Commentary
October 26, 2022

Belarus at SCO: Searching for Wiggle Room

Yauheni Preiherman

Originally published in the Eurasia Daily Monitor

Summary

The latest summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, held on September 15 and 16, made numerous headlines in the international media. Analysts watched two main summit developments most closely: how far its participants would go in asserting the SCO's ambition to become a new geopolitical force and what treatment Russia would get from the other attending states, considering the expanding international repercussions of its war against Ukraine.

Yet, little attention has been paid to another noteworthy development: Belarus became the first European country to apply for SCO membership and the Samarkand summit gave its application the unanimous green light.

Minsk lodged a formal application to the SCO in July 2022. However, its active engagement with the SCO started as early as 2010, when the country received the so-called "dialogue partner" status, which facilitated limited participation in official and working meetings through case-by-case invitations from the presiding state but without voting rights. Additionally, throughout the 2010s, the Belarusian military and special services began joining anti-terrorist exercises and training courses under the SCO aegis.

In July 2015, Belarus elevated its status within the organization to that of an observer. Thereafter, it could take part in all SCO activities but still without the right to vote. Interestingly, in October 2015, the SCO delegated an observation mission to the Belarusian presidential election, which became the first instance of SCO monitors working in a non-member state.

> The SCO's Central Asian regional focus notwithstanding, the Belarusian authorities have viewed it as a promising multilateral platform and a potential gateway to grander geopolitics than what the post-Soviet integration groupings could offer.

Even at the height of its rapprochement with the West in 2017–2019, when the priority of Belarus's relations with the European Union and United States would occasionally overtake even that of Belarusian-Russian relations, Minsk looked to the SCO with high hopes and ambitions.

Reflective of that, even as an observer, Belarus was active in proposing ideas with a view to maximizing economic and diplomatic returns on its engagement with the SCO. For example, at the 2018 and 2019 summits, Minsk put forward initiatives in the realms of food security, the "IT-ecosystem" and nuclear security. Also, the Belarusian leadership used the SCO platform to advance their signature foreign policy initiatives, such as the inclusive dialogue on international security (Helsinki-2) and digital good neighborliness.

Belarus's rationale vis-à-vis the SCO appears to have been shaped by several considerations. *First*, Minsk has viewed it as an additional "door" for opening political and economic opportunities in Asia. *Second*, the simultaneous presence of China and Russia in the organization allowed for strengthening relations with the former without provoking the latter's geopolitical sensitivities. The absence of a democratizing agenda in the SCO has clearly been another factor, but more general geostrategic considerations seem just as important. In 2015, the decision to acquire observer status at the SCO was seen as an important component of the foreign policy–hedging portfolio Minsk tried to master until 2020.

> In other words, the SCO helped, though to a modest degree, diversify diplomatic connections and foreign trade without posing any major geopolitical risks, which fully corresponded to Belarus's hedging logic.

After the 2020 presidential elections and the subsequent rupture in relations with the West, the SCO's significance for Belarus grew even further. As Minsk's wiggle room in foreign policy was shrinking dramatically due to Western sanctions and its own counter-sanctions, the SCO offered almost unique access to international cooperation beyond the post-Soviet space. In this regard, Belarus's expanding interest in the SCO became somewhat reminiscent of its rationale behind joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1998. According to then-Belarusian Foreign Minister Ivan Antanovich, NAM looked attractive as "in the conditions of the Western blockade, [it

could] provide an important compensatory chance to establish contacts with authoritative leaders and gain experience in dealing with important diplomatic and political matters".

Today, the overarching challenge for Minsk is to preserve international agency as well as diplomatic and political experience gained throughout three decades of state sovereignty. To that end, especially after Western nations adopted massive economic sanctions against Belarus in 2022, accusing it of being a co-aggressor against Ukraine, Minsk is looking for new markets to export Belarusian goods, as well as alternative suppliers of intermediate imports, logistical routes and investments. The Belarusian government expects that prospective SCO membership will help, at least to some extent, in achieving these goals.

> Even though initially the SCO viewed itself as a predominantly confidence-building and anti-terrorist institution, it now has a growing economic and financial cooperation agenda as well.

Moreover, SCO ministerial meetings and summits offer an opportunity to advance bilateral relations with individual member states, including those with large markets, such as China, India and Pakistan. For example, at the Samarkand summit, Alyaksandr Lukashenka held a bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, in which, as the Belarusian media reported, they agreed on "a historic elevation of Belarusian-Chinese cooperation to a new level". A joint declaration was signed that upgraded the bilateral relationship to that of an "all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership," which is one of the highest levels in China's foreign partnership hierarchy. Lukashenka also announced that Xi would visit Minsk after the upcoming 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and that the countries would seriously consider how to expand cooperation further, especially in "the areas where [Belarusian] technologies are sufficiently advanced, technologies the People's Republic of China needs").

Now that Belarus's membership application has been unanimously accepted by the existing SCO members, Minsk has a significant amount of homework to do before it joins the organization officially. It must adapt its national legislation in full accordance with the SCO's legal base. In the past, it normally took applicants up to two or three years to do that. Nevertheless, Lukashenka has instructed his government to ensure that all necessary adaptations are carried out in time for next year's SCO summit in India. Likely, the instructions will be fully delivered on.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations