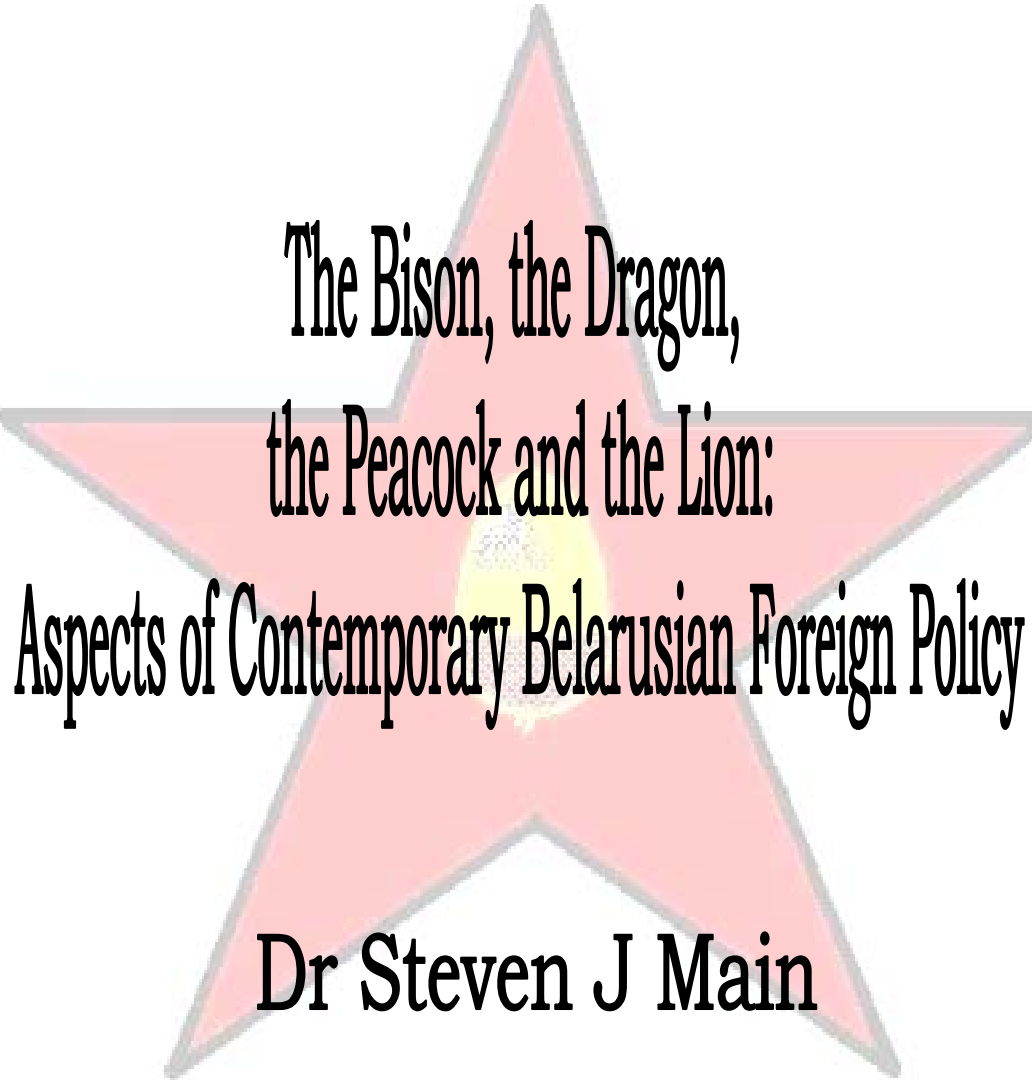


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**The Bison, the Dragon,  
the Peacock and the Lion:  
Aspects of Contemporary Belarusian Foreign Policy**

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**Defence Academy of the United Kingdom**

# **The Bison, the Dragon, the Peacock and the Lion: Aspects of Contemporary Belarusian Foreign Policy**

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## **Key Points**

- \* Since 1994, Belarus' has targeted the non-European and non-CIS countries in order to lessen the political and diplomatic isolation imposed on it by the West.
- \* Under Lukashenko, particular emphasis has been placed on developing a political, economic and military-technical relationship with the world's emerging super-power – China.
- \* Iran is also viewed as a country which could have a long-term economic and energy-security significance for Belarus'.
- \* In the short term, Syria looks set to become one of Belarus' main inroads into the Arab business and economic community.
- \* One of the main factors underlining the country's foreign policy is the economy: Belarus', unlike its large neighbour, has no significant natural resources to rely on. The former "assembly plant" of the old USSR, it still is heavily involved in producing manufactured goods for export abroad, which mean political and economic survival not only for the country, but also for the regime.
- \* Diplomatic isolation has made the regime economically aggressive in its pursuit of foreign policy: "multi-vectored" meaning a licence to seek out, talk and trade with anyone, regardless of political, ideological or confessional hue.
- \* Those waiting for the regime to collapse had better think again: Belarus' has powerful partners.

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# **The Bison, the Dragon, the Peacock and the Lion: Aspects of Contemporary Belarusian Foreign Policy**

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## **Introduction**

Whilst there has been considerably less talk recently of the “axis of evil” operating in world affairs - most notably because two “foundation-members” of the “axis” may yet be called upon to play an important role in the settlement of the crises in Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan – nevertheless, there is still a feeling, certainly in Western circles that that there are a number of “rogue” states in the world, whose activities must not only be monitored but as much as possible controlled, if not opposed. A pronounced European state, Belarus’, despite being dubbed a “rogue” state, has never accepted the description and, in terms of its own foreign policy, has advocated a “multi-vector” approach, (*raznovektornost*) and, instead of an “axis of evil”, has attempted to create an “arc of good neighbourliness” (*duga dobrososedstva*) stretching from its immediate borders outwards.

Largely as a result of years of diplomatic and political isolation by the West, Belarus’ foreign policy agenda has been driven by the need to secure domestic economic and political stability by increasing contact with the non-European world. Under Lukashenko, Belarus’ has reached out to all parts of the globe in order to secure new markets for its goods and to seek allies to counteract the isolation imposed by Western powers. Although its foreign policy does have a slight ideological base to it – as will be described below – it also contains a very strong pragmatic element: wherever Belarus’ feels there is a market, it will seek to open or strengthen relations with that state or group of states. If, in the post-war world, “Coca Cola” was an important ally in US foreign policy, the same could be said of Belarus’ and “MAZ” (*Minskiy Avtomobil’niy Zavod*, the “Minsk Car Factory”), whose products are usually part and parcel of any deal involving Belarusian exports abroad. Foreign policy and the country’s economic well-being are very closely inter-linked, and this makes Belarusian foreign policy very easy to understand. As a country which, in its recent past, has been described as the “last outpost of tyranny in Europe”, it has sought to establish new friendships on the international stage, or renew old ones from its Soviet past, to ensure its continuing viability.

This paper will not attempt an indepth analysis of Belarusian foreign policy over the past 15 years. Its focus of attention will be on examining Belarusian foreign policy in relation to China, Iran and Syria, which have the potential to be important economic and political partners for Belarus’, despite Western pressure to keep Belarus’ isolated. Whilst trade with the three states is still at a comparatively low level, Belarus’ has shown that it will pursue a distinct foreign policy course, irrespective of both the West and Russia. As shown in other papers penned by this author in particular, Russia remains Belarus’ main political and economic ally, but is nowhere near its sole political and economic partner. Since 1994, Belarus’ has pursued an active foreign policy in relation to countries all over the globe, not hindered by any over-riding ideological imperative to make the world think like

Belarus'. It has not been hindered by allegations of human rights violations. The economic imperative holds sway; therefore Belarus' has no problem in seeking to trade with both Taiwan and China although, in deference to mainland China, it will not formally recognise Taiwan's political status.

### **Belarusian foreign policy – general parameters**

In a recently-published work in Minsk on the ideology of the Belarusian state, the section on ideology and foreign policy states:

“the geopolitical position of Belarus' excludes a one-sided orientation of its national interests. We are interested in a multi-vector foreign policy, maintaining a balance between the European and the Euro-Asiatic political and economic space. At the same time, Belarus' will seek to achieve the formation of a multi-polar system of international relations, reflecting the complexity of the modern world and taking into account the interests of other states on the planet.”<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis on a multi-vectored foreign policy and, following on from that, the creation of a multi-polar system of international relations, where no single state's interests are placed above all others, is key to understanding contemporary Belarusian foreign policy – that and the economic dimension. The multi-vectored approach means that, largely uninhibited by any overt political ideology, or attempt to hold onto a recently lost imperial, messianic past – Russia's pre-1917 and Soviet past are still significant factors in that country's foreign policy – Belarus' has been able to be much more flexible than its huge neighbour, both in renewing old relationships and beginning new ones. It should not be forgotten that Belarus' immediate historical begetter - the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) – had considerable experience on the world stage:

“by the beginning of the 1990s, BSSR had representation in the UN in New York, in international organisations in Vienna, Geneva and Paris. In Minsk, consuls-general of the DDR [East Germany], Poland and Bulgaria operated ...By 1988, it was a signatory to 156 international treaties and agreements. Representatives of BSSR took part in the work of more than 60 inter-governmental organisations and organisations operating within the UN.”<sup>2</sup>

Unlike a number of the newly independent republics of the fSU, Belarus' had experience of operating within international organisations and conducting itself in the international arena. As Tikhomirov goes on to point out, Belarus' is now recognised by 159 states and has diplomatic relations with 157. By 2004, it had diplomatic representation in 46 countries, operating embassies in 44. 34 foreign embassies operate in Minsk. By 2004, Belarus' had concluded more than 3,000 inter-state and inter-government agreements.<sup>3</sup>

The country's foreign policy, whilst not only being largely devoid of political or historical ideological baggage, is also very practical, as befitting a relatively small – in terms of population size – country in the heart of Europe. Belarus' has no grandiose design to reshape the world in its image. Its foreign policy is much more geared towards ensuring the continuing existence of the state. According to the official definition of the phrase “multi-vectored foreign policy”, the latter is based on: “the absence of geographical barriers in its [Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs] work, imparting equal attention to all regions of the world”.<sup>4</sup> In other words, Belarus' is keen to talk to anyone, regardless of which part of the world they hail

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from. In an address to the country's foreign policy establishment in July 2004, President A G Lukashenko outlined the general "vectors" of Belarusian foreign policy:

"More and more often, both from the East and the West and [even] from within our own country, the question is asked: what are the vectors of Belarusian foreign policy? Have they changed? The answer is simple. The vectors of Belarusian foreign policy are wherever its interests lie. I repeat: the vectors of the foreign policy of our country are where its interests are to be found and concentrated...East or West – in general, this is not a choice. It is not a choice for Belarus! It is a false dilemma. We do not choose East or West...*We choose Belarus*'. Belarus', because of the strength of its economy, the force of its history, geography, culture and mentality, will be in the East and in the West. That is where our interests are and that is where our vectors come from."<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the country's Foreign Minister, S Martynov, described the many advantages in Belarus' geographical location and its utility to states near and far:

"By European standards, Belarus' is not a small country, it is strategically situated in the heart of Europe and at the crossroads of many lines of communication. It is a country with a highly developed economic, scientific-technological and defence potential, as well as colossal human resources, in terms of the education and qualifications of its people. If we look at the sum of all these parameters, then Belarus' is a serious partner for any state – both neighbour and those situated further away, and for any group of states or alliances."<sup>6</sup>

At a meeting of the country's political elite devoted to analysing various questions of internal and external policy in July 2005, Lukashenko emphasised the importance of economics in finding solutions to questions at both the domestic and foreign-policy levels: "I want to emphasise once more that the basis of our politics today is economics. It determines priorities both in international relations and the internal state process. The well-being and mood of the people depends on success in the economic sphere."<sup>7</sup>

The link between the country's foreign policy and the economic well-being of the state and the people were also highlighted during Lukashenko's last official trip to Syria, in December 2003: "foreign trips justify themselves...if they bring concrete economic gain".<sup>8</sup>

The parameters outlined above would appear to show the country conducting a pragmatic foreign policy, with an emphasis on selling Belarus' abroad and expanding its overseas markets, thereby ensuring full employment at home and a contented electorate/workforce. China may be Belarus' fifth largest trading partner, but Belarus' still trades more with the EU. As long as the country pursues policies designed to ensure continuing economic growth and the well-being of the people, the political opposition in Belarus' has less ammunition to use against the regime. However, Belarus' has not been pursuing an active foreign policy just to keep the people at home reasonably content with their lot: it has also been trying to break the political and diplomatic isolation imposed on it by the US and EU in particular. The country's economic penetration of such markets as China and Iran has not only been designed to expand Belarusian trade in potentially lucrative markets for Belarusian-produced tractors, trucks, computer software, etc., but also to garner

support to thwart any Western political pressure brought to bear on Minsk. Belarusian foreign policy with the non-Western world is designed to show the West that the country is not in political or diplomatic limbo and that it has other, powerful friends in addition to Russia. This ties in well with the country's publicly expressed aim of helping to create a multi-polar world and opposing continuing US dominance of world affairs. Such a stance plays well to Chinese, Arab and Iranian audiences.

However, it would be erroneous to over-play this and think that Belarus' was attempting to create an "alliance of the damnable". Despite the inter-governmental agreements and economic contracts between, for instance, Belarus', China, Syria and Iran, there is very little evidence of them forming some sort of political counter-bloc to challenge US dominance. Belarus' is no spider at the centre of a web designed to ensnare the US. However much Lukashenko may harangue the opposition for being "tools" of Western (and Russian) paymasters, this has not prevented him from allowing his country to benefit from American, British or German investment over the past ten years.<sup>9</sup> Lukashenko is well aware of the impact of the economy on the living and voting patterns of the electorate. The greater the volume of trade which Belarus' succeeds in developing with the expanding markets of the Near and Far East, the greater the chance that his regime will remain in power, regardless of the views of Washington or Brussels.

### **Belarus'-China: the Bison and the Dragon**

Since the declaration of Belarusian sovereignty in 1991, the relationship with China was not exceptional until the advent to power of Lukashenko in July 1994. In the words of the current Belarusian ambassador to China, A Kharlap, on coming to power in 1994 Lukashenko made China "one of the priority directions of Belarusian foreign policy".<sup>10</sup> In fact, China was the first non-CIS country he visited as President in January 1995.<sup>11</sup>

China formally recognised Belarusian independence on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1991 and diplomatic relations were established on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1992. China opened an embassy in Minsk in March 1992. However, Belarus' did not get round to appointing an ambassador to China until 1995 (not long after Lukashenko became President). Pre-1994, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, S S Shushkevich, and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, V F Kebich, visited China in 1992 and 1993 respectively but, despite a number of agreements being signed, the conventional wisdom of today's commentators – no doubt influenced somewhat by the views of the incumbent President – was that there was not a great deal of post-agreement activity.<sup>12</sup> This can be explained by a number of factors:

- 1) the Shushkevich-Kebich government was avowedly more Western-orientated than the current regime in Minsk and was more interested in cultivating a more open and intense relationship with the West than the East;
- 2) in alliance terms, in the early days of its new independence, Belarus' was looking to become a military and political "neutral" and was somewhat guarded in its developing relationships with the world's major powers, including Russia;
- 3) China itself was just emerging from isolation as one of the world's great powers and, therefore, was cautious in its early relationship with Belarus'.

In short, the world was a very different place in 1994.



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Not long after Lukashenko's first official visit to Beijing, Belarus' appointed V Kuznetsov as ambassador to China. Relations between the two countries gathered pace with a significant highpoint being reached in December 1996, with then Prime Minister S S Ling's visit to China. At the end of the visit, there appeared the following very interesting joint declaration: "China supports the efforts made by the Republic of Belarus' against foreign intervention, to defend its sovereignty and independence."<sup>13</sup> This unambiguous statement in favour of Belarusian independence and sovereignty was further reinforced by another joint statement, issued at the end of Lukashenko's stop-over visit to China in April 1997, when China, once again, reiterated its support for Belarus':

"The Chinese side speaks determinedly against intervention in the internal affairs of the Republic of Belarus' and against political and economic pressure put on it by any country under whatever pretext. The Belarusian side also supported the principled position of the Chinese side, as it speaks against including the Chinese province of Taiwan in the anti-missile defence system in the theatre of military operations of the Asia-Pacific Region by any country in any form."<sup>14</sup>

China's Vice-President at the time was Hu Jintao, now President. If he felt inclined to sign such a statement then, it is likely that his stance on Belarusian independence and sovereignty has not changed.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, with a now firmly established and long-term relationship with one of the world's most powerful men, Lukashenko may be embarking on a strategic re-alignment of Belarus' away from overt reliance on its traditional eastern brother-in-arms, Russia, hence his recent statement about his country's desire to represent the interests of China in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

China's renewed commitment to Belarusian independence helped to further chip away at the imposed Western-backed isolation of Belarus'. However, there was also the clear assertion that Belarus' was supportive of China in its policy on Taiwan and that Taiwan's sovereignty was purely an internal matter for China. This was repeated by Lukashenko during his most recent visit to China in December 2005.<sup>17</sup>

Another interesting feature of the political relationship between the two countries is the number of exchange visits conducted over the years, involving local government and parliamentary deputies from various regions of China and Belarus'.<sup>18</sup> An article by the Chinese ambassador to Belarus' at the time, Hu Chen'tsi, stated what was, in effect, the fundamental essence of the relationship: "despite the fact that our states are geographically far apart, we respect, understand and support one another."<sup>19</sup>

The Chinese were very pleased when, in March 2004, the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement in favour of China's recently passed law "on territorial integrity" and, in March 2005, issued another statement publicly supporting China's law "against secession".<sup>20</sup> It is no mere hyperbole on the part of the Chinese leadership either, when they openly discuss the importance they attach to their country's relationship with Belarus'. In an interview to the Belarusian press, the current Chinese ambassador to Belarus, Hu Khunbin, stated that:

"China attaches great significance to its relations with Belarus'. It is a reliable partner. Our countries hold similar positions on the most important questions facing the modern world. We support one another on these vital issues. For instance, Belarus' was one of the first to express its support for

China's law on preventing the break-up of the Motherland...[in its turn] China respects the political choice of the Belarusian people and supports the efforts of the Government of Belarus' aimed at maintaining social stability, developing the economy and defending the sovereignty of the state."<sup>21</sup>

All aims which China could easily recognise and sympathise with. On meeting Lukashenko in December 2005 in Beijing, Hu Jintao publicly stated that Lukashenko "remains the very best friend of the Chinese people. You constantly devote a great deal of attention to the development of Chinese-Belarusian friendship and make a very important contribution to the development of relations between our two states. I value this very highly."<sup>22</sup> For his part, Lukashenko stated: "we have absolutely no problems in our mutual relationship. Our relations are genuinely the relations of friends."<sup>23</sup>

In an earlier meeting with the Chairman of the Central Control Commission of the Chinese Communist Party, Hu Huanchen, Lukashenko emphasised the very close political relationship between the two states:

"The cooperation [with China] I would label exemplary. We do not have such cooperation with any other state in the world [what about Russia? – SJM] Not least because it is successful and effective, not only in the political and diplomatic spheres but, what is also very important, in trade and economics."<sup>24</sup>

The importance of the political nature of the relationship between the two states was also made plain during a visit in October 2005 by the head of Lukashenko's presidential administration, V Sheynan, to China:

"no less successful is the cooperation in the political sphere. At the highest level, we have confirmation that, in the future, China will support our country in various international organisations. In this context, I would particularly like to underline that we have no differences with the People's Republic of China, our position on a number of important international issues fully coincides with one another."<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the relationship between the two states is much more than a simple one of bilateral trade. It is based on a good, almost personal, bond between the Presidents, as well as a correlation of views on a number of important international issues. China has reaffirmed its commitment to Belarusian sovereignty and independence on more than one occasion. The fact that China has made it very plain to the rest of the international community that it is fully behind the regime in Minsk has probably had at least a mildly salutary effect on those who propose regime change in Minsk. Minsk has deliberately and successfully courted China to the extent that the Chinese, for the first time ever, sent election monitors to Belarus' in 2004, despite its long-held policy of not sending election monitors to anywhere.<sup>26</sup> Lukashenko was not too far off the mark when, in December 2005, in an interview to the Chinese media, he stated that: "as long as we have such a [good] relationship with China, we simply cannot be isolated."<sup>27</sup>

China supports Belarusian independence and sovereignty; Belarus' supports China's desire to regain total control over Taiwan. Despite the geographical and cultural differences between the two states, they have successfully forged a solid political and economic friendship, which would appear to have a long-term future. Good political relations have also helped stimulate the growing bilateral trade between China and Belarus'. China is very good, economically and politically, for

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Belarus': although bilateral trade between the two countries in 2005 reached an impressive --for Belarus' - \$500m, Lukashenko has set a target of \$2 billion by 2010.<sup>28</sup>

Lukashenko would appear to want to further cement the economic relationship, but how far is he prepared to run the risk of upsetting "fraternal Russia"? Unlimited Belarusian weapons sales to China? Belarusian economic assistance to China in developing the sensitive border regions in China's western and north-eastern provinces?<sup>29</sup> The increasingly obvious Chinese vector in Belarusian foreign policy is likely to become a more prominent feature in Belarusian conduct on the world stage with the passing of time.

Whether the economic relationship helps to cement the political relationship or *vice versa* is difficult to say, but there can be little doubting the fact that China is now one of Belarus' most important trading partners. The Belarusian ambassador to China, A Kharlap, noted that: "in comparison with 1995, by 2004, trade turnover had increased x14 and had reached \$459.5 million."<sup>30</sup> He also stated that, in the first 3 months of 2005, bilateral trade had already reached \$156m. Thus, "China is the main political and economic/trade partner of the Republic of Belarus' in Asia."<sup>31</sup>

The possibility that there may be a personal bond between the two leaders should not be discounted, since they have known one another for the best part of ten years. Lukashenko's "love affair" with China predates his time as president. In his December 2005 interview to the Chinese media, Lukashenko referred to earlier visits to China when he was a deputy to the Belarusian Supreme Soviet (1990-1994):

"more than that, my political, one can even say my international activity, on the big stage, began in the Chinese People's Republic. As a deputy, I was more than once in China, I studied the experience of the Chinese People's Republic, beginning with the free economic zones, with those 'points of growth' which you created 15, if not 20, years ago, I saw how you started, how you raised [levels of economic production]. And I, still a deputy, proposed to our parliament using the experience of China. Then, my proposals were not adopted by the government, nor by the parliament. When I became President - all the experience, the very best which had been learnt in China - and, one has to say, that China never hid anything from me - was taken and transplanted to Belarusian soil...The result - annual rate of growth of 8-10% in GDP. The highest rates of growth in the post-Soviet space, in the republics of the former Soviet Union."<sup>32</sup>

Lukashenko would therefore appear to have consciously used the economic development of China over the past two decades as a model for the economic development of Belarus'. This is not the place to verify Lukashenko's claim; suffice it to say that this may go some way to explain the so-called Belarusian "economic miracle". It would also help to underline the pragmatic nature of Lukashenko's approach to foreign policy - impressed by China's economic performance, he decided to take the best of that country's economic experience and adapt it to Belarusian conditions. Thus, the economic relationship between the two countries would appear to go much deeper than the simple balance of trade figures would imply. His fairly regular visits to China - as Head of State, he has visited China on 4 occasions, in 1995, 1997, 2001 and 2005 - have allowed him the opportunity<sup>33</sup> not only to broaden and deepen his country's political and economic relationship

with the world's emerging super-power, but also to gain first hand knowledge of China's growing economic power and wealth.<sup>34</sup>

In terms of its trade with China, Belarus' exports a wide range of goods, ranging from tractors to computer software.<sup>35</sup> 21 of the country's top machine-construction companies have created a joint association in order to explore further cooperation with their Chinese counterparts through the Chinese Machine Tool and Tool Builder's Association.<sup>36</sup> For *Belneftekhin*, China is the firm's most important trade partner: in first 5 months of 2005, China imported \$170m worth of goods from this one firm.<sup>37</sup>

In turn, the Chinese export to Belarus' a wide range of consumer durables and medicines.<sup>38</sup> There is also an element of joint enterprise activity: in Minsk *oblast'* alone, some 20 Belarusian enterprises operate partly due to Chinese capital.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese have tendered to modernise a power station in Minsk. However, whilst there is no doubt, at least on the part of the Belarusian authorities, that the Chinese have the necessary skills and equipment to do the job properly and to bring it in on cost, nevertheless distance has its impact:

“the suggested project has pluses and minuses. First of all, the price is attractive and the equipment is of a sufficiently high technical-level. As regards the minuses, these are the lack of European service centres to maintain Chinese equipment, leading to the necessity of training repair personnel or, if possible, creating our own service centres. The geographical distance could lead to difficulties in calling on chief engineers and prompt despatch of spare parts and components.”<sup>40</sup>

In overall terms, there is a feeling that Belarusian-Chinese trade is still far from realising its full potential – from public statements made by the current Chinese ambassador to Belarus' (Hu Zhenqi) to Lukashenko himself.<sup>41</sup> In terms of investment, China invests less in the Belarusian economy than, for instance, US, Germany or Switzerland.<sup>42</sup> So, despite the impressive increase in bilateral trade over the past decade, both countries would appear to be still somewhat short of matching words with deeds.

### Sino-Belarusian military-technical cooperation

Not only its there a fairly healthy political and economic relationship between the two states but, as is evident from pronouncements made before and during the visit by the Chinese Minister of Defence Colonel-General Cao Ganchuan to Belarus' in September 2006, there is also a growing military-technical one. This should come as no great surprise, nor should it cause too much concern. As early as December 1999, a report appeared in the western press that Belarus' was assisting China develop an automated command and control system for use at group-army level.<sup>43</sup> Belarusian specialists themselves have acknowledged that military-technical cooperation with the countries of north-eastern Asia (China, Japan, South Korea) has been an “important component” in Belarus' relationship with such states.<sup>44</sup>

As China continues to develop its economy and modernise its armed forces, Belarus' would appear destined to have its own role to play in the process.<sup>45</sup> But it would be misleading to over-emphasise the military relationship. Much more important to the modernisation of the Chinese armed forces is the relationship with Russia;<sup>46</sup> much more important to Belarus', in terms of its security, is also its relationship with Russia.

China's military diplomacy is designed to continue "the modernisation of the Chinese Armed Forces" and the country maintains relations "along military channels" with more than 150 countries; the Chinese have military attachés in more than 100 embassies and 85 foreign states have military attachés in China. In 2003-2005, China sent "senior military delegations" to 60 countries; during the same period, more than 130 military delegations from 70 countries visited Beijing.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the military relationship with Belarus' has to be viewed against the background of China maintaining and developing military contacts with a number of countries. Given a projected expenditure of \$360 billion for military technology for the Chinese Armed Forces in the period 2006-2020, it is obvious that a country headed by a man whom the Chinese have officially dubbed as "the very best friend of the Chinese people" will ensure that his country captures some of that expenditure.<sup>48</sup>

In May 2005, Lukashenko met the Head of the Main Directorate of Armament and Military Technology of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Colonel-General Han Binda. Lukashenko took the opportunity afforded by the visit once again to praise the cooperation between the two countries and expressed his gratitude "to the entire leadership and people of the Chinese People's Republic for [its] unprecedented support of Belarus' in all areas".<sup>49</sup> For his part, Binda stated that "he greatly valued the level of bilateral cooperation of Belarus' and the People's Republic of China, in particular, its military-technical contacts".<sup>50</sup>

No doubt, this was a useful preparatory visit for the visit by the Chinese Minister of Defence, Colonel-General Cao Ganchuan in September 2006. The visit lasted 4 days. In his opening address to the Chinese Minister of Defence, Lukashenko reminded his guest that Belarus' and China had signed 210 (another source puts the figure at 220) agreements and contracts of a military-technical nature, of which 190 had been fulfilled.<sup>51</sup> Lukashenko also stated that this boded well for the future. Commenting on the "strategic nature" of the relationship between the countries, Lukashenko praised the role of China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and urged "greater cooperation" between it and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Belarus' is a member of the latter, but not the former). For his part, the Chinese minister once again reaffirmed Minsk's position as "a good friend" to China and stated that: "Belarus' enjoys great authority amongst the Chinese people and, in particular, amongst the military of my country".<sup>52</sup> For his "huge personal contribution to developing and strengthening friendly relations and cooperation between the two states," Lukashenko awarded the Chinese General the Order of Friendship of Nations.<sup>53</sup>

The official Belarusian Ministry of Defence newspaper's report of the visit commented on the "serious attention" paid by both sides to developing "mutually advantageous cooperation" by "fulfilling joint projects, exchanging visits involving delegations of the highest calibre". The Ministers of Defence discussed "the future development of bilateral military cooperation".<sup>54</sup> The article was entitled "strategic partnership", re-emphasising Lukashenko's earlier remark that the Belarusian-Chinese relationship was now of a "strategic" nature.

According to the official report, Colonel-General Cao Ganchuan visited the Military Academy and was given a briefing by the Academy's Commandant, Major-General I Misuryagin. The latter informed his Chinese guest of the structure of the Academy, tasks and successes in its work, the training of the officer cadres, etc.<sup>55</sup> Following the briefing, the Chinese paid a visit to the Centre of Operational-Tactical Training,

as well as the Faculty of the Combat Application of Missile Troops and Artillery. They also visited the Joint Air and Air Defence Force Troops faculty, not just because there are a number of Chinese military personnel studying there, but, as one Russian source speculated: “in the defence-industrial complex, in maintaining the successful operation of both the air force and air defence, Belorussia has achieved significant results”.<sup>56</sup> Quoting an unnamed Belarusian MoD source, the Russian author stated further that: “in the past 10 years, within the framework of the inter-governmental programme of military-technical and military-scientific cooperation between Minsk and Peking, contracts have been signed with a value of \$250m.”<sup>57</sup>

Given the size of their respective economies, obviously the importance of such contracts to Belarus’ and China is very different. However, what China has spent so far in Belarus’ may be next to nothing compared to what it may yet spend in the next 14 years or so. It would certainly appear to be the case that more high value military contracts are in the offing for Belarus’.

Although it is somewhat speculative, given both the length of the visit (4 days) and the fact that not all of the visit’s itinerary was made known to the public, Bruntal’skiy hints at what the Belarusians may have shown their Chinese guests:

“In particular, the Minister of Defence of the PRC could have been shown the ‘secrets’ of the new automated control system...involving both operational-tactical and tactical-level control systems. The attention of the very important foreign guest to the Belarusian Military Academy may also have been attracted by the mobile command post of a radar unit. On top of that, Tsao Ganchuan may also have learnt about the automatic control systems, ‘RIF-R’ and ‘Sprut’...both tested...at the Russian test range ‘Ashuluk’ in August.”<sup>58</sup>

Thus, in the deepening relationship between their militaries, Belarus’ appears to be willing to sell the best of what the country’s military-industrial complex has to offer, not simply re-modified, ageing Soviet kit.

Belarus’ is now a major arms exporter in its own right, and this will play its own very distinct role in helping China achieve one of its long-term aims, that of having the strongest armed forces in Asia by 2020.<sup>59</sup> Belarus’ gets hard currency, retains key personnel in its military-industrial sector and continues to chop away at the Western-imposed political and diplomatic isolation.

There are also a number of serving Chinese military personnel studying in Belarus’. According to one source:

“From 2003 onwards, on the basis of a contract concluded between the military departments of the RB [Belarus] and PRC [China], the Military Academy of Belarus’ has instructed 48 Chinese military personnel in 14 disciplines. At the present moment, a further 23 are being instructed. For its part, the Chinese side are instructing 10 Belarusian military personnel in the military-educational institutes of the PRC.”<sup>60</sup>

## Summary

In general, there is a deepening relationship between the two countries at all levels. This has been developed particularly strongly under Lukashenko, who not only has

made it a policy objective of the state, but seems to have a very strong personal interest in making sure that it is to both states' mutual advantage. He has succeeded in getting China to publicly support his regime and, in effect, his style of rule. If, like the Chinese, you are a believer in stability and order, then Lukashenko's regime has much to commend it.

Lukashenko now openly talks about the "strategic" nature of the Sino-Belarusian relationship, taking it a stage further, elevating it beyond a simple trade/economic relationship. Both countries are against US domination of world affairs; both are in favour of the creation of a multi-polar system; both support one another in a variety of international organisations and on a whole range of issues, share a common view. And yet, despite the trade figures, the military-technology sales, the personal terms of endearment, the Sino-Belarusian leadership is nowhere near as strong as the Russo- Belarusian relationship, or as important to China as the Sino-Russian relationship, or China's economic relationship with the EU (in 2005 alone, China's trade with the EU amounted to €106 billion), or China's arms deals with Russia.<sup>61</sup> China invests considerably less in the Belarusian economy than Germany or Switzerland, or even the USA. Thus, as Lukashenko himself repeatedly asserts, there is much that can still be done to further strengthen and deepen the relationship, especially in terms of bilateral trade. Belarus' may want to represent China's interests in Europe, but how can it do a better job than the Chinese themselves?

China supports Belarus' under Lukashenko: would they be as supportive if Lukashenko was not in charge in Minsk? Lukashenko has deliberately targeted China, making China a "priority" almost from taking office in 1994. So far, the policy has worked very well for Belarus' – increasing trade, professed public support for the regime, greater military-technical sales, etc. For its part, China has at least one European state firmly on its side; a state in Europe which firmly supports the Chinese stance on Taiwan; access to advanced technology in the military sphere; another market for Chinese goods and services. Of course there is much room for improvement in all areas. The fact that there seems to be a personal bond between the presidents of both countries, cultivated over a number of years, also underlines the significance of the relationship between two countries. How the relationship will develop following a change in either country's senior political leadership is a moot point but, for the time being, the Sino-Belarusian relationship is set to form an element in both China's relationship with Europe and Belarus' continuing attempts to lessen the impact of the Western imposed isolation of Belarus'.

### Belarus'-Iran: the Bison and the Peacock

In its relations with the non-European world, Belarus' would appear to have enjoyed a degree of success. Belarus' may have been unfortunate – at least for the time being – in the political position adopted by some of its neighbours towards it, but in some respects it seems to have turned the current adversity into a partial success by seeking to build new relationships with other powers with which, on first sight, it would appear to have little in common. This need to look elsewhere has been helped by the fact that Belarus' is the only European state which is a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement (which Belarus' joined in 1998).<sup>62</sup> Thanks to this Belarus' enjoys a certain cachet amongst other members of the Movement, which numbers over 100 countries.<sup>63</sup> In the section on the Belarusian Foreign Ministry's website concerning the development of its relationship with countries of Asia, Africa and the Near East, the term "traditional partners" is used in relation to

China, India, Vietnam, Iran, South Korea, Japan, Syria, Egypt, South Africa and the Persian Gulf states.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, Iran and Syria were also listed in George W Bush's infamous "axis of evil" speech. In the light of recent events in Moscow,<sup>65</sup> this helps to underline Minsk's desire "to think out of the box" in its desire to seek out new partners. With Iran, Belarus' is strengthening its ties with a country which could be a significant player for Belarus' – not only as a market for Belarusian goods, but also as a non-Russian energy supplier.

When Lukashenko came to power in 1994, trade turnover between the two countries stood at a paltry \$89,000. By the time Iran's Foreign Minister, Kamel Harrazi, visited Belarus' on an official visit in February 2001, trade turnover had increased to \$21m.<sup>66</sup> Not a great figure, but at least it was heading in the right direction. By 2005, trade turnover had shown a modest increase to \$38.4m.<sup>67</sup> Such meagre trade figures have been dubbed by Lukashenko as evidence of "untapped reserves" in the development of the economic relationship with Iran.<sup>68</sup> On the occasion of his second and latest official visit to Tehran –in November 2006 – Lukashenko stated that:

"Belarus' is a sovereign, independent state, for us there are no limits to our cooperation with Iran...Our countries have excellent relations at the diplomatic level, a normal political relationship, we share similar views on the fundamental international issues of the day. And on this political and diplomatic base must be built a powerful, trade/economic foundation."<sup>69</sup>

Iran's President M Ahmadinejad underscored many of Lukashenko's points:

"Belarus' and Iran are powerful and independent countries, which enjoy an excellent relationship...Our states are friendly and stable, share common views on various regional and international issues. Both sides are firmly in favour of deepening and developing mutual cooperation in various spheres, we have no limits to our cooperation."<sup>70</sup>

With both leaders expressing their desire to intensify cooperation on the basis of their "excellent relationship", it was no surprise to learn that a number of agreements and treaties were signed during Lukashenko's latest visit, including a new memorandum on cooperation in Iran's oil industry; a new treaty on legal assistance in civil and criminal matters; and a new agreement on cooperation between the Belarussian Telegraphic Agency (BelTA) and the Iranian News Agency (IRNA).<sup>71</sup> The total value of all the contracts signed during Lukashenko's visit adds up to an impressive \$350m. However, no sooner had the ink dried on these contracts than Lukashenko had the audacity to ask for more! "\$1 billion – this is the level of bilateral trade which we can and must aim for and we will."<sup>72</sup> Even if Belarus' were to reach this target, Lukashenko would still not be satisfied: quoting figures showing that Iran annually imports goods and services worth \$40 billion, he stated: "surely we could not find our own particular niche in [Iran's] imports? Let it be only 10%. That would mean \$4 billion for the economic development of Belarus'."<sup>73</sup>

At the end of his visit, Lukashenko called on his own countrymen to be "more active" in Iran, assisting the creation of joint production and assembly facilities, using the latest technology in areas of machine-construction, production of fridges, TVs and other domestic durables. More importantly, Lukashenko described the agreement signed on the joint extraction of new sources of oil as "a question of national security for Belarus'."<sup>74</sup> Given the recent spat with Russia, this could be an indication that Belarus' may well see Iran, at least partially, as a potential alternative energy supplier. If this is the case – and it is a big IF – then this would



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have very widespread consequences not only for Belarus' and Russia, but also for Iran and Europe. It would only be a very short step in exporting oil and gas to Belarus' to then export it to Europe. Not only would this ensure Belarusian sovereignty and independence, but would help to break *Gazprom's* stranglehold on Europe's energy supplies: but would dependency on Iran be more palatable than dependency on Russia?<sup>75</sup>

In summing up Lukashenko's latest visit to Iran, Ahmadinejad stated that the talks were "successful and produced results". He went on:

"We think that the first cornerstone for the powerful, long-term cooperation of Belarus' and Iran has been laid. The present visit, without question, represents a new stage in the development of bilateral relations. We have agreement in many areas of cooperation. We can make a qualitative jump to the level of trade turnover of \$350m. However, the potential is significantly more. We will issue instructions that all agreements and contracts will be fulfilled. This is the first step towards achieving a trade turnover of \$1 billion."<sup>76</sup>

On top of that, Ahmadinejad also held out the possibility that the talks in Tehran could form the basis for cooperation in new areas in "science and technology, industry and agriculture".<sup>77</sup> Thus, similar to the relationship with China, not only does Belarus' want to intensify the relationship with Iran, but so does Iran. Again, politically and economically, both states seem to gain a number of advantages from the relationship: Belarus' gains further access to a potentially very lucrative market for its goods and services –tractors, trucks (HGVs), employment for its scientists and technicians – as well as a "friendly" nation in the Near East. In the long term, Belarus' may also see Iran as a country which could reduce its energy dependency on Russia, thereby enhancing still further its political independence. From Iran's point of view, the country gains access to advanced technology and specialists, useful in its long-term plans to develop the economy away from being largely resource-based to goods and services-based. Its decision to move ahead with its civilian nuclear power programme is, ironically, similar to Belarus' seeking, in the long-term, to look for alternative energy suppliers to Russia: Iran also wants to retain as much of its reserves as possible for future export earnings, rather than domestic consumption. Through Belarus', Iran also has a friendly power in Europe – which helps to cut down its international isolation. Both countries are highly individualistic, both are in favour of the creation of a system of international relations based on more than one centre of power and both, for different reasons, are strongly anti-American. Economics and trade aside, politically they have more in common than a surface scan of the relationship reveals.

A report appeared in April 2006 concerning the re-export, by Belarus', of Russian S-300PS surface-to-air missiles to Iran.<sup>78</sup> The Belarusian MoD refused to comment on the report, alleging that that would give it more value than it deserved: "there is no need to comment on this absurdity".<sup>79</sup> The Russian MoD also issued a statement denying the report. If the report is accurate, then the missile system would give Iran a very advanced capability, more than able to protect the country's nuclear power facilities from airborne attack. However, the picture has been somewhat muddied by recent reports that Russia has admitted to have begun delivery of the Tor-M1 surface-to-air missile system, and is planning to deliver 29 of the systems to Iran eventually.<sup>80</sup> The Tor-MI missile reports have also been subsequently denied by the Russians. The overall extent of Belarusian-Iranian military technical cooperation remains unclear, indeed if there is any. One may develop in future. It could be that

there may yet be a very distinct Belarusian voice in the future “dialogue of civilisations”.

### Belarus'-Syria: the Bison and the Lion

1998 was a very busy year in the formation of Belarusian foreign policy, especially in relation to the countries of the Near East: not only did Lukashenko pay his first state visit to Iran, but he also paid his first state visit to Syria in March. Although they formally established diplomatic relations in 1993, Belarus' did not open an embassy in Damascus until the end of 1998. On the occasion of Lukashenko's second official state visit – in December 2003 – both nations had enjoyed formal diplomatic relations for just a decade.<sup>81</sup>

Prior to Lukashenko's first visit to Syria in March 1998, there had been a visit by the then Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, M Marinich, in December 1997. The delegations discussed what agreements would be ready for signing by both heads of state in 1998. One was a broad inter-governmental agreement, concerning cooperation in trade, economic and technical spheres. Marinich also discussed the possibility of the creation of joint ventures in areas of telecommunications, creating assembly plants for HGVs, motor cycles, tractors, etc. A barter agreement was also discussed, concerning Syrian exports of cotton, tobacco and wheat, for Belarusian manufactured goods.<sup>82</sup>

In the month of Lukashenko's first visit to Syria, the Belarusian Republic's Ministry of Justice formally recognised the creation of the Society of Belarusian-Arab Friendship, whose initial chairman was O Gorbunov, former submariner and a member of the parliament's Standing Commission on International Affairs.<sup>83</sup> In an interview, Gorbunov outlined the mistake of Belarus' in “ignoring” the Arab world:

“Having ‘forgotten’ the Arab region, in real terms, we have lost the possibility of attracting huge investment, but also passed up the chance of increasing our foreign trade turnover with rich states, depriving ourselves of future export markets for our petro-chemical, agricultural machine-construction and electronics industries. We are now in a situation where Lebanese and Syrian students are bypassing Belarusian institutes and higher-educational institutes, simply because they do not know what Belarus' is. Our state has lost hard currency earnings, does not have significant levers of influence amongst the political and business elite of the Arab world...In sum total, Belarus' is deprived of the possibility of sending its people on study trips to the Near East...The conscious loss of such potential advantage, particularly felt given the reduction in our contacts with Europe has, to a profound extent, acted as a catalyst or the development of Belarusian-Arab relations.”<sup>84</sup>

Thus, very similar to the development of relations with China and Iran, one of the key factors in Belarus' development of its relations with Syria was economic – it needed an inroad into the Arab world, and given the historical experience of Soviet-Syrian relations, one of the main ways that this could be achieved was through Syria. Belarus' was in real danger of letting the Arab world slip off its international radar screen and, as a consequence, not only losing a potentially very lucrative market for Belarusian goods and services, but also influence amongst a very powerful political and business elite. It should not be forgotten that, amongst a certain generation of the Arab elite, a number would have received their university/higher educational training at the universities and higher-educational

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institutes of Soviet-era Minsk. As noted by V. Lopato-Zagorsky, Belarusian ambassador to Syria:

“The training of specialists for Syria was begun by Belarusian higher-educational institutes from the 1960s onwards. In Syria, hundreds of graduates of Belarusian universities and higher-educational institutes currently work. Interest in receiving an education in Belarus has not weakened amongst Syrians. As before, the most popular institutes are medical and the Belarusian National Technical University.”<sup>85</sup>

Belarus’ was not entirely “friendless” in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR in 1991. However, as Gorbunov intimated, somehow, the Belarusian political and economic elite had contrived to create a situation whereby, prior to 1998 – when Belarus’ became a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement – Belarus’ had “forgotten” the Arab world. As an example, the total value of goods imported from Syria to Belarus’ for 1993-1998 amounted to slightly more than \$500,000!<sup>86</sup> By the end of 2003, trade turnover had climbed to \$15m for that year alone – not a huge figure, but at least an improvement on the very miserly levels of the 1990s.<sup>87</sup>

As a prelude to Lukashenko’s state visit to Syria a year later, in December 2002 the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Damascus. According to Lopato-Zagorsky:

“the visit was aimed at establishing personal contacts with the new Syrian leadership, reaching agreement on positions of both countries in fundamental international issues, determining the future growth of Belarusian exports and broadening the range of goods to be exported.”<sup>88</sup>

Since coming to power in 1994, Lukashenko has paid four state visits to China, two to Iran and two to Syria: he certainly seems to be a firm believer in personal contact between leaders!

On the eve of his second visit to Syria, Lukashenko gave an interview to the Syrian newspaper “Al’-Baas”. He repeated one of his common refrains that, in the talks with the Syrian leadership, there would be “no closed topics” for discussion. He dubbed Syria “a long-term ally” and was looking forward to discussing “a broad spectrum of questions – from scientific-technical cooperation to trade in manufactured goods”.<sup>89</sup> Most of the rest of the interview dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as Iraq. No doubt, his stance on both issues would have delighted his Arab audience, but in his remarks about Iraq, the message was also for a wider, non-Arab audience:

“The main lesson of the Iraqi issue is that no super-power, possessing enormous might, weapons, can crush a people who wishes to be independent and live by their laws. Iraq bears testimony to this...They’re hurling super-accurate weapons [against it], they’re bombing all over the country and tomorrow the people will live as they [the US and its allies] see fit, a society will be built, led by America. But this has not happened. This is the main lesson for future aggressors. Before bombing an independent state, whether it be smaller, or weaker, think long and hard.”<sup>90</sup>

The Syrian journalists stated that both Belarus’ and its leader enjoyed “great respect” amongst the Arab peoples and they thanked Lukashenko for his “kind

attitude” towards Syria.<sup>91</sup> A further contemporary report emphasised that the visit had two main purposes – one political and the other economic. Lukashenko had not met the new Syrian leader Bashar Asad before, but had met his father, the late President. As far as Lukashenko was concerned, the change of leader had not altered “the general principles of Belarusian-Syrian relations. As before, they are developing in a constructive and creative manner.”<sup>92</sup>

The economic purpose of the visit was to convince the Syrians not only to import more from Belarus’, but also to broaden the range of goods imported. This was at least partly successful, with Syria concluding new contracts to buy more HGVs, tractors, aircraft repair technology, etc. Belarus’ also tried to argue for more direct Syrian investment in the Belarusian economy but, as with China and Iran “it was noted during the negotiations that it was still too premature to talk about the full use of the existing potential”.<sup>93</sup>

In other words, Syria was not making full use of what was already there, therefore there was no point in asking them to make any increase! 90% of Belarusian exports to Syria, the report noted, were made up of one manufactured product of one firm, “MAZ”. In an attempt to broaden the range of goods and services exported to Syria, one Belarusian firm operating in the energy field, *Belvneshenergo*, was tendering to build 10 electricity sub-stations in and around Damascus.<sup>94</sup> Talks ended with the signing of a further 7 inter-governmental agreements, concerning cooperation in the scientific-technical, agro-industrial, health care and other fields.<sup>95</sup>

Once again, Lukshenko spoke about his long-term ambitions for Belarusian-Syrian relations “we want to use Syria as a launching platform, from which we will cooperate economically with the whole Arab world, with the whole Near East.”<sup>96</sup> Once again, he talked about the “openness” of the discussions and stated that cooperation would be developed “in all areas and within the confines of existing international rules”. He also expressed the hope that, “within 2 years”, Belarusian-Syrian trade turnover would reach \$100m.<sup>97</sup> In his meeting with Asad, Lukashenko stated that: “our points of view in the political arena completely coincide with one another, our evaluation of the world’s processes are absolutely the same, we have no differences”.<sup>98</sup>

Lukashenko does not seem to disagree with anyone on anything! Is this hyperbole on his part, or is it simply that, amongst popular dictators, there is a commonality of political outlook which does allow them to understand one another, regardless of ideological or confessional or even historical background? Is Lukashenko a European leader who genuinely understands the mind set of the Chinese, Arab and Persian political elites? Or is he a European leader, willing to talk and trade with anyone who offers his country a way out of its isolation?

The visit of the deputy general secretary of Syria’s Ba’athist Party, A Al-Akhmar, in May 2006, gave Lukashenko yet another opportunity to praise “the good intentions of Belarus” towards Syria and his country’s desire to help Syria “develop...as much as we can”.<sup>99</sup> There was no talk of trade, or economics, just offers of assistance and warm memories of the previous President H Asad. In concluding his summary of Belarusian-Syrian relations, Lopato-Zagorsky noted:

“A general evaluation of the current state and future development of relations between Syria and Belarus’ encourages a degree of optimism. Along with this, however, there is also concern because of the lengthy Arab-Israeli conflict, which directly involves Syria. Efforts directed at [reaching] a just settlement of its regional conflict demand our general support.”<sup>100</sup>

Belarusian intervention to promote a settlement in the Middle East? Perhaps this is not as ridiculous as it first appears. After all, how many European states have an active foreign policy strategy in relation to Israel, Iran, Syria? Belarus' has a very important relationship with Israel, not least because of the genocide of Jewish people in Belarus' during the Nazi occupation of the country in 1941-1944, but also because of the wave of emigration of Belarusian Jews in the 1990s. Although the idea seems fanciful, nevertheless it may have merit. The country's relationship with Syria points up the pragmatic nature of Belarusian foreign policy under Lukashenko.

## **Conclusion**

This brief examination of Belarusian foreign policy in relation to China, Iran and Syria was undertaken largely to show how a state with little practical experience of independence has coped on the international stage and whether it has shown itself to be a "rogue state", as alleged by some. The choice of states was not accidental: China is the emerging power of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Lukashenko's relationship with the country has long roots and he has modelled his country's economic reforms on the Chinese experience, as well as making China a priority of his foreign policy. An examination of the Sino-Belarusian relationship was thus both necessary and long overdue.

Iran is, potentially at least, a huge market for Belarusian exports, with both Presidents signed up for an annual trade turnover of \$1 billion in the not too distant future. Neither Belarus' nor Iran seem to have any problems talking to one another and, given the long-term development of Belarus', it could be that Belarus' sees Iran as a potential energy supplier. Of course, much would have to change to turn that possibility into a reality. However, few until recently would have envisaged the possibility of the US talking directly to Syria and Iran about their potential role in Iraq. Thus stranger things have happened!

Syria is potentially another useful market for Belarusian goods, although in the immediate future, possibly more a launching platform into the wider Arab world. Syria's voice still carries weight in the region, and Minsk is probably looking to Damascus in an attempt to regain some of the lost influence of the old USSR.

From these specifics, what can be deduced about Belarus' multi-vectored foreign policy? A number of points can be made, always bearing in mind that a different picture may arise if one were to examine Belarus' relationship with countries like Poland, Ukraine, Germany.

Belarus', despite the wealth of experience accumulated by the BSSR in 1946-1991, initially tended to pursue a single, pro-European approach in its foreign policy. Its relationship with Russia notwithstanding, it did not devote too much time or energy to developing relations with non-European, non-CIS states. This situation changed radically following the election of Lukashenko in 1994, particularly in relation to China. Thanks to its increasing isolation from mainstream European events – partly as a result of the country's own policies – Belarus' had to look for economic and political partners elsewhere in the Non-Aligned Movement. This policy shift has been successful, particularly in relation to China, but also in relation to Iran, holding out the very real prospect that Belarus' will survive economically and thus politically. China has publicly expressed its support on a number of occasions for the independence and sovereignty of Belarus' and seems to approve the way that

Lukashenko is running the country; potentially lucrative arms technology contracts look to be in the offing. If Lukashenko succeeds in getting only a fraction of these the medium to long-term economic survival of the regime looks assured. Iran could also be a very valuable partner for Belarus' not only in terms of trade turnover, but also in terms of future energy supplies. Those who are looking for Lukashenko's regime to collapse soon have obviously not paid enough attention to Belarus' conduct of foreign policy over the past 15 years.

1998 would appear to have been a pivotal year in the development of Belarusian foreign policy with membership of the Non-Aligned Movement and state visits to both Syria and Iran. All 3 countries have enjoyed an increased level of trade, as well as political contacts. On the military side, there seems to be little, if any, discernible increase in military to military contact between Belarus' and Iran and Belarus' and Syria. The emphasis here should be on *discernible*, however. One of the main drives in the country's foreign policy under Lukashenko has been economic. In relative terms, Belarus' is not a large country and needs trade in order to survive. It has no vast reserves of oil and gas to get it through the difficult times and in general has little in the way of mineral wealth. It has not been and can never be a resource-based economy. Dubbed the "assembly plant" of the USSR, it produces a range of manufactured goods which it has to export. Therefore it has to actively seek out customers. As the country's current Foreign Minister pointed out in an interview in March 2004, Belarus' exports 90% of its tractors, 90% of its cars, and 70% of its fridges.<sup>101</sup> The country's foreign policy has a very distinct economic feel about it. Diplomatic isolation has made the country economically aggressive. Thus, Belarus' will trade with China and Taiwan, Russia and the US, Syria and Israel: it will conduct its foreign policy in a way which brings economic advantage to the state and its citizens and, thereby, ensure the regime's political survival.

Pursuing a largely economically-driven foreign policy makes Belarus' a predictable player on the international stage. Predictable should not necessarily be taken to imply responsible, but if its actions are predictable, then its status as a "rogue" element on the international stage should be revised and ways found to coax it back into the international fold. It now has important international partners, and its views on a number of current international issues mirrors theirs, and not ours. These countries have been engaged with Belarus' for the best part of a decade and look set to engage with Belarus' for a long time to come.

As a state which borders 3 EU and NATO members, it is time to change policy on Belarus' and bring it back into the European fold once and for all. It is a European state. The bison's natural habitat is not the deserts of Syria, nor the marshes of Iran, or the mountains of China, but the forests of Europe. Its presence there has been too long denied.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> S N Knyazev, S V Reshetnikov, gen. eds, *Osnovy ideologii Belorusskogo gosudarstva*, Minsk. 2004, p.445

<sup>2</sup> A V Tikhomirov, *Vneshnyaya politika*, Minsk. 2005, (<http://www.mfa.gov.by>), 7pp.; p.1

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.1-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> *Vystupleniye Prezidenta Belarusi...Vneshnyaya politika Respubliki Belarus' v novom mire'*, *Vesnik Ministerstva Zamezhnykh Sprau*, no.3 (30), 2004, 35-52; 40.

<sup>6</sup> *Otvety Ministra...S Martynov na voprosy, zadannye vo vremya 'pryamoi linii' na Belorusskom radio, (11-3-2004)*, *Vesnik Ministerstva Zamezhnykh Sprau*, no.1 (28), 2004, 27-41; 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Soveshchaniye po voprosam vnutrenney I vneshney politiki*, 26 July 2005. (<http://www.president.gov.by/press12395.print.html>)

- <sup>8</sup> D Kryat, "Diplomatiya bol'shoi politiki", *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 9 December 2003.
- <sup>9</sup> I Babak, "Belarusian-Chinese relations: present and future", *Problems of the Far East*, no.6, 2000, 65.
- <sup>10</sup> A Kharlap, "Belorussko-kitayskiye otnosheniya: sostoyaniye I perspektivy", *Vestnik Ministerstva Zamezhnykh Sprau*, no.2 (33), 2005, 70-76; 72.
- <sup>11</sup> Babak, *ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>14</sup> Babak, *ibid.*, 58.
- <sup>15</sup> Could this be one of the background factors in Lukashenko continuing to stall on full implementation of the Union State project with Russia?
- <sup>16</sup> Aleksandr Lukashenko dal interv'yu predstavatelyam kitayskikh SMI, 28 November 2005, (<http://www.president.gov.by/press12195.print.html>)
- <sup>17</sup> Gosudarstvennyy vizit Prezidenta Belarusi v KHR, 5 December 2005, (<http://www.president.gov.by/press14165.print.html>).
- <sup>18</sup> Kharlap, *ibid.*, 71.
- <sup>19</sup> Hu Chentsi, Kitaysko-belorusskiye otnosheniya druzhby sotrudnichestva razvivayutsya stabil'no I dinamichno, *Vestnik Ministerstva Zamezhnykh Sprau*, no.2 (33), 2005, 78-80; 78.
- <sup>20</sup> Chentsi, *ibid.*, 79; *Vestnik Ministerstva Zamezhnykh Sprau*, no.2 933), 2005, p.45.
- <sup>21</sup> I Kol'chenko, "Kurs na Vostok", *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 30 November 2005.
- <sup>22</sup> D Kryat, "7,000 km dlya druzey – ne rasstoyaniye", *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 6 December 2005.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> D Kryat, "Minsk-Pekin: vektor druzhby", *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 28 September 2005.
- <sup>25</sup> I Pleskachevskaya, "Vysokiy uroven", *Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, 29 October 2005.
- <sup>26</sup> Kharlap, *ibid.*, 70
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