

## Russian aircraft patrol Belarusian airspace

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On 10 December Russian military aircraft started carrying out missions in Belarus's airspace as part of joint combat duty with the Belarusian Air Force. A formation of four Su-27P fighter aircraft, most likely from the 4th Aviation Group from the 7,000th Russian Air Force Base (in Khotilovo in the Tver district), landed at the airport of the Belarusian 61st Assault Air Base near Baranovichi two days earlier and is set to be deployed there for a month, when other Russian aircraft will take over from it.

### Commentary

- The deployment of Russian fighter aircraft in Baranovichi has followed the announcement made by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoygu in April this year. It is part of a plan aimed at increasing the presence of the Russian Air Force in Belarusian airspace. In 2014 Russia is planning to deploy its base in Lida, which would be linked with granting it ex-territorial status (following two other Russian military facilities in Belarus – a early warning radar station near Baranovichi and a naval communication center near Vileyka) and most likely also with the withdrawal from there of the Belarusian 116th Guards Assault Air Base. An agreement on this issue (according to Russia it was reached in November this year) will be confirmed when the modernisation work at Lida airport is launched in spring 2014 at the latest. This will make it possible to redeploy newer types of Russian aircraft there (as was announced, Su-27SM3 multirole fighter aircraft will be deployed first).
- The redeployment of Russian fighter aircraft to Baranovichi has political significance above all. It should be seen as a symbolic counterbalance to the NATO Baltic Air Policing mission which has been in place since 2004 and consists of aircraft from different NATO member countries (mostly Poland) taking turns to guard the airspace of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The military rank of this initiative is rather low – Russian Su-27P fighter aircraft will in fact duplicate the tasks performed by Belarusian MiG-29 fighter aircraft. The only practical dimension will be the training of Russian pilots in terms of potential (future) flights in Belarusian airspace.
- Russian air policing in Belarus confirms the lack of balance in military relations between Moscow and Minsk. Despite efforts which have been made for many years by Belarus, Russia has not supported it in the modernisation of its air force, and has thus contributed to the decline of Belarus's Air Force. Exactly a year before the deployment of Russian Su-27P fighter aircraft in Baranovichi, a ceremony was held there for the withdrawal of this

type of aircraft from service in the Belarusian Air Force (Minsk was not able to maintain and use them alone, as was the case with other more advanced type of military equipment). In November this year Russia sold 18 Su-30K multirole fighter aircraft, which Belarus had tried in vain to secure for its air forces, to Angola (NB, they had been stationed in Baranovichi). Belarus probably did not have data on the type of aircraft which Russia redeployed to Baranovichi, proving that Belarus is treated instrumentally by Russia since on 8 December the Belarusian Defence Ministry announced the aircraft would be Su-27SM3, whereas the Russians flew to Belarus on the same type of aircraft that had been withdrawn from the Belarusian Air Force a year earlier.