

Brief: More Russian Weapons Headed for Belarus

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Background: Belarus is a strategic ally of Russia and a critical part of its western buffer, bordering Poland and two of the Baltic states. Though Belarus had been looking for ways to reduce Russian influence in recent years, the two countries have been growing closer since Belarus' last presidential election in August, after which the Kremlin expressed its continued support for Alexander Lukashenko, who was reelected in the contested vote.

What Happened: During training exercises for Belarus' combat and air defense units, the country's air force and air defense chief, Maj. Gen. Igor Golub, **told journalists** that the Belarusian military was in the process of acquiring Russian-made S-400 and Pantsir-S air defense systems. The units would replace Belarus' existing S-300 systems. He also said Russia would be delivering Protivnik-G and Vostok radar systems to Belarus this year, as well as a second batch of Su-30SM fighters and Mi-35 multifunctional attack helicopters.

Bottom Line: Russia's provision of complex weaponry to Belarus is driven by a number of considerations. First, it's an opportunity for Russia to strengthen its presence in Belarus. Second, it's a way for Russia to respond to statements made by NATO leadership that the West is concerned about Russia's military buildup – comments that the Kremlin sees as threatening. Moreover, by supplying a country that borders a NATO member with Russian-made weapons, the Kremlin is expanding its reach beyond its own borders and closer to NATO territory.

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