Will Azerbaijan help Belarus to become more independent?

On 8 October 2017, Defence Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Colonel-General Zakir Hasanov, visited Minsk. The visit lasted until 10 October. During the visit, Hasanov held meetings with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka as well as with all the senior military leadership of the country.

The Azerbaijani guest probably made an agreement with his Belarusian counterparts on widening military industrial cooperation and supplying Baku with “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems. Azerbaijan deems the new weapons necessary to balance an Armenian military build-up.

“Iskander” vs “Polonaise”

One should definitely pay attention to the structure of the visit. First, Colonel-General Hasanov met with President Lukashenka. The Belarusian leader’s words during the meeting were vague yet revealing. “I do not want to make excuses about the nature of our cooperation. I just want to say that our relationship does not in any case violate any international treaties or resolutions of the UN Security Council. We are sovereign independent states, and we are entitled to identify the areas of cooperation which correspond to the time and the needs of our countries,” stated Lukashenka.
Such statements hint at serious intentions of military-technical cooperation, particularly in the supply of Belarusian “Polonaise” multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to Azerbaijan. The arrangements have a certain logic: Armenia’s deployment of Russian “Iskander-E” tactical missile complexes on its territory has forced Baku to look for a symmetrical response.

The “Iskander-E” tactical missile complex can reach targets up to 280 km away. Armenia thus has a missile range that covers almost all of Azerbaijan. With the latest modifications, the Belarusian “Polonaise” system is capable of shooting to 300 km. This modification was presented during the ADEX-2016 military exhibition in Baku last year. Azerbaijan has also shown interest in Belarusian developments in areas of electronic warfare, radar systems, wheel chassis and anti-aircraft missile systems.
Azerbaijani oil

Having discussed the main issues of military cooperation with President Lukashenka, Colonel-General Hasanov spoke on more technical questions to the country’s top military leadership. On 10 October, the Azerbaijani Defence Minister signed a military cooperation plan for 2018 together with his Belarusian counterpart Andrej Raŭkoŭ. As is usual in such cases, the details of the plan remain unknown to the public.

On the same day, Colonel-General Hasanov met with Belarusian State Military-Industrial Committee Chairman Alieh Dvihalioŭ. In addition, Hasanov visited the Minsk Wheel Tractor Plant and the “Belspetsvneshtehnika” state enterprise, which, among other things, deals in arms exports. The Azerbaijani defence minister familiarized himself with the latest modifications to the MLRS “Polonaise,” as well as with air defence and electronic warfare means. At the final stage of his visit to Belarus, Hasanov held a discussion with Belarus Security Council Secretary Stanislaŭ Zaś.

It is also important to note that Secretary Zaś met with the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, during his visit to Baku on 27 September 2017. Once again, military and industrial cooperation represented the main topic of the meeting. Supposedly, the Belarusian security council secretary came with a proposition to Baku and discussed the details with President Aliyev. The following step was Zakirov’s visit to Minsk in order to present Azerbaijan’s answer and sign the documents.
While Baku mainly orients itself around military cooperation, Minsk is also hoping for the growth of economic relations between the two states. There is an assumption that the Belarusian military industrial complex might get financial support from Azerbaijan to develop and produce new weapons. With the economic slowdown Belarus is experiencing at the moment, such collaboration seems optimal for both states.

At the same time, Belarusian authorities are working to [diversify the inflow of energy resources to Belarus](https://www.bspnews.by/2020/01/28/belarusian-energetic-strategies-are-planned-to-diversify/). Previous deals to supply Belarusian refineries with Azerbaijani oil have been successful. Widening such cooperation is essential for Minsk against a background of continually worsening relations with Russia.

On the subject of propitious Belarusian-Azerbaijani projects in various spheres, one should remember that Lukashenka and Aliyev are on good personal relations. The Belarusian leader visits Azerbaijan as often as Russia and China, which means places high importance on ties with Azerbaijan.
Loud Yerevan, silent Moscow

The character of Belarusian-Azerbaijani relations raises serious questions in Armenia and Russia, who are Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) members along with Belarus. This situation becomes even more complex when the Belarus-Armenia relationship is taken into account. On the same day Colonel-General Hasanov began his tour of Minsk, Belarusian Special Operations Forces completed their maneuvers as part of the CSTO “Search-2017” military exercises, which took place on Armenian territory. This can serve as a canonical example of the Belarusian authorities’ much-touted “multi-vector foreign policy.”

But in terms of the Azerbaijan-Belarus relationship, one can expect harsh rhetoric from Yerevan. It is important to remember that at one time Armenia proposed to exclude Belarus from the CSTO. From the end of 2016 to the beginning of 2017, Belarus and Kazakhstan both attempted to block the appointment of an Armenian representative to the position of CSTO head. Supplying strategic weapons to Baku will definitely not make relations between Minsk and Yerevan any better.

Alexander Lukashenka and Ilham Aliyev.
Source: kp.by
One can’t expect Russia to publicly show its disapproval of Belarusian-Azerbaijani cooperation. Moscow’s options are to try to contain their partnership or to pressure Belarus. The reason for Russia’s indirect reaction is clear: Russia itself is the largest weapons supplier to Baku. But Armenian authorities seem to have ignored this fact. They can blame Belarus for destabilizing the region and undermining the national security of a CSTO member-state, but Yerevan will never make the same claims of the Kremlin. Indeed, especially not after having deployed Russian strategic weapons on its own territory.

The development of cooperation with Azerbaijan plays extremely important role for Belarus in the light of the latest Belarusian security agenda. After the failure to carry out an information and public relations campaign during the “West-2017” military exercises and a number of provocations from Russia, Belarus is trying to restore its image as an independent actor.

Thus, working together with Baku on strategically important projects should prove to the international community, including close neighbours, that Minsk is a true sovereign player on the international stage and a stable partner in the security sphere. Arguably, this is even more valuable at present than temporary economic benefits for Belarus.