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Rethinking the U.S.–Belarus Relationship

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Executive Summary

Belarus is commonly seen as a Russian outpost on NATO's eastern flank, with its president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, cast as a categorical opponent of Western interests. This narrative became ascendant in the West after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

However, a fuller examination of Belarusian foreign policy under President Lukashenko reveals a more nuanced picture of a country that, despite its historic ties to Russia, has consistently demonstrated a willingness to engage with the West. Lukashenko has sought to pursue what he calls a "multi-vector foreign policy," straddling the great powers to best safeguard Belarus's national sovereignty and its interests.

This multi-pronged approach has shifted decidedly in recent years, however, with Lukashenko drifting into the Russian camp, as evidenced by Minsk providing logistical support and safe passage to Russian troops in its war on Ukraine, and allowing Russian tactical nuclear weapons on Belarussian soil.

But these policies did not occur in a vacuum. They were, rather, a direct result of American efforts to isolate Belarus through a maximum pressure campaign which began in the aftermath of the 2020 re-election of Lukashenko. Western policies aimed at isolating Minsk have had the counterproductive effect of pushing Lukashenko closer to Moscow and Beijing, in an effort to counteract what he sees as a Western program of driving regime change in Belarus.

Western governments, particularly Washington, should recognize that maximum pressure will backfire by pushing Belarus closer to Moscow. An alternative strategy based on resetting relations with Belarus and enabling the return of Lukashenko's multi-vector foreign policy holds the promise of preventing the further integration of

Belarus and Russia and possibly even reversing some of Putin's moves to pull Belarus into the Russian orbit. To execute this strategy, the United States should:

- Explicitly disavow regime change and the training of anti-Lukashenko dissidents as U.S. policy goals in direct talks with Belarussian officials, conditioned on Belarussian assurance that it will not use its territory as a staging ground for attacks on NATO
- Establish a piecemeal approach for sanctions relief with Belarus as progress is made toward resetting relations
- Pursue bilateral cooperation with Belarus, including the resumption of energy trade, American investment, and other cultural arrangements.

Pursuing the soft reset prescribed in this paper will not be easy, but the alternatives would leave the United States in a weaker strategic position by needlessly heightening Minsk's dependence on its Russian neighbor. Steps toward reaching a new understanding with Belarus can instead bolster eastern European stability and enhance NATO's eastern deterrent posture.

Introduction

Minsk has rarely received substantial and sustained U.S. policy attention since the post-Cold War period. This lack of sustained policy stems in part from underlying assumptions about Belarus' strategic orientation. For the past three decades, the West's policy approach to Belarus has been predicated on the perception that Minsk has become a Russian satellite and will irretrievably remain one for as long as President Aleksandr Lukashenko is in power.

This perception was reinforced by Minsk's decision to provide passage and logistical support to Russian troops in the Ukraine invasion's opening stage, provoking a Western sanctions and isolation campaign partially designed to mirror the one imposed on Moscow itself. The current restrictions on Minsk build on an international maximum

pressure campaign introduced in the aftermath of the 2020 Belarusian presidential election, unanimously condemned by Western leaders as fraudulent. Lukashenko, decried as an illegitimate leader by the United States and Europe, was forced to deepen his relationship with Russia in a bid to shore up his beleaguered presidency.¹

This convergence has been interpreted as an “axis of autocracy” in eastern Europe, underpinned by Putin and Lukashenko’s shared authoritarian worldview and inveterate antagonism toward the West.²

But a thorough examination of Belarusian policy paints an altogether different picture. In fact, Lukashenko’s strategic thinking has long been driven by the overarching goal of triangulating between Russia and the West, balancing these two poles against each other for economic, political, and security gain.

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Parts of Lukashenko’s balancing act, though substantially diminished following the 2020 and 2022 crises, are still viable and can form the basis of at least a partial reset in relations between Belarus and the West. U.S. and European policymakers have ample reason to exploit this policy window. An improved relationship between Belarus and the West offers tangible benefits for deterrence on NATO’s eastern flank, enhances the security of the Baltic states and Poland, can constrain Russian options for westward

¹ Katya Andrusz and Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, “U.S. Condemns Belarus Crackdowns, Rejects Election Results,” *Bloomberg*, December 20, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2010-12-19/protesters-police-clash-in-minsk-after-belarus-s-lukashenko-wins-election?embedded-checkout=true>.

² Brian Whitmore, “Putin and Lukashenka are locked in a dysfunctional axis of autocrats,” Atlantic Council, July 14, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/putin-and-lukashenka-are-locked-in-a-dysfunctional-axis-of-autocrats/>.

force projection and sustainment, and poses a potent contributing factor to long-term strategic stability in eastern Europe.

Indeed, ignoring these opportunities is not only strategically wasteful but dangerously counterproductive. By insisting on an ineffective policy of isolation and maximum pressure, the West diminishes its own leverage vis-à-vis Belarus and leaves Minsk with no choice but to double down on its ties to Moscow. Put differently, forcing Lukashenko to offset Western pressure by integrating more deeply with Russia serves no tangible U.S. policy goal and generates a strategic windfall for Russia at the expense of U.S. interests in the central and eastern Europe (CEE) region.

This paper will outline the current and historical reasons to believe that it is both possible and beneficial to pursue a partial, limited reset with Belarus that provides Lukashenko with the necessary leeway to return to his preferred policy of preserving Belarusian sovereignty by straddling U.S. and Russian interests. Creating such an opening will not be simple. It will require policymakers to revisit the core assumptions that have guided Washington's Belarus policy for much of the post-Cold War period, and to adopt a strategic posture that incentivizes, rather than punishes, Belarus' aspiration to be a pivot player between East and West. Even with these policies in place, the damage done to Belarus' relations with the West from years of isolation cannot be easily undone; Belarus has no clear pathway to becoming a fully neutral state in the foreseeable future.

However, pursuing a soft reset with Belarus is vastly preferable to the alternatives. The current approach of letting Belarus slowly drift deeper into Russia's and, more recently, China's sphere of influence as a means of offsetting relentless Western pressure does not advance U.S. interests. Trying to actively force a regime change scenario in Belarus is dangerous and counterproductive, as it would drive Minsk even deeper into Russia's arms, as it did in 2020, or facilitate a direct Russian military intervention that could potentially erase Belarusian statehood altogether.

On the other hand, policies centered on cultivating Belarusian sovereignty unlock an additional outlet for U.S. and European influence in the CEE region, create a vehicle for diluting the regional influence of great power competitors at low risk and nearly no cost, provide a major boon to strategic stability and deconfliction on NATO's eastern flank, and potentially help consolidate America's position as a major energy exporter in Europe.

“Multi-vector foreign policy” and Lukashenko’s embattled neutrality

Belarus as a Eurasian pivot player

There has been a longstanding tendency in the West, amplified following the 2022 Ukraine invasion, to view Aleksandr Lukashenko as an avowedly pro-Russian leader. No one has done more over the years to cultivate this image than Lukashenko himself. “As for Russia, we are one people, I’ve said this a thousand times. These [Russians] are our people, our brothers. We were always together, they always gave us a shoulder to lean on,” Lukashenko said in 2019.³

But Lukashenko’s long history of Russophile rhetoric indicates a starkly different foreign policy approach. Moscow and Minsk signed the “Treaty on the Creation of a Union State” in 1999, building on an earlier set of bilateral political and economic agreements between the two states. The 1999 treaty was meant to pave the way for a unified Russo-Belarusian state with a common government, constitution, currency, and military. Though Lukashenko nominally supported the treaty, he has dragged his heels on implementing its major statutes. He insisted that the Union State must proceed as an equal partnership and not, as he believed it is seen by some in Moscow, as a project to absorb Belarus into Russia. “They demand that we join Russia, but I don’t want to

³ “Lukashenko on Fraternal Relations: “I tell Putin: This is my Russia, this is my country,” *Delfi*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.delfi.lt/ru/abroad/belorussia/lukashenko-o-bratskih-otnosheniyah-ya-putinu-govoryu-eto-i-moya-rossiya-eto-moya-strana-82178957>.

bury the country's sovereignty and independence as the first president of Belarus," he said.⁴

Safeguarding Belarusian sovereignty has been a consistent theme of Lukashenko's statesmanship throughout his 30-year tenure as the leader of Belarus.

Safeguarding Belarusian sovereignty — even and especially at the expense of political and military integration with Russia — has been a consistent theme of Lukashenko's statesmanship throughout his 30-year tenure as the leader of Belarus. He appears to have concluded early in his career that his only way to escape what would otherwise be Minsk's one-sided dependence on its much larger, richer, and more powerful Russian neighbor is to develop countervailing ties with other great powers: namely, Europe, the United States, and, more recently, China. Lukashenko's long-run goal is not to replace Russia, which he has always recognized as Belarus' most important partner by dint of geography and history, but to engage Russia with a stronger hand by diversifying Minsk's strategic portfolio with help from outside actors. In the same vein, Lukashenko has previously leveraged the threat of deeper Russia-Belarus military integration to engage the West if not from a position of strength, then at least with meaningful bargaining power.

This vision of a geopolitically agile Belarus, deftly straddling the great powers to preserve political independence on the best possible terms, was described by Lukashenko as a "multi-vector foreign policy."⁵

Much to the Kremlin's frustration, prior to Western pressure around the 2020 election, a recurring feature of Belarusian multi-vector politics was to keep Russia at arm's length

⁴ "Lukashenko: 'I don't want to bury the country's sovereignty as Belarus' first president,'" *New Day*, January 15, 2007, <https://newdaynews.ru/policy/99310.html>.

⁵ "Lukashenko claims turn to West because of no understanding in Russia," TASS, September 1, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1196067>.

politically and militarily whilst leveraging Belarus–EU ties to coax energy subsidies and other economic benefits from Russia. Minsk refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the 2008 Russo–Georgian War, prompting a dispute with Moscow over a \$500 million loan and Russian ban on Belarusian milk and dairy products known as the 2009 Milk War.⁶ Belarus subsequently opened negotiations with the EU on harmonizing milk standards, illustrating one of the staple tools of Lukashenko’s multi–vector policy toolkit: Minsk constantly alternates between feigning interest in falling into either the Russian or Western spheres of influence as a strategy to preserve its long–term independence from both.⁷

In 2014, days after Crimea’s annexation, Lukashenko refused to recognize Crimea as legally a part of Russia and criticized the annexation as setting a “bad precedent.”⁸ The 2014 invasion of Ukraine did not prompt Lukashenko to throw his lot in with Russia, defying long standing claims of an autocratic convergence between Minsk and Moscow. Instead, he seized on the conflict to build up his credentials as a non–aligned leader, with Belarus successfully leveraging its neutrality to host a series of negotiations between Ukraine and Russian–backed separatists that became known as the Minsk agreements. The perception of Lukashenko’s Belarus as a permanently hostile Russian outpost thus is not only divorced from the reality of Belarusian foreign policy, but unwittingly advances Russian interests by forcing Lukashenko into a strategic posture wherein he has no choice but to pursue deeper ties with Moscow as a countermeasure against a Western policy of isolation.

Lukashenko’s Belarus was not alone in pursuing a grand strategy centered on leveraging its strategic position as a crossroads between East and West.⁹ Rather, this policy fits into a broader pattern of non–aligned diplomacy practiced by states across the

⁶ Ellen Barry, “Milk War’ Strains Russia-Belarus Ties,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/15/world/europe/15belarus.html>.

⁷ Vitali Silitski, “The milk split by the milk war,” *Politico*, June 24, 2009.

⁸ “Belarusian President Says Crimean Annexation ‘Bad Precedent,’” *Radio Free Europe*, March 23, 2014, [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-leader-u-turn-says-annexed-crimea-is-legally-russian-ria-2021-11-30/#:~:text=MOSCOW%2C%20Nov%2030%20\(Reuters\),reversal%20of%20his%20public%20stance](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-leader-u-turn-says-annexed-crimea-is-legally-russian-ria-2021-11-30/#:~:text=MOSCOW%2C%20Nov%2030%20(Reuters),reversal%20of%20his%20public%20stance).

⁹ Nikolas Gvosdev, “Moscow Nights, Eurasian Dreams,” *The National Interest*, no. 68 (2002): 155–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42897435>.

post-Soviet sphere, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia after 2008. Several of these states, including Belarus, are members of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), but it is premature to describe any of them as Russia's military allies. The CSTO, as recent events between Armenia and Azerbaijan have shown, is a politically lifeless and militarily toothless institution that at times more resembles a discussion platform than a security alliance.¹⁰

Lukashenko's Belarus not only showed no interest in teaming up with Russia to form an illiberal or anti-democratic axis, but, in fact, had a history of seeking cooperation with the West at Russia's expense as part of its multi-vector policy.¹¹

Human rights as a policy objective

The Lukashenko government's record on human rights has long been a major point of contention between Minsk and the West, informing much of the skepticism exercised in the U.S. policy community toward a policy of sustained engagement with Belarus. Belarus can be described as a soft authoritarian state, with Lukashenko's government controlling the public discourse in ways that have precluded meaningful political competition and perpetuated its monopoly over all major institutions. Lamentably, Belarusian authorities have a track record of leveraging tools of repression — up to and including imprisonment — against opposition activists.¹² Yet it is important to acknowledge that numerous U.S. allies across the world, particularly in the Middle East, engage in the same practices.¹³ If relative political unfreedom and lack of adherence to democratic norms do not, either in principle or in practice, disqualify Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Turkey and many other countries with which the United States has human

¹⁰ Mikayel Zolyan, "How the West Managed to Sideline Russia in Mediating the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 11, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88347>.

¹¹ "How the Belarus-Russia axis works together on anti-EU disinformation push," *Euractiv*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/belarus/news/how-the-belarus-russia-axis-works-together-on-anti-eu-disinformation-push/>.

¹² Yuras Karmanau, "Thousands of Belarusians convicted on politically driven charges in sweeping crackdown on dissent," *AP*, March 4, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/belarus-lukashenko-crackdown-43bb792426aa072ff45cb44a89a695a1>.

¹³ "Saudi Arabia: dramatic escalation in jailings for online dissent in past year," Amnesty International, February 14, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/saudi-arabia-dramatic-escalation-jailings-online-dissent-past-year>.

rights disagreements from cooperating with the United States on a wide range of issues, a similar carveout can be made for Belarus.¹⁴

Counterintuitively, Western attempts to democratize Belarus through political and diplomatic pressure have further disincentivized democratic reforms by driving Belarus into Russia's arms and facilitating a deeper level of integration between the two.¹⁵ As extensively documented by research into the international fallout from the contested 2006 Belarusian presidential election, Lukashenko is always able to offset Western pressure by turning to Moscow, which has a persistent interest in building its influence in Belarus and, conversely, containing the spread of Western influence in the country. More recently, a similar— albeit less potent — dynamic has emerged between Belarus and China, suggesting that Minsk's offsetting strategies are becoming more sophisticated and the West's ability to force changes in Belarus is becoming weaker over time due to the rise of non-Western powers that are, at best apathetic and, at worst, hostile to the Euro-Atlantic policy consensus.

The established incentive structure for driving democratization through isolation will not work on Belarus because Lukashenko's relationship with his larger neighbor has insulated him from such pressures, and continued attempts to impose this punitive model only serve to diminish U.S. and EU leverage over Minsk. External pressure on Belarus has, therefore, been not only ineffective but consistently counterproductive.

However, periods of rapprochement between Lukashenko and the West have been accompanied by human rights progress inside Belarus.¹⁶ Lukashenko's decision to release numerous political prisoners following his victory in the comparatively freer 2016 election and his role in brokering the Minsk peace process prompted the EU to lift sanctions against Belarus in 2016, illustrating a positive feedback loop between

¹⁴ Robert Kaplan, "America Can't Afford to Alienate its Undemocratic Allies," *Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-cant-afford-to-alienate-its-undemocratic-allies-egypt-diplomacy-middle-east-saudi-arabia-b8b3f73b>.

¹⁵ Thomas Ambrosio, "The Political Success of Russia-Belarus Relations: Insulating Minsk from a Color Revolution," *Demokratizatsiya*, 14, no. 3 (2006): 407-434, https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/14_3_9162J67W06523546.pdf.

¹⁶ "Belarus: EU suspends restrictive measures against most persons and all entities currently targeted," European Union, October 30, 2015, Consilium, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/29/belarus/>.

engagement and human rights improvements.¹⁷ There is rich precedent for this approach: the 1970s Helsinki process and its approach of compartmentalizing normalization with the U.S.S.R. into distinct “baskets” illustrates how a framework for productive engagement can be a much more effective vehicle for advancing human rights than a policy of isolation. Finding a framework for continued regional cooperation with Belarus is therefore not only strategically apt but complements the promotion of democratic and liberal values in a way that does not invite blowback or risk regional escalation.

Isolation and regime change: A failed policy

Lukashenko’s multi-vector policy achieved many of its greatest successes in the run-up to the 2020 Belarusian presidential election. Russia, frustrated by a lack of progress in bilateral integration talks, suspended oil supplies to Belarus in early 2020 in an apparent move to dial up the pressure on Minsk. Lukashenko, in keeping with his long-established emphasis on sovereignty even at the expense of friendly relations with Moscow, moved to counterbalance his country’s dependence on Russian energy exports with plans to purchase crude oil from the United States.¹⁸ That decision appeared to herald a thaw in relations between Belarus and the West; reinforcing this nascent trend, Belarusian authorities arrested over two dozen Russian Wagner mercenaries on suspicion of “terrorism” and for trying to destabilize the country ahead of its presidential election.¹⁹ Lukashenko, who accused Russia of harboring “dirty intentions,” seized on

¹⁷ David Stern, “Opposition’s tiny gains point to thaw in Belarus,” *Politico*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/oppositions-tiny-gains-point-to-thaw-in-belarus-president-alexander-lukashenko-opposition-parliament-election/>.

¹⁸ “First Shipment of U.S. Oil to Belarus,” U.S. Embassy in Belarus, May 15, 2020, <https://by.usembassy.gov/on-first-shipment-of-u-s-oil-to-belarus/>.

¹⁹ Mary Ilyushina, “Belarus says it’s arrested Russian mercenaries, as rift grows between strongmen Putin and Lukashenko,” *CNN*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/30/europe/belarus-russia-mercenaries-arrests-intl/index.html>.

the Wagner scandal to shore up his domestic image as the guarantor of Belarusian sovereignty.²⁰

The Wagner scandal illustrated a persistent reality of the multi-vector policy: Russia, which shares a lengthy border, deep ethno-cultural ties, and centuries of common political history with Belarus, inherently poses a greater challenge to Belarusian strategic autonomy than the West. Russia's existential security interests towards Belarus have led Moscow to persistently try to draw Minsk into its sphere of influence through measures up to and including a "Union State" framework for the country's de-facto absorption into Russia, creating a negative feedback loop that can be exploited by the West.

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Minsk and Moscow will remain at odds over key issues for as long as Lukashenko tries to carve out an independent foreign policy path between Russia and the West. The United States and the EU need not pressure Minsk into explicitly and irretrievably breaking with Russia in order to capitalize on these differences. As I argue below, the conditions for a resumption of multi-vector politics are still in place, but the West will need to be willing to contend with the realities of the post-2022 situation. Economic cooperation provides a convenient point of departure: Washington's prior decision to supply Belarus with energy with no strings attached was an effective policy precisely because it did not force Lukashenko to choose between Russia and the West in ways that would have compromised his ability to maneuver between these two poles or provoked a substantial Russian response. "I want to emphasize that we fully support

²⁰ "Belarus detains 33 Russian contractors ahead of election," AP, July 29, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/alexander-lukashenko-belarus-moscow-elections-campaigns-43d161001e935a56026c472557b2389c>.

Belarus's desire to make its own choices, pursue its own partnerships, and play a constructive role in the region. Your nation should not be forced to be dependent on any one partner for your prosperity or for your security," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated during a 2020 visit to Minsk.²¹

Lukashenko's gravitation toward the West was reversed — and his multi-vector policy fatally crippled — in the aftermath of post-election protests against the Lukashenko government. Opposition politician Svetlana Tikhanovskaya rejected the official election results, which ascribed 80 percent of the vote to Lukashenko, and fled to Vilnius to head a government-in-exile. Several CEE states seized on the country's election turmoil as an opportunity to effect regime change in Belarus. Western governments nearly unanimously refused to accept the election results, with Lithuania taking the added step of recognizing Tikhanovskaya as Belarus' head of state. "The United States cannot consider Aleksandr Lukashenko the legitimately elected leader of Belarus," a State Department official told the media.²²

Minsk was subjected to a Western maximum pressure campaign executed in coordination with mass protests by Belarusian opposition activists demanding Lukashenko's resignation. The White House and EU announced a raft of sanctions against Belarusian officials including Lukashenko himself, effectively severing diplomatic ties and suspending any meaningful venues for cooperation between Belarus and the West. Lukashenko was forced to turn to the only actor willing to underwrite his government's stability in a time of crisis: Russia. Propelled by a stark asymmetry of interest stemming from his conviction that a Western-aligned Belarus creates unacceptable security risks for Russia, Vladimir Putin raised the stakes in ways that the United States and the EU could not match. Putin warned he was ready to send Russian security forces across the border to prevent regime change in Belarus and,

²¹ "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo And Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei Remarks," U.S. Embassy in Belarus, February 1, 2020, <https://by.usembassy.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-and-belarusian-foreign>.

²² Dave Lawler, "U.S. no longer recognizes Lukashenko as legitimate president of Belarus," *Axios*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/2020/09/23/us-lukashenko-president-belarus>.

weeks later, extended a \$1.5 billion loan to Lukashenko to offset economic pain from international sanctions and labor walkouts coordinated by the opposition.²³

Russia's help came squarely at the expense of Belarusian sovereignty. Lukashenko was finally forced to abandon much of the multi-vector policy that characterized Belarusian grand strategy for over two decades, committing to numerous new integration measures within the Union State framework that impaired Minsk's longstanding and frequently successful attempts to carve out a geopolitical space between East and West.²⁴

In their ill-conceived desire to replace Lukashenko with a firmly pro-Western government, Brussels and the CEE states at the spearhead of the maximum pressure campaign against Minsk unwittingly improved Russia's position in the CEE region, contributed to a needless militarization of NATO's eastern flank, removed what was a potent and willing conduit for Western political clout in eastern Europe, and deprived themselves of a useful long-term lever for influencing Russia.

Western attempts to isolate Belarus have also heightened the country's dependence on China, another key U.S. competitor.²⁵ Lukashenko has recently sought to deepen economic and political ties with China as an additional means to counteract Western pressure and to diversify what would otherwise be Minsk's one-sided reliance on Russia.²⁶ This impulse to shift multi-vector politics eastward, though unsurprising given Lukashenko's longstanding preoccupation with national sovereignty, is not nearly as effective and potentially profitable as his prior attempts to tread a delicate path between Russia and the West. Minsk lacks the capacity to effectively play Moscow and Beijing

²³ Paul Dallison, "A friend is in trouble: Lukashenko gets \$1.5B loan from Putin," *Politico*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/alexander-lukashenko-1-5b-loan-vladimir-putin/>.

²⁴ "Putin, Lukashenka Agree To 28 Union State Programs," *Radio Liberty*, November 04, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-lukashenka-union-state/31546225.html>.

²⁵ Andrei Yeliseyev and Olga Aleszko-Lessels, "Amid Sunny Rhetoric, China Restricts Investment in Belarus," *ChinaObservers*, February 14, 2023, <https://chinaobservers.eu/amid-sunny-rhetoric-china-restricts-investment-in-belarus/>.

²⁶ Joe Cash and Liz Lee, "Belarus President Lukashenko returns to China, seeks stronger ties," Reuters, December 4, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-willing-continue-strengthening-cooperation-with-belarus-state-media-2023-12-04/>.

off one another for two reasons: the Kremlin is not worried about the Belarus–China defense relationship developing in a way that threatens Russia’s security interests, and Belarusian-Chinese economic ties are unlikely to develop to such a degree that they will crowd Russia out of Belarusian markets.

Multi–vector politics was conceived, and is only possible, in a geopolitical configuration that allows Belarus to act as a pivot player between Russia and the West. This state of affairs, while suboptimal for Russia, offered the West a wide array of economic, military, and political benefits. Yet some Western and particularly CEE leaders, spurred by what they saw as an opportunity to replace Lukashenko with a firmly pro–Western government, put all their chips on regime change in Belarus. In doing so, they overplayed their hand and achieved the worst possible strategic outcome for the West: a Lukashenko government, wounded but still intact, that was forced against its wishes — and in stark contradistinction to its decades-long emphasis on sovereignty — into Russia’s sphere of influence.

With no Western pole to fall back on, Minsk was left without its established tools for resisting Russia’s attempts to carve out a permanent and vastly expanded military presence in the country. Russian–Belarusian defense cooperation accelerated so quickly that, by September 2021, Lukashenko said that Russia and Belarus “effectively have a single army, with the Belarusian military forming its backbone in the western direction. If a war were to start, the Belarusian army would be the first to engage in the fight, and the western group of Russia’s armed forces would join quickly after to form a joint defense.”²⁷

²⁷ Brian Whitmore, “Russian-Belarusian military merger accelerates on NATO’s eastern flank,” Atlantic Council, September 15, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/belarusalert/russian-belarusian-military-merger-accelerates-on-natos-eastern-flank/>.

Putting Belarus' eastward drift in perspective

Left without any geopolitical alternatives, Lukashenko acquiesced to an unprecedented program of defense integration that included a stark Russian military buildup on Belarusian territory.²⁸ It is in the context of this one-sided dependency that the Belarusian-Ukrainian border became one of the axes of advance for Russian forces in the initial stages of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainian officials said Russian missiles were launched toward Ukraine from Belarusian territory and that Russian troops participating in the conflict reportedly received medical assistance in Belarus, though there is no independently-corroborated evidence that Belarusian troops took part in the invasion.²⁹ Lukashenko insisted Belarus has not entered, nor is it being pushed by Russia into, the war in Ukraine, and lobbied for a role in brokering or at least hosting peace talks between Moscow and Kyiv.³⁰ Indeed, the first Russian-Ukrainian peace talks between two parties were held several days into the invasion in southern Belarus' Gomel region.

Nevertheless, Belarus came under an even more withering sanctions regime as part of the Western response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. EU officials spoke of the need to "mirror" the sanctions applied to Russia, so that they applied to Belarus as well.³¹ Statements by the G7 and other European countries framed Minsk and Moscow as wartime partners, if not co-belligerents.³² This framework of

²⁸ "Russia, Belarus ink five-year strategic military partnership plan for first time," TASS, March 2, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1261783>.

²⁹ Eliza Mackintosh, Sebastian Shukla, and Sarah-Grace Mankarious, "Inside the hospitals that concealed Russian casualties," CNN, October 25, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2022/10/europe/belarus-hospitals-russian-soldiers-ukraine/index.html>; and "Ukrainian official says missiles launched from Belarus to Ukraine," Reuters, February 27, 2022, [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-official-says-missiles-launched-belarus-ukraine-2022-02-27/#:~:text=Ukrainian%20official%20says%20missiles%20launched%20from%20Belarus%20to%20Ukraine,By%20Reuters&text=Feb%2027%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20Missiles,to%20Ukraine's%20interior%20minister%20said](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukrainian-official-says-missiles-launched-belarus-ukraine-2022-02-27/#:~:text=Ukrainian%20official%20says%20missiles%20launched%20from%20Belarus%20to%20Ukraine,By%20Reuters&text=Feb%2027%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20Missiles,to%20Ukraine's%20interior%20minister%20said).

³⁰ "Putin not pushing Belarus to join Ukraine war, Lukashenko says," Al Jazeera, August 18, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/18/putin-not-pushing-belarus-to-join-ukraine-war-lukashenko-says>.

³¹ "EU Sanctions Proposal on Belarus 'Mirror' Some Measures Applied to Russia - Media," *European Pravda*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.euointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2023/01/27/7154994/>.

³² "G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on Russia's War Against Ukraine," U.S. Department of State, May 14, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/g7-foreign-ministers-statement-on-russias-war-against-ukraine/>; "Sanctions against Russia and Belarus," Government of the Netherlands, at <https://www.government.nl/topics/russia-and-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-and-belarus>.

mutual Russian–Belarusian culpability solidified a kind of policy linkage between the two countries that took root in Washington and Europe during the 2020 election protests in Minsk and persists to the present day.³³ According to this line of thinking, Russia and Belarus have formed an anti–Western bloc with the goal of undermining NATO and the EU, and the aim of U.S. policy in the CEE region must be to shore up NATO’s eastern flank so as to deter, confront, and, if necessary, roll back the Russian–Belarusian threat.

However, this approach is counterproductive because it fails to accurately diagnose the factors driving Belarusian grand strategy. Lukashenko, despite his weakened hand against Moscow, vigorously resisted becoming directly embroiled in the Ukraine war and has instead consistently called for peace talks to end the war. "We need to sit down at the negotiating table and come to an agreement," he said in late 2023. He added: "As I once said: no preconditions are needed. The main thing is that the 'stop' command is given."³⁴

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Even as Lukashenko draws clear red lines around the the substance of bilateral defense cooperation with Russia, his government is sending signals to Western capitals that Belarus is interested in relaunching its multi–vector policy if it is met with willing partners on the other side. Top Belarusian officials, up to and including Lukashenko,

³³ Vladislav Davidzon, "Putin and Lukashenko Are Reluctant Authoritarian Bros," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/21/putin-lukashenko-belarus-sanctions/>.

³⁴ "Belarus' Lukashenko says Ukraine-Russia war at stalemate, urges talks," Reuters, October 28, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-lukashenko-says-ukraine-russia-war-stalemate-urges-talks-2023-10-29/>.

have indicated that Minsk stands ready to improve relations with Washington across a wide range of topics, including both narrow areas of cooperation and larger strategic–political issues.³⁵ “Now we make money mainly in the East: in Russia, in China. But we should not discard contacts with the high–tech West. They are close, the European Union is our neighbor. And we should maintain contact with them. We are ready to do that, but we have to give due consideration to our own interests,” Lukashenko said last year. “We need to talk to the Poles. I told the prime minister to contact them. If they want, we can talk, mend our relations. We are neighbors, and this cannot be chosen, neighbors are given by God.”³⁶ The Belarusian leader voiced a similar message, this time for American audiences, earlier that year: “I want us to have normal relations. On my side there is only one thing: don’t interfere in our garden...do not interfere with our lives, and we will be good partners. We are ready for anything that does not contradict our interests and the interests of our allies. If you do not bend us over your knees, we will quickly reach an agreement,” Lukashenko said.³⁷

Washington has ample reason to take these signals seriously. While Belarus is highly unlikely to join Russia’s war in Ukraine, the potential remains for several other flashpoints. Belarusian strategic thinking has been characterized since 2020 by acute fears around regime stability and preservation. The Lukashenko government has expressed severe concerns over claims that “Belarusian radicals” are being trained in Ukraine and several countries on NATO’s eastern flank, including Poland and Lithuania. These groups, warned Lukashenko, seek to “carry out sabotage and terrorist attacks and organize a military rebellion in Belarus.”³⁸ These fears of a Western–backed uprising

³⁵ These observations are based on the author’s discussions with top Belarusian officials and can be extensively corroborated by reference to the sources cited in this brief. Grigory Ioffe, “Belarus Looks to Revive Its ‘Multi-Vector’ Foreign Policy,” The Jamestown Foundation, October 25, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/belarus-looks-to-revive-its-multi-vector-foreign-policy/>.

³⁶ Giovanna Faggionato, “Belarus’s Lukashenko says he wants to improve relations with Poland,” *Politico*, August 12, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/belarus-aleksander-lukashenko-improve-relations-poland/>.

³⁷ “Lukashenko: ‘I want normal relations with the West on one condition: do not interfere in our garden,’” *Belta*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ja-hochu-normalnyh-otnoshenij-s-zapadom-odno-uslovie-ne-lezt-v-nash-ogorod-550636-2023/>.

³⁸ “Terrorists are trained in Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine for attacks in Belarus — Lukashenko,” *TASS*, October 10, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1520447>.

in Belarus — whether on the Polish-Belarusian border or in Minsk — are stoked by the West’s open-ended support for Belarusian opposition activists even as the EU and United States refuse to normalize diplomatic relations with Belarus.

Minsk greenlit the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil shortly following the tightening of Western punitive measures over Belarus’ role in the Ukraine invasion.³⁹ Lukashenko couched his reasons for this drastic step squarely in terms of regime preservation: "We have always been a target," he said. "They [the West] have wanted to tear us to pieces since 2020. No one has so far fought against a nuclear country, a country that has nuclear weapons."⁴⁰ There are clear indications that the Lukashenko government perceives an existential threat to its survival emanating from NATO’s eastern flank. If Minsk decides that this threat is imminent, it could initiate a drastic military buildup on its border with Poland or Lithuania that, in the absence of credible deconfliction mechanisms, risks precipitating a direct confrontation between Belarus and NATO countries. Depending on the nature and exigence of the perceived threat, Belarus could go as far as to initiate cross-border military operations against Poland or Lithuania. One of the region’s biggest flashpoints is the Suwalki Gap, a strip of land running across the Polish-Lithuanian border that connects Belarus to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Any attempt to blockade Kaliningrad or otherwise compromise Russia’s control over the area risks triggering an escalation that would likely drag Belarus, against its wishes, into direct military conflict with NATO countries.⁴¹ Minsk has made no secret of the Suwalki Gap’s importance in its thinking around a possible confrontation with NATO. Lukashenko publicly discussed with his top military officials

³⁹ "Belarus approves hosting nuclear weapons, Russian forces permanently," France 24, February 28, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220228-belarus-approves-hosting-nuclear-weapons-russian-forces-permanently>.

⁴⁰ Lidia Kelly and Andrew Osborn, "Belarus starts taking delivery of Russian nuclear weapons," Reuters, June 14, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-has-started-taking-delivery-russian-tactical-nuclear-weapons-president-2023-06-14/>.

⁴¹ "Moscow Reels, Lashes Out At Lithuania Over Kaliningrad Cutoff," *RadioLiberty*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-lithuania-kaliningrad-cutoff/31906501.html>.

the feasibility of seizing the Gap, signaling to Warsaw and Vilnius that Belarus is preparing for a conflict involving the Gap.⁴²

Belarus has less risky options for destabilizing NATO's eastern flank. Minsk can facilitate large volumes of migrant inflows into neighboring NATO countries. Indeed, it has previously done so as a reprisal against Warsaw for its role in post-2020 punitive measures against Minsk.⁴³ It can house, equip, and support Russian mercenaries with the capacity to conduct low-intensity cross-border operations on Polish and Baltic territory. The threat of such operations, let alone their execution, is itself a persistent source of destabilization on NATO's eastern flank.⁴⁴

These threats cannot be alleviated by pursuing policies aimed at regime change in Minsk. There is research to suggest that a large swathe, if not a preponderance, of Belarusians feel a significant degree of affinity toward Russia and oppose a Westernizing agenda that would see Belarus adopt an explicitly anti-Russian political or security posture.⁴⁵ Though public attitudes toward the Lukashenko government are difficult to gauge precisely, there is no concrete evidence to suggest that the exiled Belarusian opposition enjoys majority support inside the country. To the extent that Belarusians favor closer engagement with the West in general and the EU in particular, it is mostly in areas of economic rather than security cooperation.

Leaving aside substantive concerns over whether the Belarusian people genuinely want to be represented by a government that defines itself in existential opposition to Russia, policymakers must reckon with the implications of regime change in Belarus. It is a

⁴² Oleh Pavliuk and Tetyana Olinyuk, "Lukashenko discusses possible attack on Suwałki Gap," *Ukrainska Pravda*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/03/26/7448273/>.

⁴³ Kacper Pempel and Maria Kiselyova, "Go through. Go! Lukashenko tells migrants at Polish border," *Reuters*, November 26, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lukashenko-tells-migrants-belarus-poland-border-he-wont-make-them-go-home-2021-11-26/>.

⁴⁴ "Lukashenko says demands by Poland and Baltics for Wagner to quit Belarus are 'stupid,'" *Reuters*, August 31, 2023, [https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lukashenko-says-demands-by-poland-baltics-wagner-quit-belarus-are-stupid-2023-08-31/#:~:text=Aug%2031%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20Belarusian,agency%20BELTA%20reported%20on%20Thursday](https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/lukashenko-says-demands-by-poland-baltics-wagner-quit-belarus-are-stupid-2023-08-31/#:~:text=Aug%2031%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20Belarusian,agency%20BELTA%20reported%20on%20Thursday.).

⁴⁵ "Annual Survey 2023: Belarus," *EU Neighbors East*, September 15, 2023, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2023-belarus/>; Grigory Ioffe, "Lukashenka and the Nuances of Belarusian Nationalism," *The Jamestown Foundation*, March 25, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/lukashenka-and-the-nuances-of-belarusian-nationalism/>.

near-certainty that the Kremlin would dispatch Russian security forces to restore order in the event of a major uprising in Belarus. This would either heighten Lukashenko's dependence on Russia or, depending on the scale and severity of the turmoil, precipitate Belarus' full-scale absorption as a Russian oblast.

Yet the status quo, too, is inimical for the United States. A Belarus that is irretrievably isolated from the West poses myriad direct and indirect challenges to European security. The established policy of maximum pressure against Minsk thus is not in Washington's interests and should be replaced with a pragmatic, more flexible framework for realizing U.S. strategic goals in eastern Europe.

Multi-vector politics revisited

The pieces are in place for U.S. policy to pursue a soft reset with Belarus and revive multi-vector politics, but doing so requires a broader change of approach. Namely, policymakers must grow comfortable with a Belarus that straddles between East and West as an optimal state of affairs for managing long-term bilateral relations.⁴⁶

Policymakers must grow comfortable with a Belarus that straddles between East and West as an optimal state of affairs for managing long-term bilateral relations.

This principle is widely accepted as a point of departure when it comes to other post-Soviet states, notably Azerbaijan and most of central Asia. Indeed, many of the reasons commonly cited for engaging these states despite their close partner relations with Moscow and frequent incongruence with Western-style liberal democracy apply at least much, if not more so, to Belarus.

⁴⁶ Luke Coffey and Efgan Nifti, "Why the West Needs Azerbaijan," *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/28/why-the-west-needs-azerbaijan/>.

A relationship premised on respect for Belarus' attempt to pursue a more neutral foreign policy places policymakers on better footing to deal with the Belarus that exists, not the one Washington prefers. There are clear limits on what a program of normalization with Belarus can achieve, especially in the short-to-medium term. Russia will remain Belarus' largest military, economic, and political partner for the foreseeable future; any steps toward rapprochement must work within and around this reality rather than trying to confront it directly. Normalization, in order to be successful, must be pursued as an incremental, rather than zero-sum, endeavor.

In the realm of Belarus–Russia defense cooperation, for instance, Lukashenko views Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory as his insurance policy against a repeat of the 2020 regime change scenario, and there is no realistic policy path to coaxing or pressuring Minsk into removing these weapons.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the precise extent of Russia's conventional military presence in Belarus, level of integration between Russian and Belarusian forces, and degree of Russian influence over Belarusian defense policy are all fluctuating factors that can be recalibrated by Minsk if provided with the right incentives by Western governments. It is not possible to pursue a full-fledged reset with Belarus in large part because of the policy baggage accumulated since 2020, but also because of the persistent geopolitical realities that have shaped Belarusian strategic thinking since the Soviet collapse. The much-needed reset in U.S.–Belarus relations should therefore be moored in incremental rather than zero-sum or maximalist thinking. The goal should be to work with Minsk on the margins, not to try to force a radical shift.

Despite these limitations, it is squarely in U.S. interests to enable a revival of Lukashenko's multi-vector policy. The first and most important step to doing so is to return to a policy, abandoned in the aftermath of the 2020 election crisis, of differentiating Belarus from Russia. There is no seamless Russian–Belarusian axis, and

⁴⁷ "Belarus approves hosting nuclear weapons, Russian forces permanently," France 24, February 28, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220228-belarus-approves-hosting-nuclear-weapons-russian-forces-permanently>.

any policies or rhetoric stemming from this inaccurate image only benefit Russia's goal of achieving complete leverage and control over Minsk. An approach premised on differentiation between Moscow and Minsk doesn't just have the benefit of being grounded in reality — it is also strategically apt. Engagement with Minsk offers a source of leverage vis-à-vis Moscow, which has grown unaccustomed to competing with the West for influence in Belarus.

Deepening Western-Belarusian cooperation likewise gives the United States an additional card to play in any future strategic dialogue with Russia. It is not in U.S. interests to pursue anything approaching military or political integration with Belarus, but the West can and should compete with Russia in low-risk areas of bilateral cooperation — these include a resumption of U.S. energy exports, exploring schemes for direct Western investment into Belarus, and facilitation of travel as well as other cultural arrangements been between Belarus and the EU. A Belarus that is politically and commercially at play, rather than firmly ensconced in Russia's sphere of influence, makes for a bargaining chip that may relieve pressure on the United States and NATO to entertain concessions closer to core security concerns. Western — particularly European — manufacturing and energy investment into Belarus would not just dilute Russian influence but would also establish a hedge against China's growing economic presence in the country. It would also help consolidate America's position as a principal energy exporter in Europe, which helps the United States domestically and strategically.

There are several steps that must be taken before any of these beneficial outcomes can be meaningfully advanced. The West's practice of mirroring its Russia sanctions regime against Belarus has achieved the opposite of U.S. policy aims, heightening Minsk's reliance on American adversaries and encouraging Lukashenko down a more anti-Western policy path. Indeed, this maximum-pressure approach fails to grasp the underlying reality that U.S. and European long-term leverage over Belarus lies not in meting out punishments but in providing Minsk with its only viable counterweight against Russia's dominant influence.

Mirrored sanctions packages should therefore be replaced with a piecemeal approach that promises a partial lifting of restrictions within a broader framework of diplomatic normalization between Belarus and the West. In the same vein, White House officials should stress in direct talks with their Belarusian counterparts that regime change in Belarus is not and has never been a U.S. aim, and that the United States neither encourages nor condones any hypothetical effort to equip, house, or train Belarusian anti-government radicals on NATO territory. These two steps, in tandem, support what should be the most pressing short-to-medium term U.S. action toward Belarus: Appointing and sending an ambassador to Minsk, thus marking a full restoration of diplomatic relations.

These measures should be taken proactively but not unconditionally. U.S. officials should stress that any steps toward normalization are contingent upon Belarus not deepening its involvement in the Ukraine war or pursuing any unilaterally aggressive actions against Ukraine. The West should not premise bilateral normalization on a reversal of the Belarus–Russia defense relationship, nor can it feasibly supplant Russia as Belarus’ largest security partner, but there is extensive precedent to suggest that a revival of the multi-vector policy will apply downward pressure on the scale and extent of Russia–Belarus defense ties over the long term. In the short run, the United States and its allies should make clear in private bilateral discussions that allowing Belarusian territory to be used by Russia to carry out operations in Ukraine undermines the government’s professed neutrality and can jeopardize any movement in the direction of normalization with the West.⁴⁸ There need not be an explicit quid pro quo offer in this area – that is, policymakers should not tell Belarus that it will be rewarded in a specific way if it scales back certain forms of cooperation with Russia. Prior policy experience

⁴⁸ Olga Keskin, “Lukashenko: Minsk priderzhivayetsya neytraliteta otnositel'no sobytiy v Ukraine,” *Anadolu*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80/%D0%BB%D1%83%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B6%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%81%D1%8F-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%8B%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B9-%D0%B2-%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B5/2540142>.

with Turkey's S-400 purchase shows this kind of pressure rarely works and often backfires.⁴⁹ The multi-vector policy's resilience lies precisely in the fact that it is premised on core interests rather than carrot-and-stick policy gimmicks.

The West should also seek reciprocal assurances from Minsk that it will not allow Belarusian territory to be used to carry out any military actions against NATO countries – including efforts against the Suwalki Gap. It should be stressed by Western diplomats that any documented failure to uphold this guarantee will reverse steps toward normalization.

CEE countries should additionally engage Belarus in resuming cooperation on border controls to forestall any coordination between Moscow and Minsk to facilitate an influx of migrants into Poland.⁵⁰ A program of normalization between Belarus and the EU would discourage Minsk from weaponizing migrant inflows into Europe, as it did in 2021 in response to the initial Western maximum-pressure campaign, and thus enhance the security of NATO's eastern flank in ways that go beyond purely military concerns.⁵¹

The damage wrought by years of a fruitless and counterproductive policy of isolation cannot be easily undone. Even the most adroit policy approach will find it difficult to reverse certain realities on the ground, likely including the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil, without engaging the Kremlin in broader dialogue over the architecture of European security. Belarus has no realistic pathway to NATO, in part due to Russia's readiness to take drastic military action to avert this scenario, nor does the alliance derive any benefits from Belarus' accession that would be nearly enough to offset the steep costs and risks involved. Foreclosing the possibility of Belarusian NATO membership would dispel long standing Russian concerns over Western designs on Belarus. It would give Lukashenko greater room for maneuver in

⁴⁹ "Erdogan says he told Biden Turkey is not shifting on S-400s - state media," Reuters, June 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-he-told-biden-turkey-is-not-shifting-s-400s-state-media-2021-06-17/>.

⁵⁰ "Poland Says Belarus, Russia 'Organizing' New Migrant Influx," VOA, August 7, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/poland-says-belarus-russia-organizing-new-migrant-influx/7214946.html>.

⁵¹ "Violence and Pushbacks at Poland-Belarus Border," Human Rights Watch, June 7, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/07/violence-and-pushbacks-poland-belarus-border>.

carving out productive relationships with the West without the risk of triggering a security spiral in eastern Europe, thus leading to a safer and more stable CEE region. However, any such talks with Russia on big-ticket items cannot take place while the Ukraine war remains in an active state. Indeed, given the vastly divergent positions occupied by Moscow and Washington on key strategic issues, meaningful progress on these issues would be hard-fought even under more politically propitious circumstances. But it is precisely because this larger dialogue is unfeasible in the near term that U.S. policy in eastern Europe must adhere to the realm of the possible.

However, this policy framework can achieve two outcomes. First, it will prevent a further substantive deepening of Russian–Belarusian integration and, through a combination of restraint and proactive measures, block the existing possibility of Belarus’ outright absorption into Russia. Secondly, by pursuing engagement, policymakers can not just halt but reverse Belarus’ slow drift into the Russo–Chinese sphere of influence. By embracing, rather than punishing, Belarusian efforts to carve out an independent course as a pivot player between East and West, the United States can shore up NATO’s eastern flank, enhance its strategic posture in eastern Europe, advance its domestic energy industry, and bolster its strategic posture vis-à-vis Russia, all at low risk and little cost. The current impasse between the United States and Belarus stems not from an inevitable clash of values or worldviews but is instead the result of specific, short-run policy choices that have locked both sides into a downward spiral of reprisal and recrimination. The window exists for a more productive bilateral relationship with substantial positive spillover effects for NATO and the CEE region. The United States should seize it.

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