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The second “pillar” of the foreign policy of Belarus: Relations with China

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The article assesses the Belarusian government's efforts to diversify its foreign political and economic policy amid growing dependency on Russia. It outlines tendencies in Belarusian-Chinese relations such as the growth of political and economic cooperation and the influence of external and internal factors on the character of bilateral relations. Critical aspects highlighted in this analytical article include international perceptions, the war in Ukraine and sanctions, and the "soft" absorption of Belarus by Russia. Based on this, possible trends in the development of bilateral relations were identified.

Introduction

Today, Belarus is under a strict sanctions regime. These were imposed as a result of the political isolation of Lukashenka's administration by the EU, the USA, Canada, and the UK in the aftermath of the fabricated presidential election of 2020, violence against peaceful protesters, and mass political repressions, the creation of a migration crisis, and the participation of the Belarusian regime in Russia's attack on Ukraine.

As a result of the sanctions, European and Ukrainian markets were closed for Belarusian exports, and political and diplomatic relations dropped to extremely low levels. Analysts labeled this process "the degradation of foreign policy"ⁱ. Traditionally, the European vector in Belarusian foreign policy has played a secondary role, although for trade and other forms of economic cooperation, its importance was criticalⁱⁱ. In these conditions, the Russian vector has become the defining one for Belarusian foreign policy and economic activityⁱⁱⁱ.

In response to the slowing of Russian aggression in Ukraine and its abandonment of the frontlines, the Belarusian government has worked ever more intensely on the Chinese vector. According to Lukashenka, China could compensate for all losses of the Belarusian economy resulting from the war and sanctions^{iv}.

The government's political discourse gives the impression that China is a second "pillar" of Belarusian foreign policy and trade, one which repays the loss of Western markets and cooperation with Europe as a whole^v. However, considering the approximate assessment of losses in the European vector and the mediocre rise in

trade with China, the picture is rather different. As Andrei Elyseev and Olga Aleshko-Lesseles note, there is a “margin between the expectations of Minsk about economic profit from cooperation with China and the real state of things^{vi}”. Experts have identified these disparities while giving an analysis on the development of relations during the 2020-2022 period. Because of several events in the first half of 2023, such as the official visit of Lukashenka to China, the announcement about placing tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in Belarus, continuous work on an agreement regarding free trade in services between China and Belarus, and growing dependency of Belarus on Russia, a new assessment is needed.

Has Lukashenka’s administration really managed to “replace” Europe with China in its foreign policy? Could China become a balancing point for Russia in Belarusian foreign policy?

In a key document of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Priority vectors of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus*, along with Russia and the Union State, the “all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership” with China is highlighted as “the most important and promising [direction]^{vii}”.

Even before 2020, the Belarusian government was interested in intensifying cooperation with China. In turn, Beijing counted on the advantageous geographical position of Belarus as a “bridge” between Eurasia and Europe (the EU). In this regard, the Chinese government assigned a certain role to Belarus as a Chinese logistics and possibly industrial hub at the gates of Europe. The most clear example of this was the investment in the “Great Stone” industrial park.

However, as an expert survey showed, since 2017 there has been a discrepancy in the assessments of the purpose of the “Great Stone”. Chinese experts perceived it just as a logistics hub, while Belarusian ones saw it as a high-tech one. At the same time, negative assessments were noted regarding the shortage of market elements in the organization of the investment cooperation^{viii}. Therefore, discrepancies between the high level of political cooperation and problems in the economic sphere were noted even before the 2020 crisis, the imposition of sanctions, and the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine. An analysis of expert assessments in 2020 showed that the problem of

differing perceptions lies at the core of the discrepancy^{ix}. This consists of the following elements:

- 1) The gap between expected and achieved results – namely, the asynchronous development of political and economic cooperation;
- 2) A mismatch of interest, using the example of the Great Stone industrial park. In particular, this is seen in the difference between the approaches of the Belarusian and Chinese sides;
- 3) The Belarusian leadership, especially Lukashenka first and foremost, thinks of the Chinese model as a socialist model (that is, a planned economic management of the Soviet type). Meanwhile, the Chinese experts called Belarusian managers and bureaucrats “Soviet-like” with a negative connotation.

Today, Minsk can no longer play the role of a large hub due to the war and sanctions. However, it is still striving for closer ties with China as an economic and ideological partner, in addition to being a possible counterbalance for Russia.

After a break, which lasted from the winter of 2020 to the autumn of 2022, high-level contacts between the Belarusian and Chinese sides resumed. On 15 July 2022, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Secretary-General Zhang Ming announced that Belarus had submitted an application to join the organization. It should be noted that in 2017-2018, the Belarusian authorities were hesitant about this decision. However, in changed circumstances, Lukashenka tried to attract Beijing’s attention to intensify contacts.

On 15-16 September 2022, Lukashenka was invited to the SCO summit in Samarkand (Uzbekistan), where the official application process was launched. This summit also saw a meeting between Lukashenka and Xi Jinping, where the creation of an all-encompassing and comprehensive strategic partnership was announced. This officially confirmed Beijing’s support for Minsk at the highest level^x. It should be noted that airstrikes on Ukraine from Belarusian territory almost halted in the autumn of 2022, which contributed to the differentiated approach of EU sanctions against Minsk. For Beijing, this could also be a sign to intensify contacts.

From 28 February to 2 March 2023, Lukashenka made an official state visit to China and was again personally received by Chinese President Xi. The world media paid close attention to this event in the context of China's "peace plan" for Ukraine, as well as in connection with suspicions that Beijing may be involved in the possible supply of sanctioned dual-use goods and even weapons to Russia, with Belarus as a possible logistics "channel" for this purpose. According to official sources, 27 intergovernmental, interdepartmental and inter-regional agreements and eight major trade agreements were signed^{xi}. Particular attention was paid to industrial cooperation and e-commerce.

The most important document signed during the visit was the *Joint Statement on Promoting an All-Weather and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Two Countries "in a New Era."* In this document, the two sides oppose sanctions, support China's peace plan for Ukraine, highlight key areas of cooperation, and agree to open a fifth general consulate in Hong Kong^{xii}.

As expected, government propaganda on both sides extolled the visit and its results. But critical questions remain.

As of 2020, the text of the Free Trade Agreement with China is being prepared. It was previously noted that in the face of growing pressure from Russia in 2020, the Lukashenka administration accelerated work on the agreement to balance ties with Moscow and Beijing^{xiii}. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the political crisis in Belarus slowed it down^{xiv}. The process was resumed in 2022-2023. In particular, the joint statement mentioned above noted that the basis for a joint free trade agreement already existed^{xv}.

However, the specifics of the context of the international situation have changed drastically for Belarus. In addition to political isolation, war and sanctions, the process of implementing "road maps" for the Union State, which is equal to a "soft" absorption of Belarus by Russia, now plays a greater role. "Road maps" for the Union State have become tools for the slow and soft absorption of Belarus by Russia^{xvi}. These cover critically important areas of the government administration and authority: taxes,

customs, roads, etc. Therefore, given the obligations of Belarus to the Union State, there is a high probability of conflicts between its obligations to Russia and China. This will most likely result in a delay in the signing of the agreement. The decisive moment will be the approval of an agreement on “union programs” (road maps) with Russia.

One of the frequently used plotlines of Belarusian propaganda is to demonstrate success in trade with China. But if we consider the details of the information on trade turnover for 2022, there are several points that make the picture quite confusing. Since detailed foreign trade statistics are not available (they have been classified since 2022), it is difficult to analyze any of the 2022 data. There are indirect signs of serious losses for Belarusian exports. According to the official statement of representatives of the Ministry of Economy, China was the second-largest foreign trade partner in 2022^{xvii}. Considering that by 2022 China was only the third importer and was not one of the three largest foreign trade partners of Belarus, one can only guess how much exports have decreased. Trade growth in bilateral relations appears to have been moderate, as the figure of USD 5.8 billion was also cited for the 2021 result. There was no breakthrough in exports to China. Today, one cannot say that China was able to replace the EU as a trading partner in Belarusian exports.

The rhetoric about an “all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership” also needs critical reflection, considering Putin’s statements about the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) on Belarusian territory. Considering China’s anti-nuclear position and the dissatisfaction expressed by Beijing regarding these plans, one can conclude that for Minsk, relations with Russia are so significant that even criticism from Beijing cannot stop the process of deploying TNWs.

Conclusion

Analysis of Belarusian-Chinese relations at the present stage has shown the development of multidirectional trends.

1. **In general, Belarusian-Chinese cooperation continues to develop.** There was a pause in high-level contacts from spring 2020 to autumn 2022 due to the pandemic and political crisis in Belarus. Bilateral cooperation is characterized

by a number of problematic issues, which were explained by experts as a problem of differing perceptions. After the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine and the complicity of the Belarusian regime in it, a decrease in China's interest in Belarus has been noted.

2. **There has been a balancing of ties with Russia.** An intensification of contacts between Belarus and China became possible only in the fall of 2022 when the shelling of Ukraine from the territory of Belarus stopped. The Lukashenka administration used the SCO as an “entry point” to resume contacts at the highest level and intensify cooperation. This helped to balance Russia's influence in Belarus.
3. **Despite the efforts of the Lukashenka administration, the goals of compensating for losses due to sanctions and relying on China to build a balance with Russia have not yet been achieved.**



ENDNOTES

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ⁱⁱ National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus. "Foreign Trade of the Republic of Belarus." *Statistical Book*, 2021, p.52-55. <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/c4c/n6k9xzd6umpg61f8whfybtckv4t5t.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Евгения Крючкова. "Россия и Беларусь пришли к балансу [Russia and Belarus came to a balance]." *Коммерсант*, March 27, 2023. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5900590#:~:text=%D0%9F%D0%BE%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%20%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%20%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B0%20%D0%B2%202021,2%25%2C%20%D0%B4%D0%BE%20%2422%20%D0%BC%D0%BB%D1%80%D0%B4>

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^v Мария Друк. "Какие перспективы сотрудничества Беларуси и Китая просматриваются по итогам года [What are the prospects for cooperation between Belarus and China at the end of the year?]." *Беларусь сегодня*, September 22, 2022. <https://www.sb.by/articles/nadezhnyy-fundament-dlya-partnerstva.html>

^{vi} Андрей Елисеев and Ольга Алешко-Лесселс. , "Отношения Беларуси и Китая в 2020-2022 гг. [Belarus-China relations in 2020-2022]." December 2022. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19850.pdf>

^{vii} Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь. "Приоритетные направления внешней политики Республики Беларусь [Priority directions of the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus]." N.d. https://mfa.gov.by/foreign_policy/priorities/

^{viii} Роза Турарбекова and Мария Данилович. "Белорусско-китайские отношения: экспертные оценки [Belarusian-Chinese relations: expert assessments]." December 2020. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/17728.pdf>

^{ix} Роза Турарбекова and Мария Данилович. "Белорусско-китайские отношения: экспертные оценки [Belarusian-Chinese relations: expert assessments]."

^x БелТА. "Лукашенко и Си Цзиньпин встретились в Самарканде [Lukashenko and Xi Jinping meet in Samarkand]." September 15, 2022. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-si-tsinpin-vstretilis-v-samarkande-523894-2022/>

^{xi} Президент Республики Беларусь. "Завершился государственный визит А. Лукашенко в КНР [A. Lukashenko's state visit to China has come to an end]." March 2, 2023. <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/zavershilsya-gosudarstvennyy-vizit-aleksandra-lukashenko-v-kitayskuuyu-narodnuuyu-respubliku>

^{xii} Посольство КНР в РБ. "Совместное заявление КНР и РБ о дальнейшем развитии всепогодного и всестороннего стратегического партнерства между двумя странами в новую эпоху [A joint statement of the PRC and RB on further developing the all-weather and all-round strategic partnership between the two countries in the new era]." March 2, 2023. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/rus/zxxx/202303/t20230302_11033905.html

^{xiii} Роза Турарбекова. "Большой поворот? Беларусь делает ставку на сотрудничество с Китаем за счет консервации ЕАЭС и Союзного государства [Big turn? Belarus stakes on cooperation with China at the expense of preserving the EAEU and the Union State]." *IPG Journal*, May 19, 2020. <https://www.ipg-journal.io/ru/regiony/evropa/bolshoi-povorot-1067/>

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^{xv} Посольство КНР в РБ. "Совместное заявление КНР и РБ о дальнейшем развитии всепогодного и всестороннего стратегического партнерства между двумя странами в новую эпоху [A joint



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