Commentary
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Belarus-China Relations amid Geostrategic Challenges

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Recent developments in Belarus-China relations demonstrate that both countries continue to perceive each other as attractive partners, despite ongoing geostrategic shifts that are having a negative impact on their initial cooperation designs.

In early December 2023, the President of Belarus, Aleksandr Lukashenko, paid a working visit to China, which looked noteworthy due to at least two factors. *Firstly*, it had not been announced in advance and, according to the Belarusian leader, was organized "expeditiously." *Secondly*, it was already Lukashenko's second visit to Beijing in 2023; as recently as in March 2023, he paid a state visit bringing along a large government delegation. Such regularity of bilateral visits seems atypical for two disparate states that are approximately 6,000 km apart and, thus, appear not to share a particularly substantive common agenda. Not surprisingly, the very fact of the visit gave birth to numerous speculations.

While the December visit, indeed, came as a surprise to most observers, it should hardly invite sensational interpretations. If anything, the meeting itself and the evolution of Belarus-China relations show that Beijing and Minsk are looking for ways to advance cooperation amid numerous international challenges.

Long-established relations that took off in the 2010s

Belarus and China established diplomatic relations on 20 January 1992. However, until about the 2010s, few noteworthy developments took place in their cooperation. The rise of Beijing's geostrategic ambitions, and specifically the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, infused new energy into the partnership. For both countries, the rationale looked quite straightforward.

Beijing regarded Belarus's geographic position as crucial for linking China with the EU along the Eurasian land bridge. Belarus, bordering on the EU and having a well-functioning railway and road network, and border infrastructure, appeared as a natural

gateway to the EU. Especially as the fighting in Donbas and the Russian takeover of Crimea started to undermine the stability of Ukraine already in early 2014, which made the latter a less attractive logistical alternative. Belarusian membership of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and other post-Soviet groupings, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Union State of Belarus and Russia, provided another potential benefit for Chinese investors – that is, tariff-free exports of goods produced in Belarus to post-Soviet markets. Thus, Belarus's location looked appealing not only as an efficient transit corridor but also as a logistical and production hub with relatively easy access to both the EU and EAEU.

> Minsk, on its part, also perceived multiple economic and even national security opportunities in enhancing cooperation.

Expanding Chinese export potential, including BRI's massive designs, corresponded to Belarusian interest in maximizing its own logistical capacities and becoming a crucial element of transcontinental supply chains. Revealingly, in the 2010s, the transport sector – primarily, road and railway transport services – accounted for about 5-6% of the country's GDP. Belarus's share in global transport services exports amounted to 0,404% in 2020, whereas its overall share in the global economy stayed at 0,144%. Yet, according to the Belarusian government, cargo transit corridors in the country were used only up to 25-40% of their capacity, which incentivized Minsk to look for ways of further intensifying transport flows.

To read the rest of the commentary, please visit the web-site of the Centre for Eurasian Studies (AVIM).

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