Commentary
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Belarusian-Chinese Ties Draw Heightened International Attention

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Summary

From February 28 to March 2, Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka paid a state visit to China. Somewhat unexpectedly, the visit attracted enormous international media and political attention. The reason for that, however, had more to do with the war in Ukraine than with bilateral Belarusian-Chinese relations.

When Lukashenka's visit was publicly announced, its agenda was quickly overshadowed by statements from top officials in the United States that China was "considering providing lethal support to Russia in its efforts in Ukraine". Given that both Beijing and Moscow denied this, hypotheses began to proliferate about how the Belarusian president's visit might relate to a presumable secretive plan to facilitate the transfer of Chinese lethal assistance to Russia via Belarus. Tellingly, most international media headlines stressed that Minsk is a firm and staunch ally of Putin and speculated that the summit between Lukashenka and Chinese President Xi Jinping might signal China's growing involvement in the Russo-Ukrainian war.

While such a framing of Lukashenka's Beijing visit is easy to understand amid ongoing geopolitical tensions, a number of reasons bring this perspective into question. If anything, it takes time to prepare a state visit, especially when about 40 agreements have been signed within its framework in areas as broad as agriculture and food deliveries, healthcare, construction, heavy industry, banking and finances, sports and tourism, media, as well as scientific cooperation. In fact, Xi and Lukashenka agreed to organize the visit during their previous talks on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in mid-September 2022. A few days later, on September 22, the Belarusian president held a meeting with a Chinese

business delegation and announced that he and Xi would have a "substantial" discussion about economic, political and military-technical collaboration after the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party.

> The "substantial" agenda likely explains the highest diplomatic status—state visit—of the meeting.

Furthermore, at the Samarkand summit, Minsk and Beijing signed a declaration that elevated their relationship to the level of an "all-weather" comprehensive strategic partnership. This is an upgrade from their 2013 declaration of a comprehensive strategic partnership to the second highest level out of about two dozen partnership formats that China traditionally utilizes. To put this into perspective, Pakistan is the only other country to have "all-weather" cooperation with Beijing, and all skepticism regarding the hierarchy of Chinese diplomatic engagements notwithstanding, the symbolism should not be entirely discounted. At the very least, it signals both sides' political interest in a rather special partnership.

Belarus's interests here are somewhat obvious. Minsk has long considered China a key foreign policy and economic partner and, therefore, invested a great deal of time and diplomatic effort in deepening relations. Under the current conditions of the Western sanctions regime, China's significance for Minsk has become exclusive. Beijing is now viewed by the Belarusian authorities as a crucial partner that, by reorienting Belarusian products toward Chinese markets, can help to partially offset financial losses from sanctions while counterbalancing Minsk's growing dependence on Moscow. This ensures that the latter is not the only game in town, both politically and economically.

China's interest vis-à-vis Belarus might not look as straightforward, given the countries' incomparable sizes and resources. For this reason, numerous commentators have always been skeptical about the prospects for this bilateral relationship. However, developments over the past decade or so have proved such expectations wrong, though, alongside numerous advances, the relationship has long been fraught with multiple problems, including China's use of its own workers to complete joint industrial projects.

The latest upgrade in relations implies that Belarus remains attractive to Beijing for geostrategic and geopolitical reasons.

> Somewhat counterintuitively, the Russian-Western confrontation and the uncertainties it produces in Europe could in fact strengthen Beijing's willingness to continue engaging with Minsk—especially since China does not seem to have many alternatives for preserving its regional foothold.

Ukraine, which Beijing had seen as a priority partner prior to 2013, is a war zone now. Additionally, the "16+1" platform for cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe has become dysfunctional, whereas China's relations with Lithuania are now openly hostile.

Thus, despite media speculation about the meaning of the latest Xi-Lukashenka summit, it would be safe to assume that it mainly focused on the bilateral agenda. Of particular note, filling the "all-weather" framework with specific cooperation substance appears a more challenging task than what the countries' political enthusiasm might suggest. In the past, cooperation between Beijing and Minsk revolved primarily around the latter's role as a logistical route and hub, including within the Belt and Road Initiative. As a crucial part of the Eurasia land bridge, Belarus links China with Europe. Reflective of that logic, the countries launched a highly ambitious project in 2014—the Great Stone Industrial Park on the outskirts of Minsk.

However, since late 2020, the European Union has introduced multiple packages of sanctions against Belarus, which are considerably limiting not only its investment potential but also its mere capacity to serve as a logistical route and hub. Most recently, the problem has been aggravated by Poland's and Lithuania's decisions to close some crossing points on their borders with Belarus and to complicate the movement of goods and people across the remaining ones. In essence, those moves now amount to a partial blockade of Belarus, which can undermine many existing Chinese-Belarusian cooperation plans. Therefore, during Lukashenka's visit, Minsk and Beijing inevitably focused on new ideas and projects to ensure the "all-weather" comprehensive partnership does not stay solely in the political realm but also extends to economic cooperation.

All this does not mean that Xi and Lukashenka avoided discussing the war in Ukraine.

> In truth, the war was a central part of their talks, as Belarus's proximity to the conflict and allied relations with Russia make Lukashenka a unique source of information about the developments in Ukraine, as well as the Kremlin's thinking.

Moreover, just several days before the visit, China published its position paper on ending the war. While the document is too vague to qualify as a viable peace plan, most of its points are in tune with the multiple suggestions and initiatives that Minsk itself has promoted since the start of the fighting in Donbas in 2014. Not surprisingly, Belarus has praised the paper and signaled its readiness to help Beijing amplify those messages —once again, highlighting the deepening of cooperation between the two sides.

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