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Back to the Future? Russia's New Deployment to Belarus

31 Oct 2022 - Satellite images from Planet Lab show Russian forces encamped at three locations in western Belarus as well as three deployed Russian MiG-31s following a 10 Oct announcement from Minsk that 9,000 Russian troops would arrive in Belarus as part of a “regional regrouping” to protect its borders.

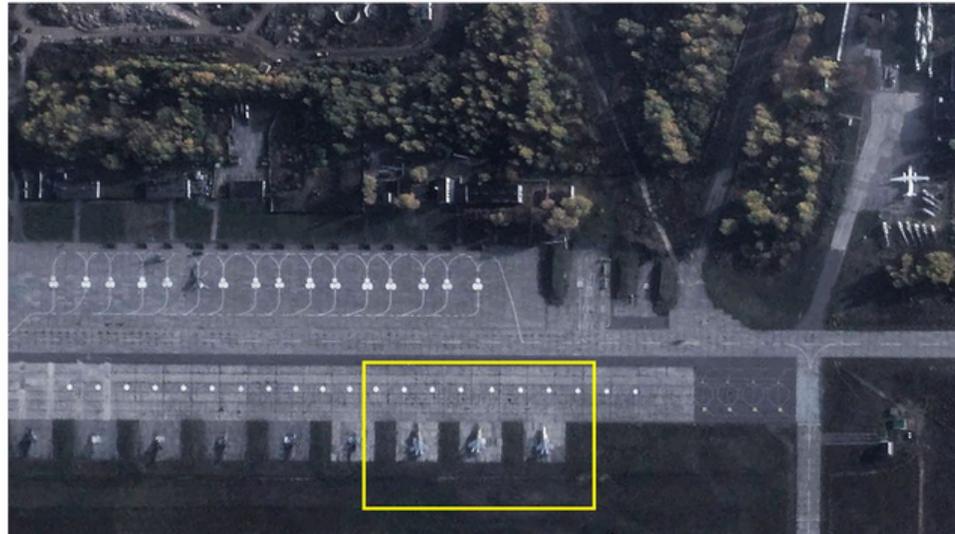
-The 10 Oct announcement closely followed the 8 Oct explosion on the Kerch Strait Bridge in Crimea, which Russia blamed on Ukraine (Ukraine denied responsibility), and a little more than two weeks after the Kremlin mobilized 318,000 reserves.

-Minsk Defence officials offered, "Military units from the formations are planned to be deployed at four training ranges of the Republic of Belarus in the eastern and central part of the country, after which they will start conducting combat training activities."

-Belarus' Lukashenko stated the combined regional forces were a “response to NATO provocations on the border” and “Ukrainian plans to attack Belarus.”

-Russian troops arrived in Belarus around 16 Oct, setting up tents, field hospitals, and support/parking areas for the expected “170 tanks and 200 infantry fighting vehicles” across three sites.

-Russia also forward deployed three MiG-31Ks around 18 Oct to Machulishchi Air Base, south of Minsk. Imagery from Planet Lab on 1 Nov shows AS-24 KILLJOY hypersonic missiles next to at least one aircraft. These missiles, believed to be in limited stock, have occasionally been launched against high value targets in Ukraine.



-Russia and Belarus announced preparations for next year's UNION SHIELD 2023 are underway, indicating the Russian presence will be long term. Of note, Russia extended troop deployments numerous times in Belarus ahead of the Feb invasion.

-Analysts have several different reasons for the presence of Russian forces in Belarus:

- Estonian officials believe the Russian presence is to train recently mobilized personnel for eventual service in Ukraine's east.
- Others differ on whether this deployment is a prelude to another attack avenue back into Ukraine as the Russians did in Feb, or is it meant to distract Ukrainian attention from the main battle area to the east.
- Additional analysts offer the deployment of the MiG-31s, in particular, is meant as a warning to the West.

-The Belarusian military has almost 50,000 active personnel with 290,000 reserves. They boast 950 infantry fighting vehicles, 739 artillery pieces, 500 tanks, 71 aircraft of various types, and 38 helicopters.

Russia and Belarus maintained deep ties after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, announcing the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 1992 along with Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Russia granted Belarus preferential treatment via guarantees in business sectors following the passage of the "Treaty on the Union of Belarus and Russia" in 1997. Putin backed Lukashenko after Belarus' much-maligned 2020 election which set the stage for Russia sending troops and equipment to their neighbor as an eventual launching point for the Feb 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This latest deployment of Russian troops has Western analysts concerned until the meaning becomes clearer.

On Second Thought - China Walks Back Position on Russian Nuclear Threats

4 Nov 2022 - China clarified remarks about the threat of the use of nuclear weapons over Ukraine in joint statements from Chinese President Xi and German Chancellor Scholz as a possible warning to Russia after they alluded to false-flag Ukrainian use of "dirty bombs."

- Putin levied a thinly veiled threat to use nuclear weapons on 21 Sep, "To those who allow themselves such statements regarding Russia, I want to remind you that our country also has various means of destruction, and from separate components and more modern than those of NATO countries...And when the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, to protect Russia and our people, we will certainly use all the means at our disposal. It's not a bluff."

- On 27 Sep, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov walked back Putin's comments, "We are not threatening anyone with nuclear weapons" and stated Russia was not seeking "open confrontation" with the US or NATO.

- On 3 Oct, China issued a stark warning in the state-owned Global Times that "[a]ll European countries will tremble under the shadow of a nuclear war" if Ukraine was allowed to join NATO. The editorial opined NATO should

withdraw from any involvement in Eastern Europe otherwise, "there will be no security for anyone, not for Ukraine, and not for the world...Instead of pursuing resolutions to end the conflict, Washington has, over and over again, displayed that the US is charging toward the other direction-fanning the flames of war."

-Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stoked Western concerns during conversations with his counterparts in the UK, US, France, and Turkey on 25 Oct that, "[Russia is] concerned about possible provocations by Kyiv involving the use of a dirty bomb". Some analysts think this may have been a ploy to slow Western aid to Ukraine.



- US SecDef Lloyd Austin countered on 27 Oct that, “senior Russian officials privately said there are no plans to use a nuclear device in Ukraine, but the U.S. remained cautious” when asked about indications the Russians might be preparing to employ nuclear weapons.

- On the same day, Putin stated, “[w]e see no need for that. There is no point in that, neither political or military” when asked about the use of nuclear weapons over Ukraine. In the same interview, he stuck by his assessment that Ukraine was planning a “false flag attack” involving dirty weapons. His updated stance likely gave China maneuvering space on the international stage during following engagements.

- During his 4 Nov state visit to China, German Chancellor Scholz stated, “President Xi and I agree: nuclear threats are irresponsible and incendiary...By using nuclear weapons, Russia would be crossing a line that the community of states has drawn together.” Xi then declared both leaders “jointly oppose the use or threat of nuclear weapons” over Ukraine.

China’s tacit support of Russia has its limits – and the use of nuclear weapons is a red line for the Communist nation (with a clear eye towards “resolving the Taiwan issue”). Russia certainly complicated the relationship over the threatened use of nuclear weapons to defend illegally annexed regions of Ukraine. Pragmatically speaking though, “Opposing the use of nuclear weapons and threats is a low hanging fruit and low-cost statement to achieve international approval and positive spillover for the German-China relationship, and perhaps that with the EU.”

"Comrades and Brothers" - China & Vietnam Sign Multiple Agreements

4 Nov 2022 – China and Vietnam signed 13 major agreements in Beijing during Vietnam’s Communist Party Chief Nguyen Phu Trong’s state visit late last month. Trong became the first foreign leader to visit China since Xi Jinping began his third term and both leaders looked to strengthen their “special bond.”

-Trong, also in his third term as Vietnam’s leader, congratulated Xi after China’s 20th National Congress with hopes of “further strengthening political trust, and setting a great direction for future development of the relationship between the two countries” on 23 Oct.

- Then from 30 Oct-2 Nov, Trong traveled to Beijing as part of a “charm offensive” to offset

waning relationships with Russia and uncertainty with the United States. During their face-to-face meeting, Xi presented the Friendship Medal of the PRC to Trong saying they were “comrades plus brothers” and affirmed what the Vietnam News Agency called “Vietnam’s consistent policy of attaching importance to relations with China as a top priority.”



-Vietnam has long pursued a “multi-vector foreign policy” in accordance with its “Three Nos” policy – no military alliances, no aligning with any one superpower, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil. Like their neighbor to the north, Vietnam still leaves room to develop vaguer sounding relationships using “comprehensive strategic,” “strategic,” and “comprehensive” partnerships. With that in mind, Trong’s moves were likely meant to address internal concerns about regime stability and self-preservation, particularly when it comes to supply chain disruptions from China due to COVID.

-Vietnam heavily relies on raw materials from China to fuel its growing economy. China steadily increased its exports to Vietnam since 2002 - jumping \$40B from 2019 to \$138B in 2021. China remains Vietnam’s biggest trade partner and Vietnam is the sixth largest trade partner for China (the United States is a close second with \$113B in trade with Vietnam in 2021).

-The wide ranging series of agreements seek to address trade imbalance by increasing raw materials and goods coming from Vietnam to China, completing railways to link Hai Phong with China, increased direct flights, and fishery cooperation amongst others. The two leaders also signed a series of Memoranda of Understanding strengthening “joint works to ensure the supply chain,” culture and tourism, ecology-environment, and state enterprises.

The increase in trade, agricultural agreements, and student/leisure travel between China and Vietnam aligns with Beijing’s “wedge strategy” - especially as it pertains to the United States and the South China Sea in particular. China’s goal is to have Vietnam remain a neutral party regarding aligned security interests with the United States by emphasizing their nations' shared ideological and economic interests. The other element in Beijing’s plan is to continue engaging in bilateral negotiations with Vietnam over the South China Sea while avoiding multilateral negotiations that weaken China’s position and bargaining power.

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