Commentary
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Belarus's Diplomatic Activities Reflect a Non-Ideological Foreign Policy

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

Belarus's recent diplomatic activities highlight Minsk's growing ambitions to court alternative economic partners to Russia and the West. These efforts reflect a non-ideological basis for the country's foreign policy, as pragmatic economic considerations trump ideological positions.

In mid-March, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Aleinik paid two consecutive visits to Asia—first to India and then to Mongolia. Aleinik was accompanied by large government delegations on both trips. Around the same time, other Belarusian officials held talks in Bangladesh and Laos. These visits, as well as Aleinik's trips to Africa earlier this year, demonstrate Minsk's pivot to the "Global South" (a term referencing the developing countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia). Belarus is engaging in regular diplomatic efforts to gain access to new markets to counter simultaneously stringent Western sanctions and a heavy dependence on Russia. These actions demonstrate that Belarusian foreign policy, in contrast to traditional media portrayals, remains non-ideological and highly transactional.

Aleinik's visit to India was perhaps the most consequential, taking place on 12 and 13 March. The trip reflected a major effort by Minsk to elevate its relations with New Delhi to a qualitatively different level and reinvigorate cooperation in multiple areas. Work in that direction started already in 2022 under the late Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei. In January 2024, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka publicly instructed Makei's successor, Aleinik, to build on those initial efforts and treat elevating cooperation with India as a high-priority matter. Given the Indian population's size and the high rate at which the domestic economy grows, India presents numerous opportunities for cooperation that Minsk does not want to miss, such as assistance in manufacturing microchips and semiconductors.

Official Minsk hopes that at least some Belarusian companies can prove competitive in the Indian market. Products manufactured in Belarus often tend to be cheaper than more internationally recognizable brands. Thanks to long-existing ties between Belarus and India, which date back to Soviet times, government officials are optimistic that Belarusian companies can claim a place in the Indian economy.

> Arguably, diplomatic considerations also contribute to shaping the perceptions of New Delhi in Minsk. Besides New Delhi's growing role and increased influence in world politics, Belarus's upcoming accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), anticipated at the next SCO summit in Kazakhstan in July, will necessitate regular contacts and coordination with India.

Similarly, Belarus has applied for membership in BRICS (a loose economic grouping originally made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), in which New Delhi plays a central role. Thus, Minsk expects the Indian government to support its membership bid and then develop more intense bilateral ties within that multilateral framework.

During his meeting with New Delhi's top diplomat Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Aleinik handed over a personal letter from Lukashenka addressed to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The letter laid out the Belarusian president's ideas for advancing bilateral relations. While the exact contents of the letter remain unknown publicly, the emphatic economic agenda of Aleinik's visit can serve as an indicator. According to the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, the central agenda items included the provision of food security (a reference to Belarus's potash exports); supplies of Belarusian agricultural, heavy, and passenger vehicles to India, including electric buses; and cooperation in pharmaceuticals and the chemical industry.

Similar to its contacts with other populous markets, Minsk stressed interest in not only expanding its exports but also opening assembly lines and service centres across India, which appears to correspond with New Delhi's aspirations. From its side, India invited Belarusian companies to participate in government-funded programs, such as "Made in India," with a focus on electronics, semiconductors, and green energy. Greater collaboration in tourism and education was also discussed. Since Soviet times, Belarusian universities, particularly medical colleges, have been popular destinations for Indian students.

Aleinik's visit to Mongolia on 15-16 March had a similar agenda and pattern of meetings. The Belarusian delegation promoted the country's key export potential in agriculture and agricultural machinery, industrial machine-building, railway transport production, infrastructure, construction, education, and tourism. Primary attention was given to joint projects rather than purely bilateral trade. Separately, the two sides discussed the implementation of an agreement to supply over 100 Belarusian firefighting vehicles to the Mongolian National Emergency Management Agency and open national trade houses in one another's capital. Additionally, officials on both sides began drafting a road map for bilateral cooperation in 2024–26.

> Both of Aleinik's visits reflect the primacy of foreign economic relations that have traditionally been at the heart of Belarusian diplomacy.

Deputy Foreign Minister Evgeny Shestakov's recent visits to Bangladesh and Laos point to the same conclusion, as did Aleinik's visits to Africa earlier this year. Expanding economic cooperation with as many foreign partners as possible was Minsk's central ambition during the "golden times" of rapprochement between Belarus and the West in 2014–20. During that period, export indicators were the main criterion for assessing Minsk's foreign policy achievements and judging the work of individual diplomats. This general approach remains in force today, as Belarus has become one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world.

Currently, Minsk is launching cooperation with countries that used to be seen as less-promising partners due to their distant locations. In earlier years, these partners were not needed as the European Union accounted for about one-third of Belarusian foreign trade and had not closed its own doors to economic cooperation with Belarusian partners. Now, Minsk is looking for opportunities to reorient its entire foreign economic relations toward markets that remain accessible. While the task will be tremendous, in the eyes of most Belarusian decision-makers, no alternative options exist so long as most Western countries fail to consider any policy toward Minsk other than doubling down on sanctions.

> The main goals of Belarusian diplomacy lie in the economic realm, and the country needs a non-ideological foreign policy to achieve those ends.

In contrast to popular media narratives that place Belarus on the map of a global confrontation between democracies and autocracies, this dichotomy does not fully reflect Minsk's thinking. Rather than vague ideological ideas, sheer pragmatism tends to shape Belarus's foreign policy decisions.

Aleinik's latest visits attest to this conclusion. While Minsk is investing time and efforts in reviving ties with India, it is pursuing the same efforts with New Delhi's main antagonist, Pakistan, and pushing even harder to advance relations with China. Similarly, when the West was open to rapprochement with Belarus, Minsk pursued greater cooperation even in the face of its alliance with Moscow. Such logic is not unique to Belarus, as many smaller states take a similar approach to international relations no matter the characteristics of their domestic political regimes prioritizing pragmatism over ideology.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations