

The strategic rapprochement of China and Belarus in the context of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Introduction

Russia invaded Ukraine and started a war on February 24, 2022. This unprecedented event dramatically changed the condition of European society and the nature of international relations. Belarus, being a close partner of Russia, has a specific role in this conflict, being practically not involved, at least from the military perspective. Based on the close relationship between Alexander Lukashenko, the head-of-state of Belarus with the Russian president Vladimir Putin, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping invited the top leadership of Belarus to China in early March 2023.

Belarus has been a key Russian ally since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine when it allowed Moscow to use Belarus' border with Ukraine to launch its ultimately failed attack on Kyiv in March 2022. Meanwhile, China has tried to appear neutral by declaring its support for both the right to sovereignty and national security, which are the interests of Ukraine and Russia respectively. Beijing refused to condemn Moscow and indirectly supported its war effort, as Chinese state media actively propagated Russia's view of the war. Neither China nor Belarus has an interest in going to war in Ukraine.

Background related to relations between Belarus and China.

Belarus and China have developed scientific and innovative contacts since the beginning of the 1990s (Zalessky 2020: 4). The first systemic steps to organize interregional cooperation between Belarus and China were taken in 2002, when the "Action Plan for the Activation of Trade and economic cooperation between Belarus and China through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Belarus and the Chinese Committee for the Promotion of International Trade for 2003-2004" was drawn up (Zalessky 2020: 17). In July 2014, the Gansu province registered its representative office in the Republic of Belarus to promote "the development of trade and economic cooperation, joint projects, the establishment of contacts between entrepreneurs". After establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership in September 2022, China and Belarus pledged during the visit of Alexander Lukashenko to Beijing to further develop exemplary relations under the partnership in this new era. Meanwhile, a certain number of bilateral cooperation documents in the fields of economy and

trade, customs, science and technology, health, tourism and sport, and local affairs were signed. 27 intergovernmental, inter-departmental, and interregional agreements were signed, and about 8 commercial contracts in various areas - industrial and agricultural activities (Эксперт: Лукашенко ищет в Китае противовес Кремлю: 2023).

China and Belarus also have long-standing economic relations. Beijing has made significant investments in Belarus in recent years, including an industrial park with a free trade zone, which was established in 2015.

This large industrial zone is called the "Great Stone" park near Minsk, ie. the Sino-Belarusian industrial park, which is the most important joint project with China. Following the state visit of the President of China Xi Jinping to Belarus in May 2015, the Sino-Belarusian Industrial Park was announced as the "Pearl of the Silk Road Economic Belt" which underlines the strategic nature of this project for China.

According to the National Statistics Committee of Belarus, the net profit of enterprises in the industrial park amounts to USD 14 million in 2022, an increase of 144% compared to the last year. So far, 107 enterprises in various fields such as machinery, e-commerce, new materials, traditional Chinese medicine, artificial intelligence, and 5G network development have registered over there, with an estimated investment of more than USD 1.3 billion (Китай и Беларусь активно развивают сотрудничество во всех областях: 2023).

The Sino-Belarusian Industrial Park is not the only one example of economic cooperation between both countries. Another example is the production of cars by the Chinese private company Geely in Belarus (Richet 2017: 58.). In March 2023, it was also announced that the Hongqi brand (belonging to the FAW group) will also produce cars in Belarus. Interestingly, Lukashenko was transported with a FAW car during his visit to China in March 2023 (китайские-автомобили: 2023).

From a broader perspective, with the strengthening of their bilateral relations, China and Belarus have seen their trade exchanges explode in recent years. Statistics from the General Administration of Customs of China show that bilateral trade exceeded USD 5 billion in 2022, up 33 percent from the previous year. Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, the volume of trade between the two countries has grown despite the difficulties. According to Chinese statistics, last year the total volume of imports of agricultural products from Belarus to China reached USD 649 million and increased by 52% in comparison to 2021 (Китай и Беларусь активно развивают сотрудничество во всех областях: 2023).

Alexander Lukashenko said that Belarus wants to strengthen cooperation with China in the fields of science and technology, industry, agriculture, and tourism, advance the construction of China-Europe freight trains and the industrial park, welcome Chinese companies wishing to

invest in Belarus and strengthen local and cultural exchanges. When it comes to education cooperation, 530 direct cooperation agreements have been signed between educational institutions in Belarus and China. Mutual academic mobility has been growing for many years. About 8,000 Chinese citizens study at educational institutions in our country, and almost 500 Belarusians study at universities in China (Беларусь - Китай: подписано 17 новых соглашений в области образования: 2023).

Within these business ties, a phrase spoken by Lukashenko during his meeting with Xi shall be underlined as the Belarussian President underlined the interest in deepening cooperation with China, especially in the field of "the promotion of goods and services on the markets of third countries. If, as assured by the United States, China considered selling arms to Russia, it could use Belarus as a transit country.

China has become the world's fourth largest arms exporter and Chinese companies have supposedly already provided "non-lethal support" to Russia (Jason Li: 203).

From the Foreign Direct Investment perspective (FDI), at the end of 2021, the volume of investments from China to Belarus amounted to USD 110 mln, including direct investments of USD 75 mln. The largest volume of direct Chinese investment is attracted to the industry, construction, transport activities, and logistics. China represented 2% of the FDI in Belarus between 2016 and 2019. China is one of Belarus' three biggest trading partners. In 2022, trade grew by 13% to USD 5.8 billion, including USD 1.7 billion in Belarusian exports and USD 4.2 billion in Chinese imports. Chinese export to Belarus represents around 12% of the total imports to Belarus. Belarussian export to China represents around 0.3% of the total imports to China. A trend in Belarus's trade with China seems to be increased fertilizer exports. (Investment: Ministry of Economy of Belarus).

The visit of the Belarussian head of state Alexander Lukashenko to China

The Belarussian head of state Alexander Lukashenko visited China and met China's leader Xi Jinping from 28 February to 2 March 2023.

Alexander Lukashenko was received in Beijing by Chinese President Xi Jinping, where the two leaders signed a series of agreements and expressed their "greatest interest" in finding a peaceful solution to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Alexander Lukashenko is one of Vladimir Putin's closest allies, if not the closest, and has shown his full support for the peace plan presented later in March by Chinese authorities to end the war in Ukraine. Lukashenko and Xi congratulated each other, describing the friendship between their countries in the closest terms.

The Chinese and Belarusian presidents know each other quite well: Xi Jinping likes to talk to Lukashenko because he is probably the world leader who knows Putin the best, so he serves

as a guide to understanding what is happening. Xi Jinping is trying to position himself in this war, trying to understand how far Putin intends to go. Lukashenko is a good interlocutor for that. This would partly explain the grand display that Beijing made for the visit of Alexander Lukashenko.

The Belarusian leader, in power since 1994, knows the Chinese president very well, having already met him 12 times. It is also his 12th trip to China. Like Vladimir Putin, Alexander Lukashenko willingly uses the codes and terms of Chinese diplomacy when he comes to Beijing. As Chinese leaders often do when addressing their distinguished guests, it is the three characters 老朋友 "Lǎo péngyǒu", "old friend" in Mandarin, that the Belarusian president used to refer to his Chinese counterpart in an interview granted to Xinhua News Agency before he left.

Both presidents evoked also the "Great Stone" park. The Chinese president stressed that more efforts should be made to develop economic and trade cooperation, build the Sino-Belarusian industrial park, and jointly build the Belt and Road, and advancing the construction of connectivity, such as China-Europe freight trains.

During his visit to Beijing, Alexander Lukashenko hailed the peace plan for Ukraine that China has presented and which has been met with suspicion by the West. Alexander Lukashenko condemns the use of "unilateral sanctions", an implicit criticism of Ukraine's Western allies. Lukashenko's rhetoric, however, has not always been so conciliatory.

In mid-February, at a press conference in Minsk, the Belarusian president warned that if aggression against his country would be committed, "the response would be immediate, and the war would reach a whole new level". However, when a Ukrainian missile mistakenly landed on Belarusian territory at the end of December 2022, Lukashenko's response minimized its impact (Ebel, Abbakumova: 2023).

On March 26, Belarus offered to accept Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons.

A few days earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin admitted along with Chinese President Xi Jinping, that no nuclear weapon should be stationed in a foreign country. The presence of Russian nuclear warheads in Belarus would be a response to Chinese President Xi Jinping, with whom an agreement has been made and which provided that there are no nuclear weapons anywhere other than in countries that already have them. In other words, Belarus is de facto integrated into Russian territory. From a different perspective if we do still consider Belarus independent then Vladimir Putin violated then Russia's constant position and humiliated to some extent the Chinese leader Xi Jinping. From an official perspective, in response, on the 27th, China expressed its position that strategic risks should be lowered, saying that there is no winner in a nuclear war. China expressed a view that may change if

these nuclear weapons would effectively appear in the Belarussian theory, which is not so obvious as it may be. We may seriously doubt that Russia would be able to erect the necessary nuclear facilities in Belarus within three months.

Finding and prospects

Last September 2022, seven months after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Beijing raised the status of its relations with Belarus to what it now describes as a "comprehensive strategic partnership", a very unusual term that it had previously only used to define another country: Pakistan.

This means that Belarus ranks very high in China's international relations hierarchy, just below Russia. The two countries, led by authoritarian governments, also share a similar vision of the world. Alexander Lukashenko is the only president of Belarus since the country left the Soviet Union. The United Nations has documented numerous cases of torture, and international observers say he has won only the first of five consecutive elections in which he has prevailed. In China, the Communist Party has ruled since 1949 without holding democratic elections. Finally, China greatly appreciates Belarus' firm support for its stance on Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and human rights issues.

The Belarussian and Chinese presidents would like to use this war to break the hegemony of the United States in the world but, at the same time, they are very uncomfortable with the way it is unfolding.

The Belarussian President knows he is in a weak position vis-à-vis Russia. There is a credible threat that Russia wants to annex Belarus in the medium term, and Lukashenko is playing his cards as best he can to try to prevent that. With this rapprochement with China, Lukashenko can also seek to reduce his dependence on Russia and, perhaps is looking for a safe place to withdraw to in case things would not go well for him in Belarus and he would be overthrown in a new political revolt. In a summary, the rapprochement between these two countries would bring asymmetric benefits to each of them. In the context of sanctions applied toward Belarus, China would be a new market for its products. For China, Belarus represents not only a source of information on the Russian invasion of Ukraine but also a logistical key point that is beneficial for the process of Chinese goods through Europe.

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