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REGIONAL AVIATION DIPLOMACY OF THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS AND ITS STRATEGIC PARTNERS

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Abstract. A robust aviation sector is a source of pride for many nations. The possession of national air carriers (both passenger and cargo), maintenance facilities, advanced air navigation systems, and airports capable of accommodating diverse aircraft is a significant symbol of modernity and international engagement for many states. As societies evolve and international engagements expand, aviation diplomacy is becoming a crucial instrument in the foreign policy strategies of numerous states, including Belarus. The author of this article examines the regional aspects of aviation diplomacy between Belarus and its strategic partners, China and Russia, analyses government documents and cooperative outcomes within the Belarus – China aviation relationship and explores the potential for expanding air routes linking Belarus, China, and Russia.

Keywords: aviation diplomacy; new dimensions of Belarusian diplomacy; regional cooperation through aviation connectivity.

РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ АВИАЦИОННОЙ ДИПЛОМАТИИ РЕСПУБЛИКИ БЕЛАРУСЬ И ЕЕ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИХ ПАРТНЕРОВ

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Аннотация. Авиационная отрасль – гордость для каждого народа. Для большинства государств мира важным показателем уровня развития является наличие национальных пассажирских и грузовых авиаперевозчиков, авиаремонтных предприятий, современной аэронавигационной службы и аэропортов, которые могут принимать и обслуживать воздушные суда различных классов и типов. С развитием общества и расширением международного взаимодействия авиационная дипломатия становится важным инструментом во внешней политике многих государств, в том числе Беларуси. Рассматриваются региональные аспекты авиационной дипломатии Беларуси и стран-партнеров (Китая и России). Проводится анализ документов о сотрудничестве в рамках авиационной дипломатии Беларуси и Китая, а также результатов такого сотрудничества. Оценивается потенциал развития авиационных маршрутов между Беларусью, Китаем и Россией.

Ключевые слова: авиационная дипломатия; новые контуры белорусской дипломатии; региональное сотрудничество через призму авиационного сообщения.

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Introduction

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the advent of flight, captivating Belarusians (like many other European populations) with the spectacle of balloons, airships, aerostats, and aeroplanes. Beyond mere observation, Belarusians actively participated in aircraft construction, fundraising for aeroplane acquisition, airfield development, and mastering new aviation technologies. The nascent Soviet state, building upon Russian aeronautical expertise, prioritised the development of aviation for both civilian and military purposes. Over time, aviation became a significant element in the diplomatic activities of the USSR, including the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.

In the ensuing decades, Belarusians contributed significantly to the formation and growth of the aviation and space industries. While initially employed primarily for diplomatic mail, transportation of diplomats, and related services, aviation and space diplomacy now occupy a prominent position in international relations.

With evolving societal needs and expanding global contacts, aviation diplomacy has become a vital foreign policy tool for numerous nations, including Belarus. Aviation diplomacy can be defined as all forms of diplomatic processes and structures pursued within the realm of civil aviation [1, p. 293]. It can also be understood as the strategic deployment of air assets to further foreign policy objectives. Notably, air assets and aviation infrastructure can enhance national and regional identity, forge political connections, and facilitate cross-border mobility [2].

Given the strengthening cooperation among Belarus, China, and Russia – manifested in the ongoing development of the Union State and Belarus' comprehensive strategic partnership with China – aviation diplomacy holds significant potential for enhancing these multifaceted interactions.

A limited number of scholars have explored related themes. M. Indriani [3] examined regional aviation diplomacy, while S. G. Zalivako [4], D. Y. Ledyan [5], and T. V. Slivinskaya [6] investigated challenges in passenger air transport and aviation within Belarus. Notably, T. V. Slivinskaya analysed the geographical accessibility of passenger air transport in the Belarusian-Russian border region, concluding that enhancing the air transport network is crucial for the future of Belarusian aviation [6]. Furthermore, Belarusian scholar V. M. Matsel' [7] assesses the prospects for cooperation between Belarus and China, Russian scholar D. Yu. Cheltsova [8] examines the evolving relations between Russia and Belarus, and Chinese scholar Zhao Mingwen [9] explores the dynamics of the Russia – China relationship. This literature review reveals a predominant focus on domestic air passenger transport and bilateral relations, with limited attention to the regional aviation diplomacy of Belarus, China, and Russia. These observations underscore the significance and originality of studying this subject. This article delineates the regional dimensions of aviation interaction between Belarus and its strategic partners, China and Russia, with the view to promoting bilateral friendships and partnerships and enhancing interregional air connectivity.

Regional aspects of aviation diplomacy between Belarus, China, and Russia

Aviation diplomacy holds substantial promise in fostering interaction among the administrative-territorial units of Belarus, Russia, and China. Given the ongoing development of the Union State, the perspective of the Chinese partners assumes particular significance. On 16 October 2022, the President of the People's Republic of China and General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist party of China, Xi Jinping, delivered a report to the 20th National congress of the Communist party of China titled "Carrying the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics highly, and striving in unity to build a modernised socialist state in all respects"¹.

In this address, Xi Jinping highlighted China's advancements: "We have proposed and implemented a new development concept, pursued high-quality growth in depth, cultivated new drivers of development, implemented supply-side structural reforms, and formulated a series of major regional development strategies with

overarching significance. China's economic strength has achieved a historic leap. China has made significant achievements in manned spaceflight, lunar exploration, new energy technology, large aircraft manufacturing, biomedicine and other fields"² (hereinafter translated by us. – Yu Yang).

Notably, China has previously articulated the outline of the 14th five-year plan for China's national economic and social development (2021–2025). Concurrently, the Civil Aviation Administration of People's Republic of China and the Ministry of Transport and Communications of People's Republic of China released the 14th five-year plan for civil aviation development. This document emphasises the necessity to optimise the configuration of the international route network, enhance the new Eurasian continental bridge system alongside other global networks, and collaboratively develop the Belt and road international economic framework. Additionally, it underscores the imperative to facilitate the interconnection

¹The 20th National congress of the Communist party of China opened in Beijing [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/16/content_5718884.htm (date of access: 03.04.2024) (in Chin.).

²Full text of the report to the 20th National congress of the Communist party of China [Electronic resource]. URL: http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/zgxw/202210/t20221026_10792071.htm (date of access: 03.04.2024) (in Russ.).

of the six major corridors and route networks. The plan advocates for proactive negotiations with international partners to establish aviation service agreements, expand and open new routes, enhance transit connectivity, and advance the construction of the Air Silk Road. The objective is to improve the functionality of aviation hubs and establish a model in which world-class airport clusters, international aviation hubs, and regional aviation hubs develop in concert³. Notably, the Air Silk road constitutes a vital component of the Belt and Road initiative and represents a core task for civil aviation's involvement⁴.

Consequently, the prospects for trilateral cooperation within the aviation sector are promising. Regional airlines and airports in China's northern provinces can leverage Belarusian and Russian routes in developing the Air Silk Road. This collaboration aligns with Xi Jinping's address at the 20th National people's congress of the Communist party of China, wherein he stated that "China will adhere to the principles of amity, good faith, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness", and to continue to deepen "friendship, mutual trust, and convergence of interests with its neighbours through a neighbourhood diplomacy featuring friendship and sincerity"⁵.

Furthermore, the Joint statement on further developing the all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Belarus in the new era encourages airlines from both countries "to increase direct flights from Belarus to China promptly and following market principles"⁶. Additionally, the Joint statement of the President of the Russian Federation and the President of the People's Republic of China on key areas of Russia – China economic cooperation until 2030 advocates for an interconnected logistics system ensuring the rapid movement of cargo and passengers through all modes of transport: rail, road, air, river, and sea⁷.

The 3045-kilometre border between Heilongjiang Province and the Russian Far East provides a substantial foundation for bilateral cooperation, as well as for collaboration with Belarus. Heilongjiang functions as a key transportation hub, integrating Russia's land and air

routes, and is positioned to play an instrumental role in establishing aerial connections between China, Russia, and Belarus. Presently, flights from Dalian, Liaoning to Vladivostok are operational⁸. Moreover, the company "Hainan airlines" operates services on the Beijing – Moscow, Beijing – Saint Petersburg, Dalian – Vladivostok, and Beijing – Irkutsk routes⁹. With the commencement of the Harbin-Krasnoyarsk route, Harbin now offers six routes to Krasnoyarsk, Vladivostok, Irkutsk, Khabarovsk, Yakutsk, and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk.

The significant expansion of international air routes has enhanced Heilongjiang Province's export trade with Russia and facilitated cultural and humanitarian exchanges between China and Russia. The growth in air connectivity enhances economic, commercial, and touristic cooperation with Russia, while promoting people-to-people interactions, advancing China's strategic initiative to open up to the north¹⁰. Additionally, the company "Aeroflot – Russian airlines" operates flights from Beijing to various Russian destinations, including Vladivostok, Krasnoyarsk, Khabarovsk, and Novosibirsk.

Regional aviation diplomacy is clearly a significant component of cooperation and exchange among friendly nations. It is worth noting that P. V. Matyukhin, deputy chairman of the Government of Amur Region, discussed with representatives of Minsk National Airport at the Eastern economic forum in Vladivostok, the possibility of organising direct flights between the Belarusian capital and Blagoveshchensk or developing a route that would include the capital of the Amur Region as a transit city¹¹.

The China – Belarus industrial park "Great stone" near Minsk serves as a prominent symbol of friendship between the two nations. The potential of aviation diplomacy is particularly relevant to this context, specifically regarding the park's connectivity with Minsk National Airport. Such a link would enhance the park's attractiveness and provide greater convenience for residents of surrounding areas and employees of businesses operating within it. As reported in December 2020, the development of design documentation for a railway

³14th five-year civil aviation development plan [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.caacnews.com.cn/1/1/202201/t20220107_1337586.html (date of access: 27.01.2024) (in Chin.).

⁴Interpretation: implementation plan for promoting high-quality development of the Air Silk Road during the 14th five-year plan period [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/241201.html> (date of access: 28.04.2024) (in Chin.).

⁵Full text of the report to the 20th National congress of the Communist party of China [Electronic resource]. URL: http://ru.china-embassy.gov.cn/rus/zgxw/202210/t20221026_10792071.htm (date of access: 03.04.2024) (in Russ.).

⁶Joint statement of Belarus and China on the further development of relations of all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://china.mfa.gov.by/ru/embassy/news/fb2937bef6398e2d.html> (date of access: 03.04.2024) (in Russ.).

⁷Joint statement of the President of the Russian Federation and the President of the People's Republic of China on key areas of Russia – China economic cooperation until 2030 [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/zyxw/202303/t20230322_11046176.shtml (date of access: 28.01.2024) (in Chin.).

⁸Direct passenger route from Dalian (Liaoning) to Vladivostok (Russia) opens [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.china-news.com.cn/cj/2023/10-19/10097062.shtml> (date of access: 28.01.2024) (in Chin.).

⁹Hainan airlines resumes Beijing – Irkutsk flight [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.caacnews.com.cn/1/6/202312/t20231228_1373483.html (date of access: 28.01.2024) (in Chin.).

¹⁰Harbin – Krasnoyarsk route officially opened [Electronic resource]. URL: http://www.caacnews.com.cn/1/5/202312/t20231226_1373404.html (date of access: 30.01.2024) (in Chin.).

¹¹Blagoveshchensk and Minsk may be linked by a direct flight: air service with the Far East was discussed at the EEF [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://amurobl.tv/news/transport/2023-09-14-blagoveshchensk-i-minsk-mozhet-svyazat-pryamoy-reys-na-vef-obsudili-aviatsionnoe-soobshchenie-s-daln> (date of access: 28.09.2024) (in Russ.).

connecting Minsk National Airport is scheduled for completion between 2021 and 2024. According to news agency “BelTA”, a railway stop named “Industrial park” is planned within the transportation hub of the Chinese-Belarusian industrial park¹². Regional partners from China, with their extensive expertise in modern railway construction, could expedite this crucial project, further exemplifying the strong partnership between Belarus and China. This development would benefit not only citizens of Belarus and China but also those from other nations [10].

Another instance of leveraging existing infrastructure is the recently renovated airport in Orsha and its adjacent multimodal industrial and logistics complex. This complex is designed for raw material processing, large-scale cargo handling, intermodal transport coordination, transshipment, and short-term and long-term storage. Its strategic location at the intersection of the 2nd and 9th pan-European transport corridors facilitates participation in West – East and North – South logistical flows. The presence of a modernised airfield capable of accommodating Boeing 747-400 class aircraft¹³, combined with its capacity for handling air, rail, and road cargo, further enhances its significance. In the current context of sanctions against Belarus, these facilities could be particularly valuable for Chinese partners engaged in air cargo transport between the two countries [10].

During the Belarusian President’s recent visit to China (28 February – 2 March 2023), the two countries issued a Joint statement on further developing the all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Belarus in the new era. This has led to an increase in residents at the industrial park “Great stone” and a rise in joint projects involving Belarusian and Chinese re-

gional entities, creating favourable conditions for new air routes between Minsk and various Chinese regions. Beyond aviation professionals, representatives from Belarusian business, tourism, and health resort sectors are actively participating in negotiations with their Chinese counterparts.

In mid-December 2023, Luo Shixiong, Minister Counsellor of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Belarus, remarked that the launch of a Sanya (Hainan Province) – Minsk flight represents another success for bilateral relations, opening new opportunities not only for tourism and recreation but also for mutually beneficial business cooperation¹⁴. Furthermore, a new route connecting Minsk with Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and surrounding areas is expected to commence on 25 May 2024. The company “Beijing capital airlines” plans to launch direct flights between Minsk and Sanya International Airport (Hainan Island)¹⁵.

As these examples demonstrate that aviation diplomacy is actively employed to expand cooperation with Belarus’ international partners. As noted at an expanded meeting of the department of aviation on 6 February 2024, reviewing the 2023 performance and outlining the 2024 outlook: “A broad range of initiatives have been implemented within the sphere of international activities... In July 2023, an Air services agreement was signed between Belarus and the Sultanate of Oman. Throughout 2023, negotiations were conducted with aviation authorities from the Russia, Egypt, China, Oman, Vietnam, Venezuela, Iran, Kazakhstan, and other countries on key issues related to civil aviation development. Currently, domestic procedures are underway to finalise air service agreements with Venezuela, the Seychelles, and Kenya”¹⁶.

Conclusions

The importance of aviation diplomacy in the Belarus – China relationship is evident in several key documents, including the Joint statement on further developing the all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Belarus in the new era, the report to the 20th National congress of the Communist party of China, and the 14th five-year plan for civil aviation development. Regional air diplomacy between the two countries is expected to facilitate the utilisation and development of the China – Belarus industrial park

“Great stone” and the multimodal industrial and logistics complex of the airport in Orsha. Furthermore, the establishment of interregional air routes linking Belarus, China, and Russia presents significant potential. This interconnectivity not only reflects active governmental cooperation within multilateral and bilateral frameworks but also provides a concrete channel for fostering interregional contacts, positively impacting economic growth, tourism, and humanitarian exchanges among the three nations.

¹²The project of construction of the railroad to Minsk airport is planned to be developed until 2024 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.belta.by/regions/view/proekt-stroitelstva-zheleznoj-dorogi-v-minskij-aeroport-planirujut-razrabotat-do-2024-goda-421225-2020> (date of access: 28.04.2024) (in Russ.).

¹³Logistics centres [Electronic resource]. URL: https://vitebsk-region.gov.by/ru/new_url_1524634188-ru/ (date of access: 28.04.2024) (in Russ.).

¹⁴Minsk and the Chinese city of Sanya will be connected by a direct flight [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/minsk-i-kitajskoj-gorod-sanja-svjazhet-pramoj-aviarejs-605817-2023/> (date of access: 02.04.2024) (in Russ.).

¹⁵Encouraging news about the opening of new routes to/from China this spring [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.aerostar.by/novy-e-poletny-e-programmy-v-kitaj/> (date of access: 02.04.2024) (in Russ.).

¹⁶The results of the aviation industry in 2023 and development prospects for 2024 were discussed at the meeting of the Board of the department of aviation [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.caa.gov.by/ru/news-ru/view/itogi-raboty-aviatsionnoj-otrasli-v-2023-godu-i-perspektivy-razvitiya-na-2024-god-obsudili-na-zasedanii-276/> (date of access: 02.04.2024) (in Russ.).

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