Commentary
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Belarus, China, and the Laws of Physics in International Relations

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

Belarus and China continue to develop their relations and strengthen cooperation in accordance with the main law of physics in international relations: when opportunities close off for sovereign states in one direction, they will inevitably and persistently seek alternatives in others.

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On 2-4 June, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko paid a visit to the People's Republic of China. In recent years, high-level contacts between Minsk and Beijing have attracted increased international attention—both in the post-Soviet space and in the West. This visit did not generate as much global media resonance as Lukashenko's trip to China in late February 2023, which was closely followed by all major global news outlets. However, the meeting between Lukashenko and Xi Jinping this time still did not go unnoticed.

All the more so because many observers were intrigued by the unexpected nature of the visit, which was officially announced only a few hours before Belarus's presidential aircraft took off. That said, this was not the first such occurrence in Belarus-China relations. In December 2023, Lukashenko's visit to China was also not announced in advance and was arranged "on short notice".

Another intriguing aspect of the June 2025 visit was its unusual status. The Belarusian head of state described it as a "family gathering in a close circle." The more conventional designations typically used for top-level international visits—such as state, official, or working—were notably absent this time from both Minsk and Beijing.

What exactly did this unusual format of high-level communication mean, and what was behind it? What specific topics might have been discussed? Why did most of the visit take place behind closed doors, away from cameras? These are all valid questions that are currently generating much discussion. Against this backdrop—and in the context of what was already Alexander Lukashenko's 15th visit to China—we take a look at some strategic aspects of the increasingly dynamic and meaningful cooperation between the two countries.

So far apart, yet of mutual interest

The diplomatic and economic engagement between Minsk and Beijing is striking, especially considering that the two capitals are some 6,500 kilometres apart and appear to share relatively little in terms of cultural and historical commonality. Nonetheless, the high frequency of contacts at all levels and the growing volume of cooperation are not entirely recent phenomena. However, it is in recent years that these relations have taken on special significance—both for Minsk and, apparently, for Beijing as well.

> For China, despite the vast distances separating the two countries, Belarus is primarily interesting because of its geography and geostrategic potential: as a critically important link in the Eurasian land corridor between China and the European Union.

In addition to sharing a border with the EU, Belarus has a developed and efficiently functioning railway, road, and border infrastructure. All this makes it a natural land gateway to the EU for numerous Chinese companies engaged in export-import operations with the unified European market. This significance grew especially after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014. Even then, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the fighting in Donbas undermined Ukraine's stability and significantly reduced its logistical and investment appeal to China. Consequently, Belarus's attractiveness in this regard increased even further.

It is therefore no surprise that Belarus-China cooperation has developed especially noticeably since 2014. Mutual trade is not the only indicator of this collaboration, but even its dynamics clearly reflect these trends. Over the past ten years, trade in goods between the two countries has increased nearly 4.7 times: from $1.8 billion to $8.4 billion.

Another additional factor driving China's interest in cooperating with Minsk is Belarus's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Union State with Russia. This membership offers Chinese investors the opportunity to export goods produced in

Belarus to post-Soviet markets duty-free. This enhances Belarus's appeal not only as a stable transit artery towards the EU but also as a manufacturing and logistics hub for accessing the larger EAEU market.

For Minsk, intensified cooperation with China brings equally obvious benefits—not only in economic terms but also more broadly in national security. Large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects and initiatives, foremost among them the Belt and Road Initiative, allow Belarus to highlight and maximise its own transit and logistics potential.

> In doing so, the country strengthens its role as a key element in transcontinental production and logistics chains across Eurasia and increases the interest of external players in its own security and stability.

Moreover, cooperation with China—both bilaterally and within the framework of the Belt and Road and other multilateral initiatives—improves Belarusian companies' access to technologies and financial resources from China. This, in turn, is important for diversifying Belarus's foreign economic activities and sources of development, which automatically expands Minsk's scope for diplomatic manoeuvring.

A symbol and expression of the mutual interest between Belarus and China in cooperating with each other is the industrial park "Great Stone," located on the outskirts of Minsk. The agreement to establish it was signed back in 2011, and construction began in 2014 with the goal of creating the largest Chinese industrial park outside China. Chinese President Xi Jinping even figuratively called this industrial park the "Pearl of the Silk Road." Later, "Great Stone" was granted the status of a free customs zone within the EAEU, which further increased its attractiveness to foreign investors. As a result, in the first years after the park's opening, its residents included not only Chinese and Belarusian investors but also companies from several Western countries.

A clear expression of China's special place in Belarus's foreign policy and development strategy was the special directive signed by Alexander Lukashenko in August 2015 on the development of bilateral relations with Beijing. In the Belarusian hierarchy of legal and regulatory acts, presidential directives hold a central importance and usually regulate domestic policy issues. The directive on developing relations with the PRC was a unique precedent, as such a document was aimed at relations with a foreign state. A little later, in August 2016, a national programme for export diversification was approved, in which cooperation with China was also assigned a key role.

Political turbulence of the 2020s – strengthening cooperation

The activation of Belarus-China cooperation in the mid-2010s took place against a relatively favourable international backdrop. It was already clear then that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine was outlining long-term contours of geopolitical tension in Eastern Europe, and that sanctions-related confrontations were beginning to reshape Russia-West relations. Nevertheless, conditions for developing interaction between Minsk and Beijing were favourable. This was also helped by a significant improvement in Belarus's relations with the European Union from 2016 to 2020.

However, by the end of 2020, some political variables in this international equation began to change. Initially, the coronavirus pandemic not only temporarily halted full-scale trade and the functioning of production and logistics chains between China and the EU, but also led many in the West to the conclusion that it was important to reduce their critical dependence on Chinese supplies. Then, following the presidential elections in Belarus in August 2020, the European Union began imposing successive sanction packages against Minsk and minimised even basic communication with the Belarusian government. After the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, the escalation of regional tensions and the breakdown of ties and cooperation took on an avalanche-like character.

> A kind of new "Iron Curtain" began to be erected along Belarus's western borders. The country found itself in a state of transport and logistics semi-blockade, as its borders to the west and south were either completely closed or operating under numerous serious restrictions.

Under such conditions, speculation quickly arose in the media and even diplomatic circles that due to the political crisis in relations between Minsk and Western capitals, Belarus's significance for Beijing would inevitably diminish. These speculations were particularly actively promoted—and later believed—by opponents of the official Minsk both among the Belarusian opposition and within Western capitals themselves.

However, a closer look at the political map of Eurasia showed that even in the drastically changed geopolitical circumstances, there was little basis for such expectations. The laws of physics in international relations (discussed below) not only did not foresee a rupture in Belarus-China cooperation but, on the contrary, predetermined its further strengthening under the new realities.

Notably, in 2022, relations between Minsk and Beijing were elevated to the level of an all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership — the highest bilateral status in China's diplomatic classification. Against the backdrop of Western sanctions, China became Belarus's second-largest trading partner. This was partly due to the growth of Belarusian exports to China, although Minsk traditionally maintains a significant deficit in bilateral trade. Investment cooperation also continued to develop. One indicator of this is the growth of the China-Belarus Industrial Park "Great Stone," whose number of residents increased from 68 to 140 over the past five years.

> In August 2024, Minsk and Beijing approved a conceptual vision for cooperation through 2030. For Belarus, a key component of this vision is the study and implementation of Chinese experience in industrial modernisation.

According to Belarusian officials' forecasts, this should open opportunities for the technical and technological upgrading of Belarusian industrial enterprises.

Within the framework of this overall cooperation vision, 28 intergovernmental agreements have been signed. The growing and more structured collaboration in higher education also demonstrates both countries' commitment to long-term partnership. The recently established Belarus-China Association of Universities includes 41 Belarusian and 40 Chinese universities. Interestingly, around one thousand Belarusians are currently studying in China, while more than 13,000 Chinese students are enrolled in Belarus.

The laws of physics in international relations

Once again, it should be emphasised that the trajectory of Belarus-China relations development is by no means surprising when analysed without emotional or political bias. The fundamental factors driving mutual interest have not disappeared amid the heightened geopolitical tensions. Moreover, these new circumstances have actually strengthened the mutual need between Minsk and Beijing, despite the many significant differences between these states and the 6,000 km separating them.

This development follows what can be called the main law of physics in international relations: if opportunities for sovereign states close off in certain directions, they will inevitably and persistently seek alternatives in others.

Thus, a natural consequence of Western sanctions and the EU's refusal to engage in dialogue with Belarus after 2020 has been the even greater importance Minsk places on cooperation with China. Belarusian authorities are making every effort to strengthen ties with China in order to at least partially offset the economic losses caused by Western sanctions. Similarly, Minsk seeks to compensate for the loss of political cooperation with the West by intensifying interaction with Beijing—both bilaterally and within multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS. All of this is aimed at helping the country preserve resources for development and maintain crucial space for foreign policy manoeuvring.

China, undoubtedly, occupies a fundamentally different geopolitical position compared to Belarus. For Beijing, relations with Minsk do not carry the same level of significance within its broader global strategy and development plans. Nevertheless, recent events—including Alexander Lukashenko's visit to Beijing on 2-4 June—clearly indicate that the Chinese leadership continues to regard Minsk as a priority partner.

> Here, too, the main "law of physics" applies: even amid unprecedented Western sanctions, Belarus remains a key element of the overland corridor for Chinese goods to Europe and a vital logistical and industrial foothold in Eastern Europe. And China has virtually no serious alternatives to it in the region.

Ukraine is currently at war and is unlikely to become a stable transport and logistics route again in the coming years. The "16/17+1" format, which China had developed for cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries, has effectively ceased to exist. Finally, Lithuania, which due to its geographic location could have served as a logistics gateway for Chinese products into the EU, has in recent years rejected the "One China" policy. As a result, China imposed sanctions on Vilnius and completely excluded it from its statistical database. At the very least, these factors alone determine and will continue to determine Beijing's interest in strategic relations with Belarus.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations