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# Belarus has crossed the point of no return by hosting Russian nuclear weapons



Belarus has crossed the line. It can no longer expect to be treated differently from Russia in some future peace settlement to end the aggression against Ukraine.

By implementing the agreement on the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons to its territory, Belarus has crossed the point of no return, after which it will not be able to present its role in the aggression against Ukraine as secondary.

Belarus might have expected this while it served as a base for Russian aviation, a transit corridor for its troops, and a training area. After signing an agreement last Thursday, Belarus has lost any possibility for such expectations.

The Russian-Belarusian nuclear deal has long been on the table as an option and is not surprising, although it marks a significant turning point in Minsk's position in relation to the war in Ukraine.

## Lukashenko's defiant initiative

The Belarusian autocrat Alexander Lukashenko was the first to speak publicly about the possible deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus at the end of 2021, when he could not have known about Russian plans to invade Ukraine.

Already under Western sanctions due to the suppression of internal political protests, Lukashenko tried to counter announcements that the US could deploy its nuclear weapons in Poland by using this argument.

If he wanted to win Moscow's trust and economic concessions using such bellicose rhetoric, Lukashenko would soon bite his tongue, because Moscow worked hard to

realise this idea, which ended with an agreement on May 25.

Belarusian support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been low for some time, and there has been no bombing of Ukrainian targets from its territory since last autumn.

The sudden death of Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei last November and Lukashenko's collapse at the military parade in Moscow on May 9 fuelled suspicions that the Kremlin is not satisfied with its closest partner's contribution to the war effort in Ukraine.

## Response to sending Western planes to Kyiv

Even if it wanted to, Minsk cannot influence whether and when the agreement on the deployment of nuclear missiles will be activated and signed. This is Moscow's decision.

The timing of the activation of the long-discussed deal seems to be a response to the Western shift in supplying Ukraine's military with modern fighter jets, including the US F-16s.

Russia wants to show it has the means for an additional escalation of the situation regarding Ukraine in reserve, but the question is at what cost and to what effect?

If it wanted to tie the fate of Belarus to its own until the end and block its satellite from any option for possible disobedience, Russia achieved that with the nuclear agreement.

However, from the military point of view, the deployment of nuclear reactors in Belarus and

the adaptation of its aviation for nuclear missile use does not make a strategic difference compared with the current situation.

Russia has deployed nuclear power plants in the Kaliningrad enclave, on the Baltic, and near its border with Belarus, so the deployment a little further to the West, in Belarus, does not bring Moscow anything that it has not had before.

## Russia is asserting itself as a global pariah

The nuclear agreement with Minsk will bring Moscow propaganda points on the domestic front because the expansion of tactical nuclear potential should remove doubts about the situation in Ukraine not being satisfactory, and the country not having a convincing answer to the West.

However, with this move, Moscow has asserted itself as a pariah on the global stage.

Last March, after Moscow announced that it had agreed with Belarus on the deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons, the UN warned of the obligations from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the global risks that would follow in case of its violation.

"The deployment in Belarus would be the first time a nuclear state has deployed nuclear weapons abroad since the adoption of the NPT, and such a reckless act could shred the global non-proliferation regime", recently concluded Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, leader of the opposition in Belarus, and Daniel Högsta from the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN).

## A slap in China's face

The Kremlin has not even had time to think about the UN's all its principles and decisions without much consideration since the start of the aggression against Ukraine. But it has many reasons to worry about China's reaction as a partner from which it expects a way out of its economic adversity.

With the final decision to deploy nuclear weapons in Belarus, Vladimir Putin deceived Chinese leader Xi Jinping.

Their meeting in Moscow last March was an encouragement for Vladimir Putin. It showed that he still has a strong partner and "no limits friendship" in China.

On the same occasion, in a joint statement with Xi, he pledged that "all nuclear weapons states should refrain from deploying nuclear weapons abroad".

Putin knew he would break his word to Xi, and he confirmed it by signing the agreement with Minsk last Thursday.

Besides being a slap in China's face, Russia's move shows they did not understand that restraining a possible nuclear escalation in the context of the Ukrainian conflict is of first-class importance to Beijing.

The Russian-Chinese partnership is like an empty shell, particularly after the recent summit between China and the five Central Asian countries, where Beijing secured its takeover of influence in this region from Russia.

After the final certification of the nuclear deal with Belarus, China will have less space but

also less interest in maintaining support for Russia, even at the pragmatic level it has displayed so far.

The victim of the nuclear agreement will be Belarus, which has worked hard to improve economic cooperation with China as the only hope for its isolated economy.

Lukashenko's visit to Beijing was an attempt to revitalise trade, particularly Chinese investments in Belarus that have been in constant decline for several years.

The possible nuclear military arrangement with Moscow, and China's negative attitude towards such a decision, will not leave much hope for Belarus to expect the resumption of Chinese business operations.