

MINSK'S RUSSIA PROBLEM

MAX GEORGE

INTRODUCTION

Russia-Belarus relations are in a state of flux. At a base level they are characterised by a power asymmetry between the two states. For Belarus, domestic considerations of regime survival for President Lukashenko predominate. For Russia the primary interest is in keeping Belarus closely within its sphere of influence. The present period is seeing Belarus gradually shift to a more neutral position aiming to maximise geopolitical freedom of manoeuvre, without decisively committing to any 'bloc', recognising Russia's local hegemony. This briefing will assess the relationship thematically to explain this Belarussian strategy of triangulation.

STRATEGY AND (GEO)POLITICS

The primary cleavage of the political relationship between Belarus and Russia concerns integration plans, whereby aspects of economic and foreign policymaking would be combined under supranational organs. The asymmetry of the two states complicates this process: any integration arrangement which would be acceptable to Minsk would require a degree of equality in decision-making, in order to protect Belarusian sovereignty. This equality would necessarily be unacceptable to Moscow as the clear hegemon in the relationship (Preiherman, 2020). Additionally, Belarus lacks the incentive of a third-party external threat to make integration desirable as a means of protection.

The relationship is characterised by a gradual alienation of Belarus from Russian foreign policy. This has been labelled a 'multi-vector foreign policy' (Shraibman, 2019). Over the last decade Belarus has shown itself willing to both diverge from Russian foreign policy and embrace Western governments, critically when this is aligned to Minsk's interests. Minsk has, for instance, refrained from explicitly supporting Russia's annexation of Crimea, instead recognising the reality of Russian control of the territory while emphasising the principles of territorial integrity (President of the Republic of Belarus, 2014). In addition, the recent visit of the US Secretary of State to Minsk highlighted Lukashenko's willingness to promote relations with the US when Belarus comes under pressure from Russia, in this case the energy dispute between the two countries.

Belarus appears to desire a position of neutrality between Russia and the US/EU. Its recent record as a site for conflict mediation (numerous 'Minsk formats' have been the sites of ceasefire and peace negotiations in Eurasian conflicts) would seem to accord with this. This diplomatic 'offer' may afford Minsk freedom of manoeuvre between Russia and the West, in the absence of relative economic or military strength (Shraibman, 2018). Avoiding a decisive alignment with Russian foreign policy or integration into Russian-led supranational structures will be necessary to sustain this position. Finally, such a position will help to assuage Russian fears of a Western drift.

MILITARY

At the strategic level the military relationship is an extension of the geopolitical situation. First, the Belarus and Russia are formally allied under Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) arrangements, however in practice Belarus has shown a reluctance to commit to CSTO operations (compounded by occasional displays of contempt for the organisation by Lukashenko), or to join in Russian overseas military interventions (Kucera, 2017). Second, widely-held NATO planning assumptions that Belarus would decisively take Russia's side in a putative Baltic conflict scenario does not reflect the high risk of entrapment this would entail for Minsk, in addition to risks it would present to the Lukashenko regime (Flanagan et al., 2019).

The potential for Russia to operate from Belarus is operationally undermined by suboptimal military interoperability which, despite joint exercises and years of cooperation, is more limited than often assumed. Belarus has also frustrated Russia with its refusal to allow the establishment of a Russian air base on its territory.

The 2017 *Zapad exercise* conducted jointly between Russia and Belarus is demonstrative of the unrealised potential for military cooperation and integration between the two. It was an opportunity for significant interoperability development and for a geopolitical statement of unity to the West, and offered the possibility of establishing permanent staging areas and logistical nodes for Russian forces within Belarus. Instead, the exercise highlighted political impediments to deeper

military cooperation. Minsk invited multiple external observers without coordinating with Moscow, and emphasised the defensive nature of the exercise, where Moscow had talked up its expeditionary utility (Ioffe, 2017). So, while the military relationship is an extension of the strategic relationship, the fact that military integration is less developed than it could be will limit military options in the future should the strategic relationship evolve.

ECONOMICS AND ENERGY

Belarus's intention to reduce its dependency on Russia is perhaps most evident in the economic domain. The imbalance in the relationship is most marked with regards to energy. Belarus imports around 85% of its energy (mostly from Russia) and, though it is a 'transit state' for Russian gas being supplied to European countries further west, this high level of dependence gives it little bargaining power. The construction of undersea pipelines through the Baltics and the Black Sea has effectively bypassed Belarussian transit, reducing any bargaining power this may have afforded. Importantly, the provision of cheap gas to Belarus since the end of the Soviet Union was always based on an implicit understanding of a trajectory towards closer integration. As Russian efforts to realise this have become frustrated recently, Belarus has now been compelled to pay market prices (Belsat, 2020).

Presently Russia represents around half of Belarus's imports and exports, and the relatively undeveloped, low-tech nature of its

industry makes it more dependent on trade with its largest neighbour. There is significant imbalance in the economic relationship between Russia and Belarus. While 44% of Belarussian exports go to Russia, the reciprocal figure is just 5.4%.

Economics and energy thus represent one of the key drivers of the Belarussian strategy of keeping diplomatic options open and avoiding decisive integration with Russia. The provision of cheap energy from Russia – a boon to the Belarussian economy – was contingent on Minsk's acquiescence to Russian integration plans. That the resulting sovereignty implications would have been unacceptable to Minsk has seen it obliged to pay market prices for Russian gas. Thus if there is no commercial benefit to relying on Russian energy (and wider trade), Minsk will seek to extend its economic links with other countries and regions. This will necessarily result in wider political and diplomatic engagement away from Russia.

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Culture and identity represent important features of the relationship due to the essentially Russo-centric identity in Belarus: shared language, religion, collective memory, and even media. However this does not automatically translate into unflinching loyalty and pro-Russian policy decisions. There has been a gradual 'Belarusianization' of the national discourse in Belarus, pushed by Lukashenko (OEC, n.d.). Opinion polling shows both falling support for Russian integration but, most importantly, a strong preference for neutrality between east and west (Belsat, 2020). There is limited evidence of any 'Westernising' trends in Belarussian identity, but there are indications of

a popular distinction between cultural and political Russianism.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, this position of maintaining cultural pro-Russianism while avoiding an explicit political identification with Russia is advantageous for Belarus. It denies any space for a narrative of oppressed Russian minorities to be wielded against it, as has been employed by Russia in Ukraine and the Baltics. It allows Minsk to demonstrate superficial sincerity about Russian kinship while diverging on policy.

CONCLUSION

The growing dependence of Belarus on Russia across political and economic domains has reached a point of unease for Lukashenko. His regime's survival is dependent upon Belarus's sovereignty and the gradual shift towards a freer strategic position – freer to make political and economic choices other than Russia – is the manifestation of this unease. Nonetheless, Minsk's awareness of Moscow's ultimate pre-eminence in the relationship explains the triangulation in this strategy: Belarus seeks to buttress its sovereignty and independent decision-making, and to secure its economic options, while not giving Russia any opportunity to reach a threshold for coercion.

It is a balancing act that carries two main risks. First, a failure to rebalance away from Russia and diversify its economy may cause domestic weakness and instability and force re-supplication to Russia on less favourable terms. Second, and most important, an unstable succession of Lukashenko as president: if the rebalancing creates creeping impetus for a more decisive Western, liberal pivot, Russia may feel obliged to adopt a more assertive, even interventionist position towards Belarus.

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