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Joe Biden's Engagement in Belarus

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Unlike his predecessor Donald Trump, President Joe Biden is taking an active interest in Belarus, a small country on the periphery of Russia, and suggesting a more hawkish policy toward Russia. It's worth looking into the possible reasons for his interest and the possible pitfalls.

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power for 25 years, is accused of having rigged the election he won in August 2020. Mass protests have been held in the country ever since. Although the US and western allies backed sanctions against Lukashenko, Joe Biden went further by siding with the demonstrators and chiding Trump for not speaking out about Belarus's "peaceful expression of freedom" and demands for new elections.

Biden also seems to be taking an interest in Belarussian human rights activist and opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. Her husband Sergei, the original Belarussian opposition figure, was jailed ahead of the election. After his arrest, Svetlana, a former teacher and translator, replaced him as a presidential candidate and emerged as an appealing figure. After Lukashenko supposedly won, Svetlana, presumably fearing danger to her children and herself, took refuge in Lithuania.

Her fears are not without justification. Russian President Vladimir Putin is suspected of supporting—if not ordering—criminal tactics against democratically minded opposition figures who might have close ties to other democrats in Eastern Europe. Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny, for example, who has many contacts in Belarus, was poisoned. Hospitalized in Germany, he fortunately recovered and recently returned to Russia, where he was immediately sentenced to 30 days in jail.

Biden's moves suggest that his administration might take Russia's and Lukashenko's human rights violations seriously, and he may intend to reinvigorate

the Western alliance in support of Russian and Belarussian human rights. Such policies should enjoy considerable bipartisan support in Congress.

The Suwalki Gap

However, given that America and NATO have strategic interests in Belarus's independence, there is more involved here than humanitarian concerns. The key security issue is the Suwalki Gap.

Considered a NATO nightmare, the Suwalki Gap is a 60-mile-wide stretch of land between Poland and Lithuania sandwiched between Russia's Kaliningrad and Belarus. Figuring in both the Napoleonic Wars and WWI, the Suwalki Gap is as serious a concern to NATO as was the Cold War era's Fulda Gap in Germany at the Hesse-Thuringian border. The Suwalki Gap could serve as a critical Russian invasion route.

Russian forces deployed in Belarus could, in a war scenario, cut off the Baltic states from NATO support. The Suwalki Gap's two highways are the only land corridor by which NATO troops could reinforce the Alliance's Baltic member states in the event of a war with Russia.

West of the Gap, Russia's Kaliningrad exclave hosts over 15,000 Russian troops and is equipped with heavy artillery and long-range ballistic and anti-aircraft missiles. To the east of the Gap is Belarus, where Russian forces have engaged in numerous military exercises in the last several months.

For strategic reasons it is imperative for NATO that Belarus remain independent and sovereign. Russian forces permanently deployed in Belarus would represent a new threat to Ukraine. Its capital, Kyiv, is only 60 miles from the Belorussian-Ukrainian border. A Russian occupation would surely rattle nerves in the West.

The primarily peaceful unrest in Belarus has been a key national security issue for Putin. However, unlike Poland's leap for freedom in the 1980s, Belorussians share culture, language, and religion with Russia and are largely opposed to native rulers. Its protests are not anti-Russian or pro-EU.

Minsk therefore does not pose a direct geopolitical threat to Putin the way Kyiv did in 2014. However, endless scenes of popular revolution and ensuing chaos, even if peaceful, could put Belarus into question as a reliable geopolitical buffer state for Russia against NATO.

Putin continues to resist Lukashenko's demands for the permanent deployment of Russian forces in Belarus. He is doubtless concerned about Lukashenko's unpopularity among his own people. That lack of affection has continued even when Lukashenko held out inducements to the people, such as turning the country's

assembly into a constitutional body and transferring to it some of his presidential power.

As for Tikhanovskaya, her position in exile handicaps her ability to plan protests and marshal large crowds. Because of Lukashenko's disinformation efforts, Belorussians are increasingly disinclined to heed her calls for demonstrations. It would be a benefit to Belarus if the US were to cultivate a few other dissident leaders in addition to Tikhanovskaya.

The worst-case scenario for the West would be the permanent deployment in Belarus of Russian military units if protests turn violent. There is no such need at the moment, and Putin has voiced his hope that Belarus will "stabilize."

Military and economic integration

As strategist George Barros noted, the Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS), which is composed of a few former Soviet republics, approved a plan in 2020 for a new joint Russo-Belorussian "regional grouping of forces" to provide deeper cooperation between the countries' military and security services as well as a unified advanced air defense system.

Russian influence will likely grow inside the Belorussian military. The Kremlin has also continued to integrate Belarus into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), including its oil and gas markets, which will maintain Belarus's dependency on Russia.

Although the Kremlin has thus far held back from military intervention in Belarus, there are signs it will increase the size and frequency of its monthly military exercises with Belarus as of September 2021. In that month, a large military exercise is planned called Zapad 21. That exercise is essentially a rehearsal for combat with NATO.

Peaceful engagement

It would be constructive for Biden's support for Tikhanovskaya to be followed by peaceful engagement with Belarus and Russia by America's allies. Biden should refuse to recognize any agreements subverting the sovereignty of Belarus that Putin might coerce Lukashenko into accepting.

It is also important that Putin not be given cause to worry that Biden and Congress will let Europe take the Western lead with regard to Belarus. Congressional support for Belarus will likely be mild, as the American focus will be on rebuilding the home front after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Biden may expand sanctions on Belorussian officials who are engaged in repressive policies, he and Congress might prefer to allow Europe to dominate the Western push to effect change in Belarus.

America's peaceful engagement with Belarus should have two objectives: first, to provide diplomatic and political support for the human rights movement led by Tikhanovskaya, including free elections and Lukashenko's retirement; and second, to try to prevent a permanent Russian military deployment in Belarus—above all keeping Russia away from direct dominance of the Suwalki Gap on the Belorussian side and in the proximity of the northern Ukrainian border.

Persistent preventive diplomacy could involve a sort of Finlandization of Belarus: support for democratization and the building of Western institutions while preserving traditional Russian economic and security interests. However, American statecraft would do well to avoid a new Cold War over this small but strategically important nation on the Russian periphery.

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