Commentary
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# Belarus Becomes First European Member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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**Summary**

Minsk hopes to use the “strategic perspective” that SCO membership offers in primary areas of interest to Belarus, including trade, investment, innovation, development of transport and logistical infrastructure, as well as energy and industrial cooperation. It also sees the SCO as a platform for strengthening its economic security and diversifying geostrategic options.

On 3 and 4 July, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) held its 24th Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. During the summit, Belarus officially became SCO’s tenth member. Although Belarus had not secured formal membership until now, Minsk began its active engagement with the organization as early as 2010 when it became a “dialogue partner”. In 2015, Belarus’s status was elevated to that of an observer, which facilitated its participation in all SCO activities but without the right to vote. Minsk lodged its membership application to correct the latter deficiency in July 2022, becoming the first European country to seek that status. The SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in September 2022, approved the application unanimously and asked Belarus to start adopting its national legislation in accordance with the SCO’s legal requirements. Whereas it had taken several past candidate countries up to two or three years to carry out the legal adaptation, Minsk completed the task in a little over a year. Thus, the SCO, which originally focused on security and cooperation in Central Asia, has institutionally expanded to a new geostrategic region in Eastern Europe.

Belarus’s speedy accession to the SCO’s legal base points to the high priority that Minsk ascribes to its membership in the organization. According to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, the SCO offers “a strategic perspective” in primary areas of interest to Belarus, including trade, investment, innovation, development of transport and logistical infrastructure, as well as energy and industrial cooperation. More specifically,

he stressed the prospects for using the SCO's integration potential to synchronize the development of the north-south and east-west transit corridors and tie them with China's Belt and Road Initiative. Lukashenka also highlighted plans for establishing the SCO Development Fund and a free trade and economic zone. Additionally, Belarus intends to advance the creation of an SCO collective financial institution and a mechanism for bilateral payments in national currencies.

> The Belarusian government also sees the SCO's added value in geoeconomic security.

In particular, Minsk hopes to use the organization as a platform for amplifying Minsk's increasingly vocal anti-sanctions agenda, which appears to be in line with the thinking of the rest of the SCO membership. Revealingly, the Astana summit declaration contains the following lines: *"The member states underscore that the unilateral application of sanctions is incompatible with the principles of international law and has a negative effect on third countries and international economic relations"*. It also stresses that sanctions and trade restrictions undermine sustainable global development. Minsk has consistently stressed this point to demonstrate the detrimental consequences of sanctions against its potash fertilizer industry for poorer countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Even as an SCO observer state, Belarus put forward several initiatives on nuclear, information, and food security, as well as the "information technology ecosystem". As a full-fledged member, Minsk will surely become even more prolific in producing SCO-relevant international proposals. In Astana, the Belarusian delegation actively promoted Minsk's latest signature foreign policy initiative — the preparation of the Eurasian Charter for Diversity and Multipolarity in the 21st Century. The charter is meant to formulate new broadly shared parameters and principles of an effective security architecture across Eurasia. The idea was first announced at the inaugural Minsk International Conference on Eurasian Security in October 2023. Lukashenka invited high-level representatives from the SCO member and partner states to attend this year's conference, scheduled for late October, claiming it will become a more inclusive alternative to the Euro-Atlantic dominated Munich Security Conference.

> Belarusian officials clearly perceive the SCO as an instrument of diplomatic and economic diversification.

The United States and European Union have not sustained diplomatic communication with Minsk and have doubled down on their policy of economic sanctions and political pressure. As a result, many in the Lukashenka government no longer see any opportunity for rapprochement with the West. Minsk, therefore, is on the hunt for other alternatives to total political and economic dependence on Russia. The SCO appears to be the most natural option due to Belarus's established track record of engagement with the organization. BRICS (originally a loose political-economic grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) looks certain to become Minsk's next target for membership.

Russia is a founding member of both the SCO and BRICS but does not unilaterally dominate them. This allows Belarus to diversify its foreign relations without stirring Moscow's geopolitical sensitivities. Of all SCO and BRICS members, Minsk perceives China as the most important and promising partner in avoiding total dependence on Russia and circumventing Western sanctions. In recent years, the Belarusian government has intensified attempts to expand bilateral cooperation with China.

For its part, Beijing has also expressed interest in strengthening ties with Minsk. Two noticeable developments in Belarusian-Chinese relations have taken place of late. At the end of June, a high-level Chinese delegation attended the Belarus-China Forum of University Rectors, which brought together the heads of 15 Chinese and nine Belarusian universities. They discussed and agreed upon a sizeable agenda for educational and scientific cooperation. Later, from 6 to 8 July, a delegation of the Training Administrative Department of China's Central Military Commission visited Minsk to explore cooperation in military education and training.

Perhaps more noteworthy, the two country's special forces are conducting the joint anti-terrorist exercise "Attacking Falcon" close to Belarus's border with Poland from 8 to 19 July. The programme of the drills includes night landing training, overcoming water obstacles, and conducting operations in a populated area. While this is not the first such bilateral anti-terrorist exercise that Minsk and Beijing have held on Belarusian territory, due to the present security situation in Eastern Europe, the exercises have predictably attracted heightened attention in the West.

The rather long duration of the exercises, their proximity to the eastern border of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the fact that they were launched on the eve of the NATO summit in Washington all invite questions about whether Minsk and Beijing are using the exercises to send any political signals to the West. What is certain is that the exercises demonstrate how Belarus's SCO membership strengthens China's institutional access to Eastern Europe.

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