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Belarus and China: Together through thick and thin?

While economically speaking, China's cooperation with Belarus is no longer as close as it was, politically, they continue to deepen their partnership

The signing of the 'joint declaration on establishing an all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership' by Belarus and China in September 2022 is seen by both sides as a historic breakthrough. However, this sentiment would fail to reflect the growing problems in economic cooperation between the two countries.

In the last two years, several international and domestic political developments have negatively impacted the relationship between Belarus and China on various levels. Starting with the Covid-19 pandemic, which impeded the trade and investment relations between the two countries as well as the implementation of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Secondly, the political crisis in Belarus in 2020, which resulted in Western sanctions and international isolation. Thirdly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, including from the territory of Belarus, placed further strain on the relationship between Belarus and the West.

Closer political ties

Although the pandemic impeded trade between the two countries, it allowed Belarus and China to develop closer political ties. Despite their dramatically different approaches to combatting Covid-19, Minsk and Beijing closely collaborated on the issue. Belarus sent two aid planes to China at the very start of the pandemic and China donated around five million doses of their Covid-19 vaccine to Belarus. That said, the political crisis in Belarus in 2020 and Russia's military invasion of Ukraine significantly altered the economic cooperation between the two countries.

The West reacted to the fraudulent presidential elections in Belarus and the violent crackdown of the security forces on peaceful protests by imposing economic sanctions on Belarus, which could not but impact

relations with China. Despite China's official recognition of the results of the Belarusian presidential elections, Beijing was very wary of addressing the issue in its relations with the West. According to expert opinions, as a result of the sanctions imposed by the US, China's economic cooperation with Belarus is no longer as close as it was. But the friendly political relations remain.

Recently, Belarus and China have preferred to create the illusion of 'business as always', glossing over their deteriorating economic and investment relations.

At the start of the political crisis in Belarus in 2020, China began to limit its economic and investment cooperation with Belarus, effectively suspending a whole series of economic projects. And while this may not have been expected in 2020, the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces made economic cooperation a whole lot more difficult.

Still, in recent times, Belarus and China have preferred to create the illusion of 'business as always', glossing over their deteriorating economic and investment relations. Belarus is careful to conceal its frustration concerning its unfulfilled expectations in these spheres, instead actively highlighting the exclusively positive trends, such as the growth in exports of Belarusian foodstuffs and wood products to China. Also, in relation to the inaccessibility of Western markets, Belarus sees China – along with Russia – as key markets for its exports to replace those in the West.

Impacts of the war in Ukraine

Russia's war on Ukraine and the resulting Western sanctions pose a significant barrier to the implementation of China's investment and infrastructure Belt and Road Initiative. Currently, the importance of Belarus' logistical and transit role has been called into question, as has the planned development of the China-Belarus Great Stone Industrial Park (GSIP).

'The war has interrupted plans with regard to new Chinese companies entering the GSIP and previous political decisions on this have been suspended. For now, it is not worth questioning the profitability of Great Stone, but it remains a landmark project', an informed expert reported.

Great Stone, which is a significant project for both sides and is being personally and actively advanced by Alexander Lukashenko and Xi Jinping, is not meeting the expectations of either country. Minsk's plans to increase the number of resident companies in the GSIP to 100 by the end of 2019 had still not come to fruition by the end of 2022. However, quantity does not necessarily mean quality: questions are being raised

about the technological effectiveness and the prospects of the companies that are part of the GSIP. Companies from the EU began to abandon the GSIP at the beginning of 2020, and the entry of Chinese companies slowed. As a result, the administration of the GSIP began to shift its focus towards cooperation with Russian firms.

For Belarus, political support from China is essential.

Despite the decline in economic cooperation between the two countries, on the political level, Minsk and Beijing continue to deepen their partnership. The 2016 'China-Belarus joint declaration to enhance mutual trust and establish a win-win comprehensive strategic partnership' was followed by the signing of the aforementioned joint declaration in September 2022.

For Belarus, political support from China – a major and influential player in the international arena as well as an important ally and key security guarantor – is essential. Consequently, we should not expect some kind of official criticism with regard to the deteriorating partnership. China supports Lukashenko's political course and has repeatedly criticised Western sanctions towards Belarus (including the imposition of economic sanctions in relation to the Belarusian aviation industry due to the incident with the Ryanair flight), as well as Western demands regarding respect for human rights and 'the interference of external forces' in the country's domestic affairs.

For China, in turn, Belarusian political support in various international forums is important.

According to reports by the state-owned national news agency 'Belta', not only did China not change its position towards Belarus after the start of the Russian war on Ukraine, but it allegedly even took a positive view of Belarus's role in resolving the armed conflict. In Minsk's official rhetoric, the narrative of China as a guarantor of security has strengthened since the beginning of the war. This could be linked to the increasingly tense relations between Belarus and the West and to Lukashenko's fears regarding Russia's possible encroachment on Belarusian sovereignty.

For China, in turn, Belarusian political support in various international forums is important when it comes to the issue of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet and the South China Sea and also with regards to the controversy surrounding the provenance of the Covid-19 infection. In

the 2022 joint declaration between Belarus and China, Minsk emphasised its commitment to the 'One China' principle and clearly opposed Taiwanese independence. In the economic sphere, an important issue for China is still the regular supply of Belarusian potash, which has been made more difficult by Western sanctions.

It is most likely that Beijing will continue to develop its political involvement in Belarus but it is unlikely that the previous level of economic and investment partnership with Minsk will be restored until the regional situation is normalised and relations between Belarus and the West have improved.

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