

The American Conservative

Belarus Crisis Grows Worse

It is a dangerous folly for the United States to extend security guarantees to small nations that quarrel with their neighbors.

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November 17, 2021

The long-simmering feud between Belarus and several of its NATO neighbors (especially Poland and Lithuania) over the flow of refugees from the Middle East is escalating rapidly. On November 10, the European Union accused Belarus of mounting a “hybrid attack” by pushing migrants across the border into Poland. Poland and the Baltic republics have bolstered their security forces along their frontiers with Belarus to block the migrants trying to enter their countries. Thousands of hapless refugees are now stuck in makeshift camps in what amounts to a geographic no-man’s-land, and conditions there are becoming appalling.

It would be bad enough if the border crisis only involved humanitarian considerations, but the issue is taking on a military dimension. Britain has sent a small contingent of troops to Poland’s eastern frontier to show support for its NATO ally. On November 12, Russia and Belarus commenced joint snap paratrooper drills in Western Belarus, raising tensions another notch. More ominously, Moscow sent nuclear-capable bombers to patrol the skies over Belarus, emphasizing the Kremlin’s commitment to the security of that country and to Alexander Lukashenko’s government. Lukashenko has made his own contribution to the mounting tensions by threatening to cut off the transit of natural gas supplies from Russia to Poland and Germany—a step that would be quite worrisome on the eve of the winter season.

Both sides are engaging in dangerous and destructive posturing. There is little doubt that Belarus is exploiting the refugee flow to put pressure on its western neighbors. Minsk has provided financial incentives to encourage migrants to come to Belarus with promises that they will be able to gain asylum in the European Union’s eastern members and find new opportunities there. Reports also indicate that Belarusian authorities even supply the migrants with guides and maps to help them find the border, as well as wire cutters to deal with fences and other physical impediments there.

However, it is a stretch to insist that using the migrants to exert pressure on the E.U. countries is entirely unprovoked. The European Union has repeatedly imposed economic sanctions on Belarus because of Lukashenko's crackdown on domestic political opponents. The initial round took place in October 2020, and those restrictions were reinforced in a new round implemented in June 2021. On November 15, the Western powers expanded the scope of punitive measures yet again, further exacerbating the ongoing crisis with Minsk—and by extension, with Belarus's patron and protector, Russia. Such provocations cannot be ignored as a factor that generated and exacerbates the tensions that Belarus has with the European Union and the E.U.'s easternmost members.

There is also more than a dollop of hypocrisy in the stance that the Western powers have taken on the refugee issue. Official E.U. policy is supposedly quite receptive to granting asylum to refugees from the war-torn Middle East. Indeed, some E.U. members, especially Hungary, have gotten into sharp confrontations with the authorities in Brussels for defying that policy and seeking to close their borders to asylum seekers. Ironically, the E.U. just threatened to impose fines on Budapest for that offense.

Yet when it comes to refugees trying to enter Poland or the Baltic republics from Belarus, European leaders take a very hard line in favor of those members' rigid "closed borders" policies and condemn Minsk for encouraging the flow. The Biden administration supports its European allies in their confrontation with Belarus, and Biden indicated that Washington had communicated its "concerns" to both Moscow and Minsk. There was little doubt that U.S. leaders blame Belarus and Russia entirely for the crisis. In early November, NATO (with strong U.S. support) issued a statement condemning "the continued instrumentalization of irregular migration artificially created by Belarus as part of hybrid actions targeted against Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia for political purposes."

The E.U. and U.S. stance has drawn at least oblique criticism from human rights organizations. One group, Human Rights First, expressed an even-handed—and caustic—view. "Over the last week, human rights challenges at the Belarus-Poland border have escalated, as Belarus pushes migrants and refugees toward the border and Poland sends thousands of officers to prevent their entry and push them back. The motivations of both countries are rife with disdain for human rights." That position is in sharp contrast to the stance that both Brussels and Washington have taken of blaming Belarus exclusively.

Such criticism of Western hypocrisy is amply justified. Aside from humanitarian concerns, though, the crisis between Belarus and its neighbors is fast becoming a geopolitical time bomb. Minsk's neighbors now warn openly that the confrontation could build to a military clash—a development that would have high potential to bring Russia into the fray to back its ally. The ever-provocative Ukrainian government has just deployed 8,500 additional troops to its border with Belarus, pouring gasoline on an already smoldering situation.

This situation is a textbook example of why it is a dangerous folly for the United States to extend security guarantees to small, vulnerable nations that have their own parochial disputes with neighbors. Poland and the Baltic republics are NATO members, and Washington has a treaty obligation to come to their assistance if they become embroiled in a war—even though such a conflict would have little or no relevance to America’s own vital interests. It would be a great irony—and a tragedy of epic proportions—if the United States ended up in a war with Belarus (and quite likely, Russia) over a petty spat involving refugees.

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