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THE EURASIAN SECURITY SYSTEM AND BELARUS: PROBLEMS OF GEOPOLITICAL INTERDEPENDENCE

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This article identifies and considers the most important elements of the interdependence between the foreign policy of the Republic of Belarus and the process of formation and development of the Eurasian security system, including military-strategic cooperation between Belarus and Russia, development of the military-industrial complex, and the efforts of the CSTO to maintain security in Central Asia.

Key words: security; Eurasian integration; foreign policy of Belarus; geopolitical interdependence; the Ukrainian crisis; military-industrial complex; Central Asia; the CSTO.

ЕВРАЗИЙСКАЯ СИСТЕМА БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ И БЕЛАРУСЬ: ПРОБЛЕМЫ ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ ВЗАИМОЗАВИСИМОСТИ

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Определены и рассмотрены важнейшие элементы взаимозависимости внешней политики Республики Беларусь и процесса формирования и развития евразийской системы безопасности, включая военно-стратегическое сотрудничество Беларуси и России, развитие военно-промышленного комплекса, усилий ОДКБ по поддержанию безопасности в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: безопасность; евразийская интеграция; внешняя политика Беларуси; геополитическая взаимозависимость; украинский кризис; военно-промышленный комплекс; Центральная Азия; ОДКБ.

Introduction

The Republic of Belarus occupies the western periphery of geopolitical Eurasia, by which I mean the post-Soviet space, and is fairly far removed from Central Asia. This distance, however, does not mean that the Belarusian expert community, as well as military and civilian specialists, are indifferent to the problems of security of Central Asia and Inner Eurasia as a whole. Belarus is involved in all the integration structures in post-Soviet space, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in particular, which makes it one of

the sides in any hypothetical conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus if all the other CSTO members are involved [1].

A member, together with Russia, of the Union State, Minsk has even greater responsibilities in the collective security sphere [2; 3]. Today, Belarus is concerned about the gradual movement of NATO forces closer to its territory caused by the Ukrainian crisis and the mounting confrontation between Moscow and the West [4].

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The Ukrainian crisis has destabilized the European part of the CIS and spread its negative impact across Eurasia. The events in Ukraine confirm the principles

of indivisibility of Eurasian and Euro-Atlantic security registered in the Declaration of the Astana OSCE Summit of 2010.

Military-strategic cooperation between Belarus and Russia

Very much according to the logic of previous confrontation, Belarus has preserved its military-strategic importance for Russia and is one of the most consistent and active members of military integration within the CSTO. Both countries support the so-called coalition approach that saves money spent on defense and optimizes the system of command and control.

Russia's military-strategic interests are served, among other things, by the Volga Radar Station (Russia rents it from Belarus, the present term ending in 2020), which allows Russia to follow troop movements in the North Atlantic, as well as in Northern and Central Europe, and the Antey hub site, which ensures communication with the Russian submarine missile carriers in the Atlantic Ocean. Russia pays Minsk between 14 and 20 million US dollars every year. On the whole, Russia's annual aid to Belarus in the form of armament, training of officers, and maintenance of the S-300 air-defense missile systems has reached 360 million US dollars [5–7].

Practically all the military equipment the republic receives from abroad is produced in Russia; in the last fifteen years over one thousand citizens of Belarus have graduated from Russia's military educational establishments.

The economic and political context of the relations between the two countries leaves much to be desired, but cooperation in the military sphere is developing on the basis of over 30 treaties and agreements. As a neighbour of NATO's military infrastructure, Belarus is doubly important to Russia.

The two countries successfully cooperate in the sphere of radiation, chemical and biological defense, and topographic and geodesic support of the armed forces. Experts point out that in the past much was done to ensure external security of the Union State – it acquired united systems of radio-electronic warfare, communication, and logistics in the military sphere. As mentioned earlier, there is a Russian radar station in Belarus and a hub of long-range radio communication; joint staff and field exercises keep the battle-worthiness of troops at the required level. The Single Regional Air-Defense System is another important element of the Union State's military potential. In 2013, Russia supplied Belarus with the first upgraded Buk missile systems to improve air defenses.

In April 2013, during his official visit to Minsk, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu discussed military cooperation within the Union State with President A. Lukashenko and Defense Minister of Belarus Y. Zhadobin, in particular, increasing the efficiency of joint defenses and the possibility of setting up a single

group of armed forces within the CSTO. Russia intends to discontinue its import of elements for new types of strategic armaments, including nuclear weapons, and to rely in this field on Belarusian capacities. It is expected that the largest Belarusian enterprise, Integral Ltd., which manufactures microelectronics, will also be involved. Today, it occupies 15 to 20 % of the Russian market of electronic components of dual and special use.

The final stage of joint military exercises Zapad-2013 organized, for the first time, simultaneously in Russia and Belarus took place in September 2013. Russia planned to deploy, by 2015, a regiment of fighter planes at the airbase in Lida (Belarus) used by Belarusian ground attack aircraft, which also serves as a training center with the necessary and adequate infrastructure. At the first stage, it was planned to deploy the latest multi-functional SU-27SM3 fighters there, as well as strengthen the aviation group with other types of military aircraft. The Russian side, however, demonstrated that it did not plan to set up a joint airbase.

In November 2013, the situation around the base changed; it was planned to move it from Lida to Baranovichi. When in Baranovichi, A. Lukashenko made several statements addressed to Moscow, in particular about his intention to remove Su-27 planes from the republic's air force. Earlier, the Belarusian president had mentioned that Russia would deliver new military aircraft.

The statement in Baranovichi was intended as a warning to the Kremlin that the republic would modernize its weapons (including aviation) on its own and that, in the future, it would pursue an independent military policy.

The haggling over the military facility is still going on; the Lida base is too close to the external borders of the Union State; therefore, four Russian SU-27B aircraft were temporarily removed to Baranovichi.

Earlier Belarus made similar concessions in exchange for Russia's economic aid and used them as maneuvering room in its relations with Russia and the European Union. Some observers think that the steadily decreasing military potential of Belarusian aviation will make it more and more dependent on the Russian air force to protect its borders.

Russian experts are convinced that a Russian air base in Belarus is a response to the relocation, on permanent tactical efficiency, to the military base in Šiauliai (Lithuania) of four NATO F-16 Fighting Falcon all-weather multirole aircraft capable of carrying American B61 variable yield bombs. The 15-minute flight time between Šiauliai and Moscow makes these bombs (defined as tactical weapons) strategic weapons for Russia.

The experts of the Center for European Integration Problems in Minsk are convinced that a Russian airbase in Belarus indicates that the Kremlin is very concerned about NATO's military threat. The Russian airbase in Belarus issue has a domestic political dimension as well; the local opposition speaks of approaching Russian occupation and accuses the president of violating the Constitution. He, in turn, dismisses as absolutely groundless what the opposition says about the possible loss of sovereignty due to continued military cooperation with Russia.

Minsk argues that the Belarusian army forms the core of the joint group of armed forces and never fails to criticize the North Atlantic Alliance and its military activity in the region and the position of Poland on the American ABM system in Europe.

Development of the military-industrial complex in the Republic of Belarus

Belarus inherited about 120 enterprises of the military industrial complex (including maintenance plants) from the Soviet Union and practically no enterprises of final assembly. The Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic did not produce its own weapons; its production range was limited to automobiles and various equipment – communication, navigation, and command and control systems, as well as optics of all sorts, etc.

Today, military-industrial production is coordinated by the State Military-Industrial Committee of the Republic of Belarus. In 1992, it supplied up to 20 % of the total volume of materials, spare parts, and components needed by the Russian military-industrial complex; in the 2000s its share dropped to 8 %.

The Belarusian leaders have preserved some of the former integration contacts with Russia and the Russian enterprises that produce mobile ballistic missile systems Topol, Yars, and Iskander (the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant (MZKT), for example, supplies chassis for them). Belarusian targeting fire systems and navigation complexes are used in Russian planes and tanks; the republic is further deepening its specialization to develop systems of communication, navigation, reconnaissance, surveillance and command and control without which no network-centric army is possible [10].

In 2012, Belarus launched production of over 35 types of high-tech products; over 20 R&D have been completed in the following five fields: battle systems of special operations and land forces; geo-information systems; drones; high-precision weapons countermeasures and systems of fire damage.

The range of latest achievements includes a radio-relay station Tsitrus (which can replace 10 radar complexes) and also automated guidance systems Bor, Polyana RB, Neman, Sprut, Prostor, Rif-R, and Protok that have no analogues in the world.

Belarus has moved to the frontline of drone production. In April 2014, at the 4th International Exhibition and the BMC DIMDEX-2014 conference in Qatar,

Despite the traditionally high assessments of battle-worthiness of the Belarusian Armed Forces, Russian and some Belarusian experts point to the mounting problems caused by military-technological degradation, the negative effects of demography, etc. The financial, economic, and budget problems do not allow the state to maintain its army at the previous high level.

Money shortages have negatively affected the special rapid reaction force expected to form the core of the republic's armed forces after the reforms. Russia's very justified concerns about the future of the Belarusian armed forces, the battle-worthiness of the armed forces of the Union State, and the efficient involvement of the Republic of Belarus in the CSTO are caused by the noticeable outflow of contractors from the elite and special units [8; 9].

Beltekhexport exhibited its latest products, including Berkut-1 tactical short-range drone intended for optoelectronic night/day reconnaissance. The hand-starting unit Berkut-1 together with a payload is able to absolutely automatically fly a distance of 15 km at an altitude of 1000 meters. Cruising speed machine is 50–80 km/h, the unit can be flown for 1.5 hours.

In Qatar, the republic showed Shershen-D, another novelty, viz. an absolutely unique third generation anti-tank guided missile (ATGM).

Belarus has created unique devices of radio-electronic warfare; its maintenance plants have manufactured new and modernized some types of old Soviet military machines (air-defense assets in particular) very popular in developing countries. The same enterprises cover the needs of the armed forces of the republic and other countries. There is an opinion that the Belarusian military-industrial complex turned out to be more viable and, on the whole, more successful than the Ukrainian.

Military-political cooperation between Russia and Belarus is unfolding within the Treaty on the Union State and the CSTO and is based on five main documents. Both countries belong to the unified air defense system of the CIS countries. The republic has a considerable number of facilities of Russian military-technical infrastructure in its territory, which helps to maintain strategic security in Europe (the early warning radar system in Baranovichi and Russian Navy's long-haul communication center in Vileyka, which provides communication between Russia's Navy headquarters and atomic submarines in the Atlantic (the above-mentioned Antey hub site). Since 1998, the budget of the Union State has been funding military education for the Belarusian military in the Russian Federation.

The Belarusian-Russian intergovernmental commission on military-technical cooperation is doing a lot, including holding regular talks between heads of organizations and industrial enterprises of the mili-

tary-industrial complex, designed to arrive at the best forms of cooperation in various fields and to draw up and implement programs of the Union State in the field of security and defenses.

The two countries have pooled forces to design and produce science-consuming technologies— microwave and optoelectronic products and equipment to be used to produce nano-materials. There are several very successful programs – Komposit, Traektoria, Kosmos-NT, and Nanotekhnologii-SG.

Belarus has preserved over 50 enterprises of the defense sector involved today in production and scientific and technical cooperation with over 400 enterprises in Russia, which they supply with electronic components, spare parts, etc. The country is actively involved in bilateral projects through its participation in interstate financial and industrial groups and joint ventures; its defense industry concentrates on the latest information and telecommunication technologies.

In 2006, the country launched the State Armament Program for 2006–2015, so far the most ambitious military-technical project in its history as a sovereign state. Automated systems of troops and weapons command and control are generally regarded as the highest achievement of the Belarusian military-industrial complex. According to military experts, a single automated control system for the air force and air-defense upgrades the fighting potential of the Belarusian army and the regional group of troops (forces) of Russia and Belarus.

It should be said that joint military industrial projects do not interfere with cooperation of Russia and Belarus with third countries. While moving their military products to foreign markets, both countries carefully avoid competition among themselves so as not to infringe on their partner's interests.

In the sphere of dual technologies, Belarus is present in the CIS markets and cooperates with China – they produce multi-axis wheeled chassis and tractors for special, including military, equipment and armaments of various purposes. The first Chinese-Belarusian assembly plant was opened in 1998 in Xiogan (Hubei Province). After a while, the Chinese started copying the MZKT products and pushed out the Belarusian suppliers.

China is also interested in the fairly high technical and exploitation properties and fighting qualities of the Belarusian air-defense system. According to Russian sources, in 2000–2002, China and Belarus signed several agreements in this sphere. The Chinese military are very impressed by Belarusian achievements in radar technologies, in particular the Vostok D/E mobile 2-dimensional metric band surveillance radar carried on MZKT chassis [11].

Beijing is interested in what is being done in Belarus in the field of high-precision weapons, the modernized Module-A complex designed to improve the tactical-technological description of common aerial bombs

being one of them. There are signs that China and Belarus are intensifying their cooperation in design and development of means of radioelectronic warfare intended for themselves and third countries. There is an opinion that Belarus and China will cooperate in R&D of mid-range surface-to-air missile systems similar to S-300.

General overhaul and, recently, modernization of SU-27 aircraft and Mi-8 helicopters are the traditional sphere of military-technical cooperation between the two countries. Recently the military-industrial complex of the Republic of Belarus has moved into a new and potentially very attractive field for the People's Army of China, namely modernization of the Smerch multiple rocket launcher and production of the means of radio electronic protection for aircraft. There is the Satellite complex of airborne equipment of individual radio electronic protection of the aircraft against high-precision radio-controlled weapons with active homing missiles of the surface-to-air or air-to-air classes.

There is any number of those who think that the recent intensification of relations between Belarus and China at different levels is largely explained by pragmatism of the Chinese – they are interested in the results of the latest Belarusian original academic and applied studies. The state base of scientific and technical cooperation among China and Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and other CIS cities set up in Changchun, the capital of the Jilin Province, is geared at contacts in optical electronics, studies of materials, biotechnologies, etc.

Earlier, Belarusian State University and Harbin Polytechnics signed an agreement on cooperation. The Center for Scientific and Technical Cooperation was set up for joint studies and development of new technologies (laser and nano technologies, etc.). China is especially interested in what Belarus has done in space research and dual and military high tech.

Beijing knows that many types of military equipment and dual products developed and produced in Belarus are absolutely competitive on a world scale or even unique, with no analogues in the CIS countries. The Chinese military treat as such the automated system of troops and weapons command and control, aerial space optoelectronic devices and photogrammetric systems, armored vehicles fire control, automated radar, laser-optical and information air-defense command and control systems.

Until recently the Belarusian military-industrial complex closely cooperated with the Ukrainian defense industry, Shershen, Sarmat, and Skif being the results of their joint efforts. The Belarusian side produced homing systems, while the missiles were made in Ukraine; both had the right to sell them to third countries. The rule was applied not only to these missiles but also to surface-to-air missiles and the module that transformed unguided gravity bombs into guided bombs.

The recent events in Ukraine changed everything. In April 2014, during his visit to the 558 Aviation

Maintenance Plant in Baranovich, President A. Lukashenko pointed to two equally attractive possibilities created by the crisis – highly skilled Ukrainian specialists who could be tempted to move to Belarus and Ukrainian technologies that could be borrowed from their owners.

Late in September 2014, a delegation of the military-industrial complex of Belarus visited military enterprises in Kiev, Lvov, Dnepropetrovsk, and Chernigov on a fact-finding mission. The members were primarily interested in industrial enterprises and scientific research and development organizations connected with the design and manufacture of missiles and their components, homing systems, engines, automated command and control systems, etc. There is a more or less generally shared conviction in Ukraine that the Belarusians will try to lure the best specialists or will even try to buy missile technologies (it should be said that Russia is very reluctant to let Belarus develop these facilities in its territory).

The seventh international military hardware expo MILEX 2014 in Minsk was a great success. The organizations within the State Committee for Military Industry of the Republic of Belarus signed 55 contracts totaling over 350 million US dollars (on the whole, contracts amounting to 700 million US dollars).

Alebarda, a mid-range anti-aircraft missile system made in Belarus, attracted a lot of attention; even before the expo ended the new missile had gathered

15 orders. The market capacity is assessed as 200 or even more complexes, produced practically from beginning to end in Belarus.

Recently, the leaders of Belarus, who are seeking wider contacts with the developing countries, have been inviting their potential partners (Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, South Africa, and some of the Arab states) to set up joint military-technical projects.

Today, the Belarusian military-industrial complex demonstrates the following trends:

1) modernization of military equipment to add mobility and manageability to the troops, ensure their protection, widen the scope of reconnaissance, and increase the possibility of delivering precision strikes at long distances;

2) setting up a complete production cycle of promising types of weapons ranging from means of mobility to means of destruction. The country has already created prototypes of a fighting armored vehicle and a car of all-terrain capability and completed the design stage of an unmanned aerial complex with a range of 100 km or even more. Belarus and its foreign partners have created a new anti-tank missile complex;

3) there are plans to set up, jointly with leading world machine-tool companies, assembly facilities to produce equipment and the latest machine tools as a means of import replacement and, later, set up national production facilities in the republic.

Belarus and security in Central Asia in the CSTO context

Normally Minsk is not much interested in the problems of Central Asian security and the threats emanating from Afghanistan. President A. Lukashenko last clarified his position on the issue at the fall 2013 CSTO Summit. He was convinced that the CSTO states should help Tajikistan fortify its border with Afghanistan after the Western coalition pulled out its forces.

Until recently, Belarus limited its support within the CSTO to supplies of uniforms for the Tajik border guards and was officially thanked, in February 2014, by Nikolay Bordyuzha, Secretary General of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Civilian and military Belarusian experts are contemplating the technical possibility of being involved (as one of the units in the Collective Rapid Reaction Force) in responding to potential threats created by destabilization in Central Asia (a low-intensity conflict) after the coalition forces of NATO have been finally removed from Afghanistan. Some experts think that destabilization might spread to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan [12].

They also think that the country is unable to part with more than the one-third it has already pegged for participation in the Collective Rapid Reaction Force; two-thirds should remain in the republic for personnel rotation.

It is commonly believed that the country cannot spend more than 1 % of its consolidated budget (central and local budgets), that is, about 230 million US dollars, on training the national contingent and its funding.

The numerical strength of the Belarusian military contingent within the Collective Rapid Reaction Force depends on the nature and scope of the potential threats and might include military, gendarme, and counterterrorist units, communication with local authorities, and support forces.

Belarus could be represented by one mobile battalion of about 550 people complete with armored vehicles and guns; the organizational structure and personnel will be geared at the nature of the terrain and the degree of threats. The gendarme contingent will consist of two or three patrol companies from among the Ministry of the Interior Forces (up to 400 men) trained and equipped to suppress riots and conduct searches of transportation vehicles and people.

The counterterrorist part will be represented by a unit of up to 30 members of the Alfa and Almaz groups and riot police involved on a rotational basis. The group responsible for communication with local authorities consists of Belarusian officers serving in the staffs of the union forces, the Ministry of the Inte-

rior, the Air Force, and the state security forces of the host state.

The support group consists of a helicopter unit of up to 300 men and a medical sub-unit.

It has been calculated that up to 1600 military from the Ministry of the Interior, the State Security Committee, and the Defense Ministry will be needed; the country cannot afford more; no more than one-third of the total amount of needed forces are deployed in the host country, while the rest is intended for rotation.

Experts believe that the technical equipment of the units of the Ministry of the Interior, the counterterrorist units, and the medical service units is adequate, although they need well-protected transportation vehicles.

Belarusian analysts are showing a lot of interest in the fighting experience of Estonian units in Afghanistan, which revealed, among other things, that Soviet armored machines were ill-suited as mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles.

Because of limited finances and technical possibilities, the republic's national contingent will be moved to the area of possible conflict and will be supplied by land; transport aviation will be reserved for emergencies.

The republic's involvement in a possible mission requires a lot of technical training since the available armored vehicles and cars cannot be used in contemporary armed conflicts.

Experts have offered the following three ways out: modernization, purchase of new machines, and purchase of surplus machines from foreign states. So far, there is no idea about the exact sums involved, even though several million dollars might be required.

In Minsk, the problem of Afghanistan is discussed as part of the drug threat; the expert community looks at drug production in this country as a unique phenomenon explained not so much by the volumes of the locally raised and processed drugs as by the unpredictable geopolitical effects of their spread and consumption. Russia consumes 75 to 80 tons of Afghan heroin every year and loses, according to certain sources, over 30 thousand lives.

There is an opinion in the Belarusian expert community that "drug production in Afghanistan, unprecedented in its scope and concentration in one geographic point, can be described as a tool for undermining international security. This is a unique planetary-historical phenomenon that can be qualified, according to the U.N. Charter, as a threat to international peace and security".

This domestic Afghan phenomenon directly affects the region and many countries outside it; it is directly connected with the armed conflicts unfolding in the territory of Afghanistan (which have already assumed international scope) and the military-political destabilization of Central Asia and pours a lot of money into extremist criminal and terrorist activities. This phenomenon is largely caused by the unprecedentedly high level of corruption in Afghanistan and the countries along the trafficking route, which excludes any possibility of realizing the ideals of democracy in the region's countries. This explains why Belarusian experts have been talking about the right of Russia and the other CSTO member states to self-defense against the drug aggression waged by Afghan non-governmental groups in their territory [13]. Some of them think that the SCO should also pour its political and economic potential into the CSTO anti-drug efforts.

The expert community has pointed out that the Ukrainian developments might radically change the geopolitical situation in Eurasia as a whole and in Eastern Europe in particular; the security system might change to confront the CSTO with new and even more complicated problems. The military-political expert community of Belarus, however, cannot discern any prospects for CSTO expansion and prefer defense cooperation with Russia within the Union State.

At one of the meetings with the speaker of the Federation Council and the heads of the federation subjects of Russia, President A. Lukashenko said that in the near future the CSTO would develop into the military component of Eurasian entity. The Belarusian expert community is of a different opinion – Moscow demonstrates a lot of independence when it comes to decision-making and rarely takes the positions of its allies into account. This has been amply confirmed by previous crises.

The Crimean crisis put the deficit of trust among Moscow, Minsk, and Astana into bolder relief. Indeed, Belarus and Russia belong to the Union State and, together with Kazakhstan, to a single regional armed group and the CSTO. The Kremlin resolved the Crimean crisis and passed the decision on unification (which means joining the peninsula to the Union State and the CSTO) unilaterally. The post-factum consultations within the Union State and the CSTO were purely formal.

Belarusian experts have pointed out that the CSTO members prefer to stay away from the Russian-Ukrainian war and that Moscow has failed to rally the post-Soviet states for a military-technical blockade of Kiev.

Belarus and the Ukrainian crisis

Throughout 2013–2014, Minsk gradually readjusted its attitude to Ukraine, which has been living through a far from easy period of political transformations. The Belarusian media and public opinion limited their comments on the wave of opposition later tagged

as Euromaidan to whether or not Ukraine would be involved in Eurasian integration. As the situation on Maidan moved toward violence, Minsk paid more and more attention to the Ukrainian developments; the removal of V. Yanukovich and the political U-turn per-

formed by those who came to power in Kiev shocked the Belarusian president.

In March 2014, A. Lukashenko began regularly commenting on the Ukrainian developments; put in a nutshell, he says the following:

1) the Belarusian authorities will not allow a second edition of Maidan in their country;

2) the Ukrainian riots were caused by “the huge scope of corruption and economic collapse” in Ukraine;

3) Minsk will adequately respond to all attempts of NATO members to step up military activities in close proximity to Belarus.

This was when Minsk formulated its foreign policy interests:

- prompt stabilization of Ukraine;
- resistance (if necessary) to Russia’s pressure, which might insist on worsening Minsk’s relations with the Ukrainian regime;
- capitalization on the Ukrainian developments and the worsened relations between the West and Russia.

The Belarusian leaders primarily had to find a balanced political course: they did not know how far they could go with their support of Moscow because of its rapidly worsening relations with the West, lest to betray the country’s national interests, undermine its international position, and dent its security.

On the whole, A. Lukashenko was not always consistent; he sided with Moscow when the U.N. General Assembly voted on the annexation of Crimea; later, on 7 June, the President of Belarus attended the inauguration of President Poroshenko and clearly indicated that he was on the side of Ukraine.

There is another aspect of the same issue – A. Lukashenko tried to wring dry the Ukrainian conflict and extract the maximum political dividends by positioning himself as a broker between Kiev and Moscow. In late July 2014, he began insistently offering Minsk as a venue for the tripartite talks of the so-called contact group that was trying to settle the situation in the east of Ukraine.

Late in August 2014, Minsk welcomed a summit of the Customs Union, Ukraine, and the high representatives of the European Union; during this meeting, A. Lukashenko skillfully used his diplomatic talents to gain a personal audience with Catherine Ashton, an indirect sign that Brussels had softened its position in relation to the Lukashenko regime. The President of Belarus used the Minsk summit to obtain diplomatic bonuses and upgrade the country’s international status.

Minsk extracted all possible economic and political dividends from the Western anti-Russian sanctions and Russia’s reciprocal sanctions. While formally remaining on Russia’s side, A. Lukashenko clearly indicated that Minsk would not join the reciprocal sanctions and promised to close possible holes in foodstuff supplies with Belarusian products. Later Moscow re-

peatedly accused Minsk of cheating by re-exporting products of EU countries.

In view of the crisis, Belarus adopted additional measures to tighten internal security, in particular, in connection with the world hockey championship. In August 2014, the president signed decrees on the mechanism for introducing a state of emergency; early in 2015, the law on martial law was amended.

In many respects, the Ukrainian market remains the biggest consumer of Belarusian export, oil products and potassium fertilizers in particular (which brought 6 to 7 billion US dollars every year). On 19 August 2014, Ukraine and Belarus abolished all the limiting measures previously introduced in trade and mutual licensing, which meant restoration of the free-trade regime. In 2014, the trade turnover between the two countries decreased mainly because of the devalued grivna.

Minsk strengthened its border guards, especially those stationed along the borders with Ukraine, and deployed a new air group of the Russian Federation at the Baranovichi airbase. On the whole, A. Lukashenko and V. Putin agreed that they should jointly and adequately respond to the current build-up of NATO troops.

In August 2014, the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus officially refuted information that Belarusian citizens had joined the volunteers in the east of Ukraine. According to official information, by August 2014 there were about 26 thousand Ukrainian refugees in Belarus; 1.5 thousand applied for a refugee status and nearly 1.5 thousand received residence permits; over 3 thousand intend to apply for temporary residence.

The country’s external and internal policy remains under the pressure of the Ukrainian crisis and the related international events. President A. Lukashenko believes that the Ukrainian regions should become more independent and that the Constitution should be amended accordingly. Early in September, he signed a decree which simplified many procedures for Ukrainian citizens in Belarus, including application for state grants, education, and employment.

The country’s international situation and its relations with Germany and the United States are likewise strongly affected by the Ukrainian crisis. Early in September 2014, an American delegation headed by one of the top officials of the U.S. State Department came to Minsk to confirm that Washington was pleased with Minsk’s decision not to recognize unification of Crimea with Russia and that its efforts to encourage and organize talks on the settlement of the Ukrainian crisis were appreciated. The American diplomats paid particular attention to the Minsk’s recognition of the new people in power in Ukraine and expressed their readiness to change the format of relations with Minsk in light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

Late in September, during Lukashenko visit to Moldova and in the interview he gave on 1 October, the

Belarusian president expressed his opinion about the Ukrainian crisis. He said that the contact group that had worked in Minsk did a lot and halted the hostilities. He described the possible repercussions of the crisis as catastrophic and pointed out that what had happened on Maidan was wrong and unconstitutional. He said that his country had offered a peace plan for Ukraine, but “the West rejected it because somebody profited from this rejection”.

On 21 December 2014, when in Kiev on a working visit, President A. Lukashenko made an official statement to the effect that his country would spare no effort to help restore peace in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian president reciprocated by praising Minsk’s clear position on his state’s sovereignty and independence and thanked A. Lukashenko for the opportunity to use Minsk for the meeting of the tripartite contact group, which arrived at a document intended as the first step toward peaceful settlement.

Experts paid particular attention to what the Ukrainian leader said about the “Minsk format” as the only model of de-escalation of the situation in some of the districts of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions; they associated this with certain shifts in Kiev’s approaches and explained Lukashenko’s Ukrainian visit by the re-

cently worsened relations between Moscow and Minsk in trade and the economy and, allegedly, the common strategy Moscow, Minsk, and Astana are pursuing in their relations with Kiev.

It should be said that the talks between Minsk and Kiev produced an unexpected decision on setting up a joint TV channel in Minsk (which will probably be safely forgotten).

Most of the expert community agrees that Minsk and Kiev have many common interests: Belarus wants Ukraine as one of the largest markets for its products, while Ukraine wants maximum security along its northern border, steady supply of oil products, and neutralization of Russia’s attempts to limit Ukraine’s trade and to the standards of the Eurasian integration project.

What is even more important is the fact that Minsk indirectly refused to support the “federalization scenario” Moscow was imposing on Ukraine. It also guaranteed that it would not allow third countries to use Belarusian territory for military aggression against Ukraine.

In any case, Alexander Lukashenko is using every opportunity for political maneuvering to create the impression of his complete independence.

What Minsk thinks about the security threats to Central Asia

The latest assessments of the new security threats to Central Asia and the region’s geopolitical future offered by the Belarusian expert community are very interesting. The report published by the Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies (TsSVI) [14], described the following two supra-national strategies of counteraction: the Chinese, represented by the SCO and the emerging Silk Road Economic Belt, and the Russian, represented by the CSTO and the emerging EAEU.

There is a more or less common opinion that Central Asia has come close to fundamental changes largely connected with the developments unfolding in other regions, the Middle East in particular. The following can be described as the key factors responsible for the Central Asian strategic context:

- 1) the pullout of American troops from Afghanistan in 2014–2016;
- 2) the establishment of the EAEU and its possible enlargement;
- 3) the dramatic activation of China’s regional policies;
- 4) the emergence of India as a new regional power;
- 5) the continued strategic rapprochement of the U.S. and Iran;
- 6) the shift of the zone of U.S. primary interests to the Far East and Washington’s rising concern about the growing Chinese factor in Eurasia;
- 7) the changed structures and patterns of activity of international extremist and terrorist organizations and continued struggle between ISIS and al Qa’eda;

8) the rising level of violence, the rising drug production, and the persistent political crisis in Afghanistan.

The United States, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, and, of course, Russia are the states with the potentially greatest impact on Central Asia. Washington wants to preserve the stability level, which will allow it to shift its geopolitical priorities, safely and completely, from Central Asia to the APR and the Middle East. The White House is concentrating on containing China by counterbalancing it to the states involved in Central Asia (Russia, Iran, and India in particular). The Americans expect that Russia will try to push China out of the post-Soviet space and that Iran will help to stabilize Afghanistan and prevent the greater role of Pakistan and the Taliban, while India, locked in competition with China, will add geopolitical and economic weight to the structure.

Experts and analysts believe that China is attracted by Central Asia’s mineral resources and consumer markets, its interests in the region being inspired by Beijing’s desire to avoid instability in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

Meanwhile, China which has already formulated the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative, occupies a much more active or even expansionist position: the economic belt will require infrastructure which will require protection. The Chinese elite, or its greater part, is regarding the Economic Belt as a free trade area between China and the Central Asian countries. After losing interest in the Mes Aynak copper mines, China developed

an interest in protecting the oil fields in the north of Afghanistan.

Containment of India is one of China's strategic concerns; Beijing wants to limit Delhi's influence in the region and intercept its share of the resources.

India, according to the expert community, is primarily concerned about receiving a steady supply of resources mainly through TAPI (Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India) and IPI (Iran – Pakistan – India) gas transportation systems.

Tehran needs stability in Afghanistan, a solution to the drug trafficking problem, and suppression of the still growing influence of extremist groups oriented toward Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Iran needs larger markets for its hydrocarbons (hence the IPI project) and a wider area of economic cooperation. The Port of Chabahar project, the only Iranian port with direct access to the ocean, is one of Tehran's strategic priorities. The country is determined to pursue an active policy in Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asia (Tajikistan being the main aim). A decrease in the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia is another point on the Iranian agenda.

On the whole, analysts agree that Pakistan has found itself in a quandary. In recent years, the traditional contacts between the Pakistani special services and the Taliban (and its branches) have been causing increasing trouble. Like many of its neighbours, Pakistan is interested in the resource-rich Central Asian states; it wants to keep India and Iran outside Central Asia and relies on China as its main ally.

Russia's strategy in the region is fairly vague; the Ukrainian crisis distracted its attention from Central Asia, the key to Eurasian security. Russia, which is establishing the EAEU together with its allies, expects

that Kyrgyzstan and, somewhat later, Tajikistan will also join it. According to certain sources, it is interested in the TAPI gas pipeline, while some Russian companies are ready to join the construction project.

The Belarusian expert community has concluded that the terrorist international is being torn apart by the dramatic rivalry between ISIS and al Qa'eda. In the West, experts are very skeptical about the prospects for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which needs money and fresh forces; its ethnic composition, Uzbeks being in the minority, has moved far from its title. The Ismailites of Afghan and Tajik Badakhshan may temporarily come to the fore, as well as pan-Turkic and ethnically diverse groups in the north of Afghanistan and more moderate Islamist organizations of the Hizb ut-Tahrir type.

The expert community in Belarus points to the Islamist threat as the main one in the present conditions; the new actors, ISIS being one of them, on the regional scene may aggravate it even more.

Today, the Central Asian states are doing more than the other players to oppose the region's destabilization. They are keeping the political field under control, applying pressure, within legal limits, on the Islamist and other opposition structures, and offering the easily tempted, as well as vulnerable groups, social benefits.

The Central Asian countries have geared their opposition strategies to nationalism, a combination of the following two key values: national history and sovereign statehood. This particularly applies to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. According to the expert community, these two countries, rather than the CSTO, will play the main role in strengthening the region's security, at least because Russia remains bogged down in the Ukrainian crisis.

Conclusion

Today, the foreign policy course of the Republic of Belarus is largely determined by the following factors:

- wide-scale, diverse, and, at the same time, "uneven" cooperation with the Russian Federation;
- involvement in Eurasian integration and the EAEU Treaty signed in May 2014;
- cautious drawing closer to the West;
- its higher international status of a broker between the sides in the Ukrainian conflict and consolidation of

its military-political cooperation with Moscow;

- continued cooperation with its traditional partners – China, Venezuela, some of the CIS countries, and Kazakhstan in particular.

Beyond its borders, the country is looking for new and widening the already existing markets for its products; it is using Eurasian integration to strengthen its position when dealing with Russia and has returned to its old policy of balancing between Russia and the EU.

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