were approved in a February 2022 referendum, with 65.2% reportedly in favor of the changes. These included ending Belarusian neutrality and the previous ban on possessing nuclear weapons. The new constitution also includes a prohibition on allowing its neighbors to be attacked from Belarusian territory, so it appears that Russia (and Belarus itself) is willing to ignore the new constitution when it suits.

While the potential reintroduction of nuclear weapons into Belarus will probably not occur on a scale comparable with Soviet deployments during the Cold War, its prospect is a step

backwards for Euro-Atlantic security. If Russia does deploy nuclear weapons to Belarus, it will probably enter into a nuclear-basing arrangement similar to the Soviet Union's system with members of the Warsaw Pact where Soviet soldiers guarded, handled, loaded, and delivered nuclear weapons at the order of the Soviet premier. It is less likely that Russia will form a nuclear-sharing arrangement with Belarus similar to NATO's, in which nuclear weapons would be released to select NATO allies at the order of the US president for delivery on dual-capable aircraft.

However, the proposed modification of Belarusian aircraft for nuclear missions has complicated this judgement considerably, and Russia has said it will train Belarusian pilots to deliver air-dropped nuclear bombs. Regardless, there is a chance that in the future Belarus will be absorbed by Russia into a "Union State," in which case Belarusian soldiers could be subordinated to the 12th Main Directorate, the branch of Russia's armed forces that oversees its non-strategic nuclear arsenal.

One explanation for the shift is that Russia's war on Ukraine has depleted Moscow's conventional power for the short term, and NATO's reaction to the war has expanded Russia's border with NATO. The addition of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance has added more than 1,300 kilometers of land border and nearly 8,000 kilometers of Baltic Sea coast to concern Russian defense planners. As a result, Moscow will either need to consider stationing large numbers of soldiers and equipment in defensive positions at critical points in northern and eastern Europe, or shift towards a greater reliance on non-strategic nuclear weapons for its territorial-defense and deterrence needs. Given that most of Russia's Armed Forces are now involved in its ongoing war on Ukraine, it is far more likely that Moscow will draw down some of its conventional forces and rely more heavily on non-strategic nuclear weapons to deter NATO.

Whether Belarus does or does not ultimately join Russia in a Union State, short-range nuclear-capable aircraft and ground-launched missiles could soon be stationed on Belarusian territory that would be capable of striking additional targets via different platforms than are currently available to the two countries. Given that deterrence relies on a combination of capability, credibility and communication, an analysis of the equipment Russia plans to supply to Belarus suggests that Moscow's actions – for now at least – appear to be more focused on nuclear bluster than on providing Minsk with a capable and credible nuclear deterrent.

Nonetheless, it is a supreme historical irony that after more than a decade of building its forces to gain numerical advantage along its Baltic-state borders, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and NATO's subsequent reinforcement and enlargement has flipped this equation on its head.

Prior to the 2014 NATO Wales summit, Russia had seen an Alliance that possessed a shrinking conventional force incapable of defending its eastern flank without relying on nuclear forces; it now faces an increasingly robust NATO force from the Mediterranean to the High North. Thus, if nuclear weapons arrive in Belarus – which may happen soon – they will be unlikely to leave.

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