Commentary
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Belarus-Iran: Minsk goes where doors are open

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Summary

On March 12 and 13, just ten days after his state visit to China, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka paid an official visit to Iran. For similar reasons with the visit to Beijing—that is, widespread speculation that Minsk might be joining Russian-Iranian military cooperation schemes with serious implications for the war against Ukraine — this visit also attracted significant international attention. However, as with the China trip, there is no indication that the talks focused on anything other than the bilateral agenda.

Symbolically, the visit was meant to mark the 30th anniversary of establishing official diplomatic relations between the two countries. During his meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Lukashenka admitted that, in years past—that is, before the rupture in Belarusian relations with the West—Minsk had paid insufficient attention to ties with Iran. Nevertheless, the Belarusian president declared, "now, we have come to realize how much we need each other, how closely we should cooperate in this world". Revealingly, this was Lukashenka's first visit to Iran in 17 years.

In 2022, trade volume between Belarus and Iran saw a three-fold growth, even though it stood at a modest $100 million. Importantly for Minsk, its exports increased by six times. In truth, the Belarusian government also hopes to expand potential benefits by launching cooperation projects instead of focusing on trade only. In Tehran, the countries signed a roadmap for bilateral cooperation in 2023–2025, which, according to the Belarusian authorities, foresees joint action on political, economic and consular matters, as well as collaboration in science, education, culture, arts, media and tourism. For obvious reasons, the announced economic results of the Tehran talks—another $100

million, in Lukashenka's words—pale in comparison with the agreements reached by the Belarusian delegation during its recent visit to Beijing. Yet, Minsk believes that more mutually beneficial synergies can be found with Tehran.

> Currently, it is difficult to judge how realistic are the Belarusian government's economic expectations vis-à-vis Iran.

Indeed, about two decades ago, the countries' bilateral relationship saw the release of multiple upbeat statements and ambitious plans. However, it later turned out that a gap existed between the signed agreements and their implementation. For that reason, during each meeting in Tehran, Lukashenka emphatically asked the Iranian leadership to ensure that the Iranian bureaucracy delivers quickly on the agreed items. The Iranian government, for its part, underlined the importance it ascribes to relations with Belarus, as Lukashenka was received by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In light of Lukashenka's recent international visits, which also included the United Arab Emirates and Zimbabwe, it has become commonplace for diplomats and journalists to ask what signals Minsk might be sending to the West. Some believe that the geography of the visits, as well as Belarus's application for membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), are meant to signal that Minsk is determined to fully reorient its foreign policy eastward. To them, the latest announcement that Belarus might soon host Russian tactical nuclear weapons represents quite possibly the most vivid expression of the Lukashenka government's longer-term planning. Still, others suppose that, while Minsk has no strategic designs in reorienting its foreign policy, Lukashenka wants to use any opportunity to go abroad to demonstrate to the West that attempts to isolate him have failed.

If one truly wants to understand the current rationale behind Belarusian decision-making, it is helpful to look at the country's realities through the eyes of its government, not just from external (especially normative) standpoints, which is usually the case among Belarus-watchers. It would take only a few conversations with officials in Minsk to realize that their motivations are much more banal than what international analysts tend to hypothesize.

To begin with, Minsk simply does not have enough time nor margin of error to really engage in signaling (about anything) to the West. Belarus is essentially muddling through the extremely adverse and rapidly deteriorating regional security and economic realities by reacting to the most acute challenges while having nearly no room for international maneuver. A key challenge here, besides the growing military risks, comes from unprecedented Western sanctions and, effectively, the logistical semi-blockade of

Belarus. To stay afloat, Minsk must "manually" reorient economic cooperation away from its more traditional Western markets to offset the losses inflicted by the sanctions regime and quickly find alternative supply chains and logistical routes. Currently, this is the core focus of Belarusian foreign policy.

Under such circumstances, it is only natural that Russia's overall significance for Minsk has grown dramatically, as has Minsk's dependence on Moscow, with the Russian share of Belarusian foreign trade and economic cooperation reaching new heights. For example, together with the three other states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia) of the Eurasian Economic Union, the Russian share in Belarusian exports amounted to 63.1 percent in 2022; whereas, prior to 2020, Minsk had pursued an official goal to keep this share at around 30 percent. Obviously, such expanding economic dependence quickly spills over into other areas, including the security realm.

That is why Belarus's second motivation for reaching out to countries in Asia and Africa is to simultaneously look for ways of limiting dependence on Russia, since this can no longer be done through cooperation with the West. This logic dictates that even the slightest available opportunities to diversify foreign and economic relations need to be used here and now. As Lukashenka recently admitted, "We go where doors are open for us".

Were more doors open for mutually beneficial cooperation with the West, Minsk would likely be knocking on them. The closest that Belarus has come to dialogue with the West in recent months came in the form of a visit by Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó to Belarus in mid-February 2023, which demonstrated that, broadly speaking, Minsk continues to look at relations with the West and European Union pragmatically. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult to even design realistic pathways to opening Western doors for cooperation with Belarus, not to mention the implementation of such designs. It would require enormous diplomatic creativity and extraordinary political leadership on both sides to overcome a multitude of domestic and international hurdles to any potential easing in Belarusian-Western tensions.

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