

Will Russia station nuclear weapons in Belarus?

TIPHAINE DE CHAMPCHESNEL

On March 25, Vladimir Putin stated that Russia intended to deploy tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, specifying that a special repository would be completed by July 1. For the time being, the issue of the transfer of nuclear warheads has not been raised publicly. Even if it also serves other objectives, this announcement seems to be part of Russia's strategy of intimidation in the context of the conflict in Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has several times reiterated its nuclear status and has also repeated implicit or explicit threats to use the bomb. These statements are most often interpreted as part of a strategy of intimidation against Ukraine, the United States and NATO. Together they create a latent sense of fear and pervasive pressure around the possibility of nuclear escalation. The pace of this **Russian nuclear signaling** seems to have accelerated in recent weeks.

Speaking on Rossiya 24 TV on 25 March, President Vladimir Putin confirmed he would transfer nuclear capabilities to Belarusian territory. He said that the two States, Russia and Belarus, had agreed on arrangements which have already begun to be implemented, with **the adaptation of ten Belarusian aircraft and the transfer of Iskander systems**. He also specified that **crew training** was to begin on 3 April and that a **tactical nuclear weapons depot** would be completed by 1 July, thus emphasizing the realization of commitments. The question thus arises as to the consequences of these commitments, beyond their political use in the context of the invasion of Ukraine and the management of the relationship between Moscow and Minsk.

The prospect of such an agreement had already been publicly mentioned in the transcript of a meeting between the Russian and Belarusian presidents in St. Petersburg on June 25, 2022. At the time, Alexander Lukashenko justified this development by his concern about “the flights of U.S. and NATO aircraft, training

to carry [...] nuclear weapons”; he asked to prepare an “equivalent response to these actions”, requesting Russia's help in adapting its fighter planes to carry nuclear weapons.

Vladimir Putin's response seemed to follow two lines. On the one hand, **he gave credence to the Belarusian request, drawing a parallel with NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement** and stating that “we must [look after] our unconditional security, the security of the State of the Union [Union of Belarus and Russia] and perhaps even that of other CSTO [Collective Security Treaty Organization] member countries”. On the other hand, Vladimir Putin also made it clear that **it was not necessary to reproduce NATO's arrangements**. He then envisaged adapting Su-25 aircraft (and not Su-35 as suggested by Alexander Lukashenko) and the training of crews, as well as the transfer in the following months of Iskander-M, underlining **the dual nature (conventional/nuclear)** of these systems. Thus, he maintained **uncertainty as to the purpose of the missiles that would be transferred to Belarus**. However, he did not leave any doubt about whether these decisions would be followed up, since the two leaders had agreed to instruct their respective defence ministers and chiefs of staff to work on their implementation.

The March 25 announcement is therefore not entirely surprising. Even less so since **the Belarusian side, has several times expressed the wish to allow the return of nuclear weapons** to the territory, twenty-five years after the definitive withdrawal of the strategic and

tactical systems that Minsk had inherited when the Soviet Union collapsed. Indeed, like Kazakhstan and Ukraine, in 1992 Belarus had signed the Lisbon Protocol, by which it committed to assume, along with the other USSR successors, the disarmament obligations that the USSR had undertaken by signing the START-1 reduction treaty a year earlier. Article V of the Lisbon Protocol also required signatories to accede to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) as non-nuclear-weapon states, which Belarus did on July 27, 1993, even though the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from its territory was still in progress. Tactical nuclear weapons had been withdrawn by May 1993, but the removal of strategic weapons was not completed until November 1996.

In an interview with Russia Today at the end of November 2021, Alexander Lukashenko explained that he had never been in favour of the departure of Soviet systems from the territory and that he had delayed the implementation of the agreements at the time, only complying under “tough pressure” from Boris Yeltsin. He further boasted that he had kept several strategic missile sites intact; and he indicated, that in the event of NATO placing nuclear weapons in Poland, he would propose “to Putin to return the nuclear weapons to Belarus”. Thereafter, the Belarusian president made several similar statements, but it was especially the referendum of 27 February 2022, concerning changes to the Belarusian constitution, that increased international concerns about the possible stationing of Russian nuclear weapons. Indeed, the referendum not only strengthened the power of the presidency, but it also **removed Belarus’ non-nuclear status** from Article 18.

Some experts have questioned whether Russia can trust its Belarusian ally enough to authorize moving its nuclear weapons there. Such a nuclear sharing could take place without the transfer of the weapons themselves, at least initially: preparations could be made through the adaptation and installation of delivery vehicles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, as well as the construction of a weapons repository, without necessarily being followed by the transfer of nuclear warheads. This would conform to the Russian practice of centralizing the storage of tactical nuclear weapons, as indicated by official Russian statements in UN fora: “all of Russia’s non-strategic nuclear weapons [...] are located exclusively on national territory and grouped in storage bases [...]”.

However, given the range of Russian capabilities, the **operational need for this nuclear sharing is not obvious**. In an article in the Observatoire de la dissuasion, Isabelle

Facon, a specialist in Russian security and defence policies at the FRS (Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique), analyses the reactions of several Russian military specialists, who were skeptical about the added value for the Russian army of deploying these capabilities in Belarus. Moreover, these announcements raise questions about the choice of adapting the Su-25 fighters (due in particular to doubts about their survivability) as well as about the number of missiles that Moscow will actually give to Minsk. The fact that the operational benefit is not proven does not eliminate all strategic interest in these developments for Russia, which could conceive of them as **a new option to be integrated into its deterrent maneuver**. It could, for example, move nuclear weapons towards Belarusian territory to signal a ramp-up in a crisis, as suggested by Pavel Podvig, a researcher at UNIDIR’s weapons of mass destruction programme. From this perspective, this agreement would be less nuclear sharing than Russia’s use of Belarusian territory in its **strategic communication**.

For the time being, the communication surrounding this agreement makes it appear primarily to be a means of political pressure on NATO as a nuclear alliance, at a time when the organisation is integrating a new member. In a teleconference on 4 April, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu linked Finland’s entry into NATO and developments in Belarus, indicating that Russia was reacting by defending the security of the “State of the Union”. This reinforcement of the security narrative of the union between Russia and Belarus converges with that of respect for non-proliferation commitments, which Vladimir Putin has insisted on, as a way of gaining legitimacy on the international scene. ■

Dr. Tiphaine de Champchesnel is research fellow in nuclear deterrence and disarmament at IRSEM.

Contact: tiphaine.de-champchesnel@irsem.fr