



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

The trilateral meeting between Xi Jinping and Lukashenko



President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko visited China this week. His visit was friendly, cordial and probably fruitful for relations between the two allies, although, in many ways, it has not been bilateral.

Russia and Putin were certainly part of these talks, although they were not physically present.

Lukashenko's visit to Beijing comes between two important meetings. It took place just a few days after the first Chinese diplomat Wang Yi visited Moscow, and before the meeting between Xi and Putin in Moscow, which has been unofficially announced to take place in the next few months.

As the only direct wartime ally of Russia in its aggression against Ukraine, Belarus makes no attempt to have an independent foreign policy, separate from Russia and its interests.

Even a visit to China, with which Lukashenko has very developed relations, could not be separated from the Russian dimension.

Belarus shares the economic destiny of Russia. Both are under severe Western sanctions, which make them almost completely isolated.

Engage in China's peace plan

Although Lukashenko answered with a "no way" to the question about the possibility of his army joining Russia in its aggression against Ukraine in mid-February, before his trip to Moscow, Belarus has been an invasion hub since the start of the Russian aggression against their common neighbour.

One of the most important points of discussion between Lukashenko and Xi in Beijing has been the Chinese peace plan for Ukraine, which was announced on the anniversary of start of the Russian aggression, on February 24.

In Beijing, Lukashenko gave "full support" to this plan, and in a joint statement he and Xi emphasised "extreme interest in the soonest

possible establishment of peace in Ukraine".

Today, Belarus is not in a position to be a participant and host of peace talks on Ukraine, as it was eight years ago when the agreements on the cessation of the conflict in the east of Ukraine were concluded in Minsk.

But the isolated Belarusian leader may have ambitions for at least a small role in a future peace process, counting on the fact that this could ease at least some of the political and economic sanctions.

The long decline of Chinese investment in Belarus

Belarus desperately needs the stimulation of economic relations with China. They have been in sharp decline in the past few years, first due to the COVID-19 pandemic, then due to Western sanctions against Belarus from 2020, and finally due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The COVID-19 pandemic has passed, but the sanctions are still in place and there is no prospect of them being lifted soon.

A large number of Chinese business projects in Belarus have been stopped. This particularly applies to the main joint project within the Belt and Road initiative: the Chinese-Belarus Industrial Park (CBIP), which the Chinese described as a "pearl" within this global project.

By the end of last year, there were 99 companies in CBIP, with a total investment volume of about 1.2 billion dollars. However, both parties previously planned that this amount (100 companies) would be reached in 2019, and not three years later.

The plans of Belarus to have 170 investors in the park, which is still called "Great stone", by 2025, are now even further from realisation and probably unattainable.

China has been very restrained in placing

investments in Belarus, precisely because of the heavy sanctions to which the regime in Minsk has been subject.

The economic interest in investment that once existed due to the transport and logistics corridor to Western Europe has now disappeared, and the question is when it would be relevant again, if ever.

Even the previous joint investments in "Great stone" have largely come from state companies, meaning that China did not have high profit expectations from this business. It constituted a kind of a showcase at the door of Europe.

Is the same Lukashenko returning from Beijing?

Beijing and Minsk have not been reducing their extremely friendly rhetoric towards each other, despite the visible weakening of economic ties.

There has been no mention of the decline in investments or the suspension of joint projects, not even during Lukashenko's visit to Beijing.

Belarus received support from President Xi for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, where it now serves as an observer.

Since last autumn, Belarus has moved up one place on the Chinese scale of mutual relations, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing described those relations as an "all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership".

This status has been very high in the Chinese nomenclature, because only one other major Chinese ally - Pakistan - has it, and it is only one degree below China's relations with Russia, according to the BBC Monitoring analysis.

Belarus and its leader have been restricted by Western sanctions from 2020 on their own

"merits", and additionally by the sanctions that followed due to the alliance with Russia in its aggression against Ukraine.

Additionally, Belarus has been constrained by obligations in the alliance with Moscow, which in wartime conditions make it more of a Russian province than an independent state.

Lukashenko certainly sees a way out of the economic predicament through China, and makes attempts to revive China's visibly reduced interest in joint affairs, which again comes from China's refraining from doing business with countries that are under Western sanctions.

This Chinese "window" seems to be Lukashenko's only hope for economic recovery. If he really moves in that direction, it would be a risky path because it would require concessions.

If Lukashenko travelled to China as Putin's proxy, it is possible that he would return from there as Beijing's proxy to Putin's backyard.