Belarusian Defence Sector To Benefit From the Conflict In Ukraine

On 24 July, Russian Ambassador Alexander Surikov revealed Moscow's proposal to Minsk to take over production of several thousand new components used by the Russian defence industry.

Russian official openly stated that the conflict in Ukraine was the issue standing behind their offer. In June, president Poroshenko of Ukraine banned all forms of military technical cooperation with Russia.

Earlier this year the Belarusian leadership proclaimed its intent to reboot its national defence industry which by this point has exhausted nearly all of its Soviet potential.

But Belarusian manufacturers will hardly be able to serve as a substitute for Ukrainian suppliers to the Russian defence industry.

Moreover, Belarusian firms do not work exclusively with Russia, but have a number of other partners. Minsk has also a vested interest in continuing its cooperation with Ukraine in this arena.

Belarus' Military Export: Tip of Iceberg

According to the latest data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), from 2009-2013 Belarus' arms exports made up 1% of the world's total sales. The country even reached 16th place in the global arms export's rankings. However, Belarusian military-related exports have been declining from the 1990s.

According to SIPRI, in 2012, Belarus' total weapons exports
were worth just of $97m (with $69m in sales going to Azerbaijan and $28m to Yemen) – perhaps the worst year in terms of arms trading in nearly two decades. The situation improved last year, as exports rose to $338m (with $170m in sales going to China and $168m to Sudan).

Military analyst Alyaksandr Alesin, speaking to TUT.by, warned that military-related exports from Belarus might be be more substantial than is currently believed. Belarusian firms export few ready-to-use types of equipment monitored by international organisations.

They export mostly military electronics, command and control systems, optics, and other components for Soviet and post-Soviet arms and military equipment.

In addition, Belarusian firms focus on modernisation of old Soviet arms. Thus, they recently produced a low-budget version of an air defence system for a developing country by once more "re-modernising" a Soviet SAM system, the S-125 Pechora. A decade earlier, together with the Russians, Belarusian specialists modernised Egypt's Pechoras.

Up to 70 per cent of goods produced by the Belarusian defence industry goes abroad, according to Siarhei Hurulyou, Chairman of the State Military-Industrial Committee.

There is little internal demand for its domestically produced equipment, a result of its meagre defence budget. This makes the industry susceptible to external demand. The rise in arms exports last year immediately resulted in a 51.4% rise in production for defence industry.

Last but not least, the SIPRI almost never publishes data on Belarusian military-related exports to Russia, yet the bulk of Belarusian military exports make their way to Russia.
Silent Yet Efficient Cooperation with Ukraine

In recent months, top officials — among them Lukashenka and Hurulyou — have repeatedly spoken about the necessity of avoiding an Ukrainian scenario, one that entails a collapse of the national army after years of neglect towards defence issues.

Hurulyou stated that now national defence industry should be concerned first with supplying Belarus' armed forces with the most modern weaponry and maintain export levels. “Earlier everything was precisely the opposite: [first came] exports and [then] a little bit for the army.”

In April, Alyaksandr Lukashenka urged the government to develop its defence industries. He underscored that the potential of Soviet arms had been exhausted and its national defence industries should create new products. Belarusians, according to him, will start producing helicopters and aircraft.

Of course, Lukashenka said, Belarus will not be able to manufacture them alone but will need to work together with other nations. It should cooperate with Russia in this regard, but as the Belarusian leader added:

"Let's try to make arrangements with the Ukrainians so that we can try [to build new weapons] together... Likewise, the Europeans and other [nations] are today also interested in working with us."

Thus far, however, Belarusian defence enterprises have succeeded in cooperating only with the Ukrainians. Lukashenka referred to a helicopter production project in Orsha.
In 2012, the largest Ukrainian engines manufacturer Motorsich and Belarusian firm "Sistemy innovatsii i investitsii" came together to implement it. Last September, Orsha Aviation Repair Works started assembling modernised MI-8 helicopters.

Cooperation with Ukraine has been fruitful in other spheres of military production as well. In particular, Belarus and Ukraine have jointly developed the T38 Stilet air defence system, the Skif anti-tank missile system and its most recent modification – the Shershen.

because of disruption of Russo-Ukrainian cooperation and Western sanctions against Russia, Belarusian defence industry will likely gain new opportunities with Russia.

Currently, Stilet is being deployed in the Azerbaijani army, while the Skif – in the armies of Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

**Can Belarusians and Russians Be Partners?**

New developments in Belarusian defence industry would appear to have contradictory consequences for its own future. On the one hand, because of disruption of Russo-Ukrainian cooperation and Western sanctions against Russia, it will likely gain some new opportunities with Russia.

For instance, it is going to establish some aircraft production inside Belarus with the involvement of the leading Russian United Aviation Building Corporation (Obyedinennaya...
On the other hand, the strategy of national military industry development may collapse. Until now, Belarus has tried to position itself as being “in between” Russia and the West.

First, it closely worked with Russia, because without ties to the Russian defence industries the Belarusian defence enterprises would have immense difficulties in producing their own complete products for sale.

Second, Minsk has tried to enhance cooperation with any other countries willing to cooperate. Among them were some countries which have strenuous relations with the Kremlin, such as Ukraine, Georgia or Azerbaijan.

In due course, Belarus could have established a much more equal partnership with Russia and even achieve its own position of effective neutrality by pursuing this policy.

But now, new lines of confrontation in Europe may limit Minsk's opportunities to work with everybody. The Belarusian defence industry might become more dependent on Russia than it had ever imagined possible. Instead of becoming partners with the Russians, Belarusian firms risk becoming just part of the Russian military industrial complex.

If put before a choice – either to cooperate with Russia or others, Minsk for now will choose Russia and renounce other partnerships. Therefore, the West should not corner Minsk and force it into making a choice between the parties. In doing so, the West would undermine the prospects of Belarus as a viable independent state.