



Lukashenka Visits China

Anna Maria Dyer

On 1-2 March 2023, Alexander Lukashenka was on an official visit to China. During the meeting, a number of bilateral political and economic declarations were signed. Despite the lack of official announcements, security issues were also one of the most important topics of the talks. Closer cooperation between Belarus and China will be beneficial for Russia from the perspective of its aggression against Ukraine.

What happened during the visit?

Lukashenka's trip was announced during the September meeting between the Belarusian leader and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the SCO summit in Samarkand. The visit had a state character and was held with full ceremony. During the meeting, Lukashenka had a conversation with Xi Jinping that lasted several hours and was focused on security issues and economic cooperation. Earlier, Lukashenka met with Prime Minister Li Keqiang and the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Li Zhanshu. Lukashenka and Xi adopted a joint statement on advancing the strategic partnership between Belarus and China. Lukashenka also expressed Belarus's support for the Chinese peace plan for Ukraine. In addition, about 20 documents were signed on closer cooperation in various economic areas, as well as with in the sports, tourism, scientific and technical cooperation, and media spheres. Lukashenka also met with the leaders of important Chinese corporations (CITIC Group investment company, FAW Group automobile manufacturer).

How does cooperation between Belarus and China help Russia?

Before his visit to China on 17 February, Lukashenka went to Russia where he announced a delegation to Iran for mid-March. The chronology of the meetings and the choice of partners suggest that he is probably conducting a series of talks aimed at supporting Russia in its aggression against Ukraine. The statements of the leaders of Belarus and China

show that both countries have a common approach to re-shaping the world order to a multipolar model. They also concluded economic agreements, including the production of machine tools and cooperation in the automotive industry. That and information that both countries are to return to earlier announcements of joint production of unmanned aerial vehicles show that Belarus and China are taking actions that may benefit Russia as a recipient of equipment for the purposes of waging war with Ukraine. In turn, the agreement on cooperation between the state-owned news agencies Belta and Xinhua shows that Belarus and China will jointly conduct disinformation campaigns against Western countries.

What is the significance of the visit for Lukashenka's regime?

The Belarusian's visit to Beijing was intended to show that his regime, despite Western sanctions and his support for Russia in its invasion of Ukraine, is not fully isolated in the international arena. It also signalled to Belarusians that Lukashenka, next to Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, is one of the world leaders aiming to shape a new international order that will challenge the dominant position of the U.S. and the so-called "collective West".

Belarusian official media emphasised the supposedly significant economic importance of the visit by pointing out that the cumulative economic effect of all the concluded agreements will amount to around \$3.5 billion. However, most of the signed documents are merely memorandums, and the cooperation between the two countries so far shows

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that many of the concluded agreements have never been implemented. The topics of the talks and the economic agreements indicate that they are intended to increase the ability to support Russia, and therefore the visit cannot be considered an attempt to make Belarusian foreign policy more independent of that country. Perhaps, it is even an attempt by Russia to circumvent the problem of sanctions by the U.S., which threatened China that if it started open and direct support for Russia in its aggression (not only in the form of weapons, but also dual-use systems, such as drones), it would also be sanctioned.

What are the consequences for the West of closer cooperation between Belarus and China?

The announcements of closer cooperation with Belarus suggests that China wants to support Russia in its attack on Ukraine. At the same time, it is important for both countries

to build the image of an anti-Western coalition that is expanding to include Belarus. This means that in the near future we can expect a number of joint initiatives in the international arena, especially in the UN, aimed at the policies of EU members, NATO, and the U.S. Propaganda cooperation between Belarus and China may also prove a challenge to the West, including, for example, duplication by Chinese sources in African or Middle Eastern countries of Belarusian disinformation regarding the border crisis or relations with Poland.

The possible strengthening of the defence potential of Belarus through Chinese investments in the Belarusian defence sector may have consequences for the security of NATO's Eastern Flank in the next few years. Therefore, the Alliance countries, especially the U.S., should closely follow the development of this cooperation and respond to it with sanctions against Belarusian and Chinese enterprises.