

# Belarus: Russia's Cat's Paw

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*Belarus has managed to escape the scanner of major countries reserved for rogue nations despite blatant violations of the laid-down international rules. Alexander Lukashenko, the President of Belarus, despite his moral credentials badly shaken after trumped up elections in 2020 still seems to be holding firm ground due to the unstinted support offered by Russia, an acknowledged military powerhouse. Despite committing grave acts of provocation endangering security of many nations, Belarus seems to have its way due to the strategic advantage it offers Russia in its dealing with NATO nations and Ukraine, an old friend turned new enemy on date. Further, Belarus has turned out to be an echo chamber of the Russian establishment and follows the predicted pathway paved by the Russians and is greatly assisting the aspirations of Putin who hopes to regain the lost glory of the erstwhile USSR.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the conduct of international affairs, there are numerous references with regard to regimes that violate democratic norms such as evil axis, rogue regimes, hostile regimes or least responsible states. Countries that fall under this infamous category include Iran, North Korea, Syria and

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Venezuela and are invariably referred to as exporters of bloodshed and chaos. Surprisingly, one country with a similar track record that has escaped the scanner of world attention is Belarus ruled by Alexander Lukashenko, who continues to use an aggressive policy violating all laid-down norms both at home and abroad. Despite his domestic legitimacy being badly shaken, the international community apparently seems to tolerate the mistreatment meted out to the people by Lukashenko regime and flouting of the law by acts of aerial terror or migrant dumping on neighbours that he seems to view as hostile. The law enforcement psychology and the rule-based order theories propounded by major powers have spared Belarus the attention it deserves for corrective treatment. The apparent cause for this world apathy is the unstinted support offered to Belarus by Russia, a military powerhouse. The Russians, though see Lukashenko as an asset with limited benefit, are not averse to using him as an ideal proxy to weaken the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and the European Union (EU). Barring token sanctions without teeth in the penalties and loud rhetoric, no substantive action has been taken against Belarus by major powers as Belarus quietly fades away from the news and the world grows indifferent. Lukashenko's boldness is undoubtedly due to Russian backing and clearly shows that nations that have the support of a major military power can get away with anything contrary to fundamental laws.

The rationale of the arguments being put forward on paper is to amplify that smaller nations ruled by unpopular dictators, or military regimes can flex their muscles and threaten larger democracies if they have the support of another larger military power. The case of Poland, which faces an immigrant crisis in its borders perpetuated by Belarus, and India facing terrorists in its borders sponsored by Pakistan are classic examples as both these countries are supported by Russia and China respectively. As a consequence, democracies could face severe headwinds if such acts of brazen violation remain unchecked as there are no fail-safe protocols in place.

This article brings out that while in the grip of the Russians, Belarus can severely dent democratic norms and create disorder. It highlights the Russia–Belarus military fusion; Belarus trying to create its own path to highlight its importance; its quelling of democratic norms; and the future trajectory of Belarus's relationship with Russia highlighting some of its brazen finger wagging attempts at undermining international rules and regulations. The China–Pakistan consonance is quite similar to Belarus–

Russia as both Russia and China's involvement exceeds knowledge and crosses into participation.

#### **BELARUS: A FACT CHECK**

Belarus was a part of the former USSR and became independent in 1991 after the disintegration of the giant communist state. It is a landlocked country that borders Russia in the northeast, Ukraine in the south, Poland in the west, and both Lithuania and Latvia in the northwest and encompasses an area of 2,08,000 sq. km, enjoying the distinction of being the largest landlocked country in Europe. A population census in 2022 ascertained that Belarus has a population of about 9.4 million people.<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Lukashenko was elected as the country's first President in July 1994 and has been ruling the country since then, keeping it in his vice-like grip. It is pertinent to note that Lukashenko held and retained posts in the erstwhile Soviet Army and the communist youth organisation Komsomol when Belarus was part of the erstwhile USSR. A seasoned politician, Lukashenko got elected to the parliament in the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990 and was the sole deputy to oppose an agreement that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Belarus was the most loyal Republic in the erstwhile USSR pledging unflinching allegiance to the Soviet Union. It was in 1996 that Lukashenko coaxed Belarusian voters to accept constitutional amendments that offered enhanced powers and broadened the clout of the presidency. When the Western nations promptly criticised the move, Lukashenko retaliated and temporarily expelled the American and EU ambassadors.<sup>2</sup>

Even after attaining independence, Belarus continues to preserve its political and economic ties with Russia in comparison to all the other former Soviet republics. To cement the ties further, both Belarus and Russia signed a treaty on a two-state union on 8 December 1999, envisioning greater political and economic integration, which intended to conceive a USSR-like confederacy with an analogous regime, currency, flag and army.<sup>3</sup> The treaty sought cooperation in the spheres of foreign policy, defence, social and economic policies with the aim of setting up a unified parliament and a single currency in the future. Though the treaty was signed in 1999, it could not be ratified due to lingering differences between the two countries on multiple issues and hence the treaty merely exists on paper. The treaty commits that the two signatories merge into a confederate state but Russia was wary of the treaty which was signed

by an ailing Boris Yelstin and Lukashenko as it had all the ingredients to worsen the economic situation of Russia. For Yelstin it was only symbolic and a gesture of defiance to the West. Lukashenko pretended to go ahead with the treaty, but in reality stalled the merger, and used it over the last two decades to milk the Russians for billions of loans, preferential trade practices and fringe benefits for scores of Belarusian blue-collared labour working in Russia. It is also a fact that Belarus itself was deeply divided over the integration as it feared that it would infringe on the country's identity. The Belarusian public opinion has been undivided and against any integration of the two states. The spontaneous outburst of dissatisfaction and subsequent protests witnessed in December 2019 over the proposed integration were also surprisingly supported by Belarusian opposition parties namely the Christian Democrats and United Civic Party.<sup>4</sup>

However, Belarus remains a close political and military ally of Russia, and is perceived by the latter as a decisively critical buffer abutting the EU and NATO. Russia has demonstrated repeatedly that it would go to great lengths to ensure that Belarus remains within its sphere of influence and a vital cog to its strategic bandwidth. When Russia was facing severe sanctions imposed by the West, Belarus effectively played the role of a middleman by importing goods from the EU and re-exporting them to Russia and vice versa, thus rendering geopolitical favours to Russia. This largely helped Russia to tide over a severe crisis it was facing. In return, Belarus was offered sizeable financial and unwavering political support by Russia.

#### RUSSIA'S STRATEGY

The Russians have formulated a strategy in pursuance of its intended goals of regaining supremacy and aptly termed it as the 'Strategy of Active Defense'. Moscow is fully aware that a prolonged war with the Western nations will neither be economically nor militarily feasible. It would also be foolish to attempt a direct confrontation with NATO. It has hence embarked upon the above-mentioned policy, which primarily focusses on undermining the Western nations' capability and willingness to defend itself from a focussed onslaught. To achieve this objective, Russia has adopted a stratagem of permanent mental conflict with the West, whereby individual NATO members are identified, bullied and intimidated from outside and destabilised from the inside. Poland, Latvia and Lithuania have been continuously bearing the brunt of the

Russian intimidation tactics. Ukraine, though not a NATO member but perceived to be close to the West, is constantly hounded through an array of grey warfare tactics. All this has been going on even when the Russians are not openly challenged by the NATO as their decision-making capabilities are compromised and NATO denied any fruitful military options for defence. Moscow exerts a wide-ranging overt and covert, non-military and military instruments in a coordinated way, perfectly tailored for peacetime, crisis and war. To achieve this, Russia uses various proxies and allied countries as its cat's paw. Belarus features largely in the Russian strategic vision and hence it becomes an important cog in the Russian strategic wheel.

#### **RUSSIA–BELARUS: MILITARY FUSION**

Belarus has maintained close military ties and has been a steadfast ally of Russia ensuing the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and military cooperation between the two countries has been close thereafter. This relationship has stood the test of time even when the Belarusian President showed interest in the West on a number of occasions. The 2002 military doctrine of Belarus unequivocally emphasises the principle of collectivity and a military cooperation with Russia as the primary guarantor of security and defence of the country.<sup>5</sup>

The Belarusian military inventory is primarily of Russian origin and Belarusian firms also complement it by producing a number of weapon components that Russia cannot singularly manufacture. It supplies Russia with military equipment such as optics, electronics, command and control systems, etc. The military training in Belarus, one of the most essential ingredients in moulding the defence personnel, is provided by Russia as there aren't many military training institutions in Belarus. The military-to-military ties between the two nations have always been warm and cordial. Russia maintains two vital military bases on Belarusian soil—a long-range radar, and a naval VLF signal transmission station used to communicate with Russia's submarines at Vileyka and Missile Attack Early Warning System site in Hantsavichy. The ongoing establishment of a training centre in Hrodna is part of a broad Russian military policy aimed at expanding the Russian military footprint in Belarus.<sup>6</sup>

The Russian Air Force planes are offered the facility of operating from the military airports in Belarus; the sole rider being that these planes are not authorised to spend more than 24 hours in Belarusian airspace. The Belarusian province and its armed forces have been factored as integral

parts of Russia's A2AD (anti-access area denial) capabilities. It is also realistic to expect that the dominant majority of Belarusian forces would actively cooperate with Russian forces, particularly in coordinating their operations with the use of Russian A2AD assets.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Russians have effectively ensured that Belarus would firmly be in its strategic stranglehold in future operations against the Baltic States.

#### BELARUS'S BALANCING ACTS

Russia plays a dominant role in fuelling the Belarusian economy by supplying subsidised crude oil at lower than market prices. Belarus, in turn, refines the crude oil and sells it internationally. The accruing profit accounts for a sizeable part of Belarus's gross domestic product and this represents almost 15 per cent of the country's GDP and its exports to Russia amounts to 41 per cent of its total exports. This is a staggering percentage and Russia undoubtedly wields a decisive hand in the Belarusian future.<sup>8</sup> Belarus was also the charter member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the associated Customs Union, which later became the Eurasian Economic Union. In addition to these affiliations, the two countries have a special bilateral integration structure, termed as the Union State.

Lukashenko quickly realised that Belarus's increasing economic and military dependence on Russia had become a major problem as the strings attached began infringing on his country's political system. In 1998, the Belarusian president painted himself as the precursor of defiance to Western expansionism and joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). There is no doubt that NAM played an important role in facilitating to diversify the foreign policy of Belarus with other member nations, but could not iron-out the onerous task of equipoising the intimidating effect imposed by the West and Russia on it. The apparent purport of NAM membership only amplifies the fact that the membership merely contributes to Belarus's strategic intention to become and remain a neutral state, as recorded in its national strategic concepts and doctrines.<sup>9</sup>

The Russians demanded unwavering geopolitical loyalty from Belarus, which took a steep downside and began evaporating after Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, and President Lukashenko's strong willed refusal to recognise the sovereignty of the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Clearly, he did not want to be seen as a vassal state and tried to flex his muscles in standing up to Russia. It was in 2008 that Lukashenko in a reversal of foreign policy tilted towards

the West, a first by itself, and Belarus was accepted into the folds of EU's Eastern Partnership in 2009.<sup>10</sup> The apparent cause for this dabbling was the Russia–Georgia War, which clearly highlighted that Russia would never hesitate to use military force in a dispute with a neighbour. Belarus's war of words and differences with Russia reached its peak in the summer of 2010 when the Russian television channel NTV beamed a limited series documentary titled *Krestny Batka*, and the programme portrayed the Belarusian president as a tyrant. In order to counter these Russian allegations, the Belarusian strongman also strived to enhance diplomatic relations with the West striking a conciliatory note by releasing political detainees, slackening media restrictions, and playing host to the members of the NATO.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the lopsided capability and equations between the two nations, Lukashenko in a battle of wills in March 2014 opposed Russian annexation of Crimea and was also critical of the war waged by Russia against Ukraine and dubbed it as a dangerous precedent. This was primarily to ensure that Lukashenko does not continue getting dubbed by the West as the 'Europe's last dictator'. Belarus has also resisted Russia's push for a unified state.

The annexation of Crimea and subsequent amalgamation into Russia placed Belarus in a seemingly problematic position, as it had to air its stance in the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 62/282 on 27 March 2014, and after a great deal of wavering was among the 11 nations which voted against the resolution, thus favouring Russia. However, the Russians were not amused as Belarus continued giving statements condemning the Russian annexation of Crimea and managed to walk a tightrope between the West and Russia.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, Belarus also angered Russia when it refused to play host to a Russian air base.<sup>13</sup>

These actions greatly angered Kremlin, but it was forced to maintain a guarded silence due to Russia's desperate need for an ally at that critical juncture. It is but true that Belarus is a dependable partner, though at times an irritating one too, in Europe as most of the former Soviet republics have made political overtures and alliances with the West. The Russians were bidding for time and the 2020 Belarusian elections proved to be a God-sent opportunity for them.

#### BELARUS'S DEMOCRACY DEFICIT

Lukashenko proclaimed victory in all the five consecutive national polls post 1994, despite repeated calls that the elections were unfair.

He brushed this as conspiracy mongering and has been suppressing all legitimate calls for democratic reforms after he secured a landslide win in a farcical election in July 2020. This had led to massive street protests in the capital city Minsk and the uprising was crushed with brute force using the justice system that he had effectively weaponised. A number of journalists, opposition leaders and protesters were jailed indiscriminately thus inviting the wrath of the EU, leaving Lukashenko with little choice but to seek the help of the Russians in this most vulnerable period of his authoritarian rule.<sup>14</sup>

The brutal handling of all protests ensured that Belarus stood completely isolated from the Western nations which had deplored the repeated glaring contempt by the Belarusian regime of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of its own people. The post-election situation put an abrupt end to Belarusian foreign policy's manoeuvring between East and West. Further, the economic and social isolation had forced Lukashenko to seek Russia's support on the latter's terms leaving him with very little manoeuvring space. This self-created unsavoury situation forced Lukashenko to remove the neutrality clause from Belarus's Constitution in July 2021, thereby overtly exhibiting his total constancy to Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin, a prominent critic and opponent of 'colour revolutions' that he perceives as orchestrated by the West against pro-Russian regimes such as Ukraine's pro-Western Orange Revolution, and the Pink Revolution of Kyrgyzstan,<sup>15</sup> publicly supported Belarus's decision of removing the neutrality clause.

#### WAY AHEAD

The removal of neutrality clause was the first step as a pay-back for the incurred debt for Russia's unwavering support to the Lukashenko regime at a critical moment in August 2020. Belarus has thus relinquished all obligations to the West and has committed its involvement to Moscow's strategic priorities. It requires little emphasis that Belarus is of significant strategic importance to Russia, as it plays the role of a strategic buffer separating Russia from NATO's eastern flank, thereby ensuring that the potential threat is kept away from Moscow.

On 13 September 2021, the presidents of Russia and Belarus made an announcement of grandiose plans towards deeper economic integration under the slogan of 'two countries, one economy'. The current appointment of the veteran diplomat Yevgeny Lukyanov as Russia's ambassador to Belarus is a significant step in Russia's geopolitical

geometries.<sup>16</sup> It is pertinent to mention that Lukyanov has extensive experience in banking and finance as well as an apparent background as a foreign intelligence officer in the Soviet KGB and is a trusted Putin man. This is a clear indicator that Russia seeks to gain control over the Belarusian economy.<sup>17</sup>

The Russian company *Uralkali*, fully owned by the Kremlin-connected oligarch Suleiman Kerimov, is ostensibly trying to take control of the giant Belarusian potash producer Belaruskali; and the Russian chemical producer *Uralkhem*, owned by the Belarusian-born Russian citizen Dmitri Mazepin, is reportedly attempting to acquire the major Belarusian fertilizer company Hrodna Azot.<sup>18</sup> Belarus is among the world's largest potash-producing nations, ranking just behind Canada, and produces approximately 12 million tonnes per year of the potassium-rich fertiliser. This by itself accounts for about 20 per cent of the global supply. Russia is fully aware that any sanctions imposed on the exports of potash could elicit a global slump in the fertiliser and agriculture markets and could have an expansive impact on the global food security.<sup>19</sup> The Western nations would hesitate in imposing sanctions against the potash industries, which would be an economic windfall for the Russians.

#### FIRMLY IN THE RUSSIAN ORBIT

The reasons why Lukashenko agreed to deepen integration with Russia at this juncture can be easily ascertained. The Belarusian president, on account of his own actions of systematically crushing protests and jailing opposition leaders, had become overly dependent on Russia, following the protests over the disputed elections of 2020 and the Western nations' quick response with sanctions. Russia was willing to commit its troops and confirmed that it would use force if required, thereby affirming its aim of keeping Lukashenko in power.<sup>20</sup> The looming likelihood of a 'soft annexation' of Belarus by Russia, with Lukashenko clinging on to power while the Russians systematically wrest control of Belarus's economy, foreign policy, and security is pretty high. It only helps the Russians that a morally bankrupt and powerless Lukashenko certainly offers innumerable advantages.

The Russians had their own reasons in backing Lukashenko despite the threat of becoming increasingly unpopular in Belarus. The Russians did not want a sudden change in the leadership of Belarus as there was always a nagging and a dangerous possibility of the new regime opting to go out of the Russian orbit like Ukraine. This unthinkable happening

can heavily dent Putin's prestige domestically and can even embolden local dissidents in Russia.

Russia's unstinted support to Belarus has certainly produced some immediate dividends. The backing ensured the aversion and postponement of the collapse of Lukashenko regime. When viewed under the strategic prism of Russia, it is a nightmare scenario for Putin to see a dictator being overthrown by the masses right at the doorstep of Russia and democracy gaining a new and a strong foothold. Furthermore, Russia would definitely be in a position to tighten its stranglehold on Ukraine by methodically increasing its encirclement through Belarus by garrisoning troops close to the Ukrainian capital. Russia further uses Belarusian territory to monitor military activity in Western Europe.

The Russian electorate are fond of 'geopolitical gifts', and Kremlin is giving the impression that Russia is 'slowly taking over' Belarus.<sup>21</sup> This would further strengthen Putin's ratings domestically at a time when his actions are under a microscopic scrutiny at home. Further, the immense strategic gains for Russia in maintaining a hold over the post-Soviet space and bordering NATO countries of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia cannot be underestimated.

#### BELARUS'S ACTS OF RECKLESSNESS

##### **Aerial Terror**

The recent acts of Belarus over the last few months smack of recklessness and new-found confidence over the assured support by Russia. The first was an act of aerial terrorism perpetuated on a civilian airliner in May 2021 when a Ryanair, a low-cost Irish airline, Flight FR4978 was on route between two EU capitals (Athens and Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania) when it was intercepted by a fighter jet from Belarus. The aircrew were given instructions to divert the aircraft to Minsk, which was not their official stopover. Interestingly, on board the aircraft, in addition to the 171 passengers and crew, was Roman Protasevich (a 26-year-old journalist from Belarus), a prominent critic of Lukashenko, and his girlfriend Sofia Sapega (a Russian national), who were both forcibly removed from the plane by Belarusian officials. The aircraft was allowed to take off after this unscheduled layover of over six hours. The incident drew widespread criticism from the international community, government officials of various nations as well as the management of Ryanair. This reckless act by Belarus was rightly described as combinations of state-sponsored hijacking, air piracy and kidnapping.<sup>22</sup>

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), an agency of the United Nations, condemned the act and came out publicly that Belarus had breached the Chicago Convention, of which it is a signatory. This Convention came into vogue on 7 December 1944, and is also referred to as the Convention on International Civil Aviation. Article 3 of this Convention clearly states: 'States must refrain from resorting to the use of weapons against civil aircraft in flight and that, in case of interception, the lives of the persons on board and the safety of aircraft must not be endangered.'<sup>23</sup> By despatching a MiG-29 fighter aircraft equipped with air-to-air missiles, primarily meant for military operations, to intercept a civilian aircraft with civilians on board, the authorities in Belarus 'used weapons' contrary to laid-down rules, thereby breaching the Convention. In a swift response to this act of aerial terror, the EU placed a blanket ban on Belarusian air carriers from operating from EU airports and flying over its airspace.

However, it is to be remembered that Belarus is not the first country to breach this Convention as there have been some incidences of similar nature in the past, involving other nations as well. The US, for instance, has always been known to show scant disregard to the laid-down laws to suit its own purpose. In October 1985, four US Navy F14s intercepted a chartered Egypt Air flight flying from Egypt to Tunisia, which had on board four members of the militant Palestine Liberation Front, a proclaimed terrorist organisation which was found to be involved in a cruise ship hijacking that left an American citizen dead. Likewise, in February 2010, Iranian Air Force fighter jets intercepted a plane mid-air owned by the Kyrgyzstan Company Istok-Avia. The aircraft was bound to Bishkek from Dubai and was forced to land at Iran's Bandar Abbas airport, where the Iranian authorities forcibly took two passengers off the plane, including Abdolmalek Rigi, a leader of the Sunni militant movement Jundallah wanted in Iran for terrorist bombings.<sup>24</sup>

In July 2013, under the Barrack Obama administration, Bolivian President Evo Morales, flying in a Bolivian Presidential aircraft Dassault Falcon 900 FAB-001 from Moscow to La Paz, was forced to land in Austria due to a sustained pressure exerted by the US administration on a faulty intelligence that US fugitive Edward Snowden was on board the aircraft. But contrary to the Belarusian air piracy, which involved fighter jets and bomb threats, the Bolivian flight was force landed by bureaucracy involving multiple countries.<sup>25</sup>

### **Illegal Migration Gateway**

The Belarusian authorities eased visa regulations for entering their country and facilitated immigrants from strife-torn countries like Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan primarily to push them into Poland, Latvia and Lithuania to create disturbances in those countries. These immigrants were given Belarusian visas, brought into the country in an organised manner, promised further easy transfer to the EU nations, were often on a one-way ticket on one of the many flights run by the Belarusian state-operated airline headed to Minsk, and were housed in government-run hotels. The apparent ploy by the Lukashenko regime was not to provide humanitarian aid and a safe haven for migrants, but to put pressure and to bring the EU to the negotiating table to lift sanctions imposed on Belarus.<sup>26</sup>

On 8 November 2021, at the Belarus–Poland border crossing of Bruzgi-Kuźnica, there were hundreds of refugees trying to forcibly enter Poland and were stopped by the Polish border guards. Belarus accused Poland of inhumanity, but to the contrary, the migrants were taken to the western border in large groups and forced to rush the border at gunpoint, giving them no chance to come back. Lukashenko has apparently used this human bomb on the advice of the Russians to accentuate this refugee crisis and put pressure on the three NATO nations and destabilise them. Russia accuses Poland of massing troops in its border with Belarus.<sup>27</sup>

### **Streetfighter State**

Lukashenko has offered vocal support to Russia's military build-up on the Ukrainian borders and has also allowed about four divisions numbering 5,000 Russian army personnel along with artillery and short-range ballistic missiles to be positioned inside Belarus region bordering Ukraine. He has also abandoned his country's neutral stance on the Ukraine build-up and has publicly endorsed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Belarus is also actively deploying its own forces and military hardware in its Ukrainian border in a manner that appears to be in coordination with Moscow's plans.<sup>28</sup> This extreme provocation by Belarus and the possibility of a multi-pronged Russian attack on Ukraine using Belarus looms large. This blatant act of allowing its soil to be used for an imminent attack is a grave violation of international norms and does not augur well for the region.

## FUTURE OF BELARUS

Under the present regime, Belarus is heading towards a downward spiral with its actions over the past year. By showing that it is not obligated to protocols, it has proved evidently that it is neither united internally nor networked externally. It also continues to remain on the crosshairs of the entire EU and may not be able to garner much support from neutral nations. By threatening to disrupt the supply of gas to the EU, which flows through his country, Lukashenko has only made matters worse. His advent of excess blackmails may prove counterproductive as Russia also needs its gas to reach the EU to remain economically resilient. Russia would back the Belarusian regime to a certain extent and would not hesitate to dump Lukashenko and make him a scapegoat.

The EU is already hardening its stand against Belarus and is drawing out plans to put in place an expanded legal framework meant to penalise individuals or countries involved in migrant trafficking, encompassing airlines, travel agencies and officials, which would entail banning their leaders from travelling and freezing their assets in Europe. One further measure being envisaged is a complete closure of the border, thereby denying any economic benefit likely to accrue to Belarus.

In the event of Russia launching an attack on Ukraine from Belarus, it will be treated as an act of war by the EU and NATO. The swift and decisive reprisals, both military and economic, may be very unsavoury for Belarus and may lead to a hasty ouster of Lukashenko. In addition, the possibility of Belarus suffering extensive infrastructural damage due to counter military action is a scenario which no level-headed Belarusian would be keen to comprehend at present.

If Lukashenko is ousted from power by the pro-democracy protesters, it would be unacceptable to Russia that the replacement government in Belarus would tilt towards the West. Russia would ensure that the emerging power in Belarus does not position itself as 'anti-Russian'. It might be prudent for the opposition movement in Belarus to separate domestic politics from emerging geopolitics and achieve a Belarusian democracy that does not challenge Russia's suzerainty. The Western promises of ushering democracy in Belarus can prove counterproductive and will lead to a military dynamic that bestows Moscow with a considerable sway over the political future of Belarus.

**RUSSIA–BELARUS AND CHINA–PAKISTAN: STRIKING SIMILARITIES**

Pakistan is to China what Belarus is to Russia. Both Pakistan and Belarus function as the cat's paw of China and Russia respectively. Pakistan–China is the only bilateral relationship, other than Pakistan and Saudi Arabia perhaps, in which Pakistan is happy to play the second fiddle and junior partner, a role akin to what Belarus is playing to Russia. The plain fact is that, for China, Pakistan is not just a client state, but a valued instrument to help contain India. Belarus is precisely doing the same for Russia in trying to expand Russian military presence in the region. Pakistan's army is already honeycombed with the Chinese military as the Belarussian army with the Russian military. China and Russia's open and blatant disregard of international rules and their penchant for bullying explains why they remain largely friendless powers but in need of a diehard vassal, a role which both Pakistan and Belarus are playing to perfection. It is a matter of fact that both Russia and China are countries with a deep vision and both look far ahead while making their strategic moves. It is important to note that Belarus and Pakistan are nothing but mere pawns in Russia and China's long-term goals that may be used or discarded based on necessity.

**CONCLUSION**

The Belarussian population deeply appreciates peace, which is directly due to absence of war and probably the older Belarussians as fait accompli may not be averse to Lukashenko remaining in power as long as he does not usher war at their doorsteps and forces them to live in a threat-laden environment. With Belarus deeply involved in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Belarussian populace is worried about the looming threat of a military retaliation on its soil. Belarus cannot now hope to get a kind of blind-blanket immunity from the West and must be ready to face serious consequences. The haunting memory of young Belarussians fighting for the erstwhile USSR, who were largely killed in Afghanistan at the behest of Moscow, has not faded from Belarussian memory.

Belarus is currently undergoing a deep political crisis and is facing a prospect too bitter to contemplate. The paternalistic framework buttressing the Lukashenko regime is both outworn and unsustainable. It won't be long before Belarus gets labelled as Europe's North Korea if it continues in the path chosen by Lukashenko. The fuelled instability in Belarus has all the ingredients to spill over into the Nordic–Baltic

region through refugees and economic disruption, and it could also have a cascading effect on other parts of Central Europe. Trying to get overly involved in Russia's long-term games would be detrimental to the interest of the Belarusians. The best path ahead for Belarus is a regime change even if that is orchestrated by Russia itself as Russia is mentally losing Belarus due to its continuing cooperation with Lukashenko. The Russians in order to stop their lowering popularity in Belarus may oust Lukashenko from power on culmination of the Ukraine war.

The use of soft power by the Western nations to affect a regime change is also a possibility. This may be achieved by showing solidarity and increased engagement with the people of Belarus and also bringing into force policies that make it undemanding for Belarusians to travel with ease and study in the EU. The most important aspect in the regime change is that the West will have to be patient and be prepared for a lengthy and painful transition.

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