

Minsk steps up contacts with Libya, Pakistan, and Iran

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2025 has seen a marked intensification of contacts between the Belarusian regime and eastern Libya, Pakistan, and Iran. In February, Libyan leader Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar visited Minsk, and over the following months relations deepened – in May, Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Karankevich and KGB chief Ivan Tertel travelled to Benghazi, and in late June a Libyan government delegation arrived in the Belarusian capital. In April, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visited Minsk, followed in August by Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian. In each case, talks reportedly focused on strengthening trade and investment ties.

Minsk's cooperation with Libya, Pakistan, and Iran is nothing new. For years, it has reflected one of the key paradigms of its foreign policy: the pursuit of a non-European alternative to relations with Russia and the West. However, none of these countries counts as a significant trade or investment partner for Belarus. Despite official rhetoric, the recent intensification appears to focus on military and security cooperation, as suggested by the involvement of representatives from the defence and interior ministries, as well as the KGB. These countries may also serve as sources of labour – with over 200,000 job vacancies in Belarus – but migrants could also be used to maintain pressure on the EU border.

Eastern Libya – military cooperation and an air connection

Officially, Haftar's talks in Minsk focused on 'humanitarian and social issues, as well as economic cooperation.' Among the gifts presented by Alyaksandr Lukashenka were miniature models of a tractor and a bus – most likely intended as a pointed gesture to underline the economic nature of the visit. Similar topics were discussed during subsequent meetings: in March, a Belarusian delegation signed six framework agreements in Libya covering areas such as agriculture, industry, and energy, including the exploitation of Libyan gas and oil deposits. During the return visit in June, the Libyan delegation toured key production sites in the Belarusian capital, including the Minsk Tractor Works (MTZ) and the MAZ truck factory.

The visitors also expressed interest in sending their citizens to study at Belarusian medical universities, as well as in purchasing hospital equipment. No contracts were disclosed, though both sides announced an imminent increase in trade. According to the most recent available data from 2021, Belarusian exports to Libya were worth only \$4.2 million, with no imports recorded.

More concrete arrangements were made in non-economic areas. Visa procedures were simplified – fees were waived, though the requirement to obtain a Belarusian visa remains. The head of the KGB attended the opening of the Belarusian House in Benghazi, which may

function as a quasi-consulate. In early July, the foreign ministers of both countries confirmed that they had discussed terms for establishing a direct air connection. Flight frequency remains limited for now (operated by Belavia using an Airbus A330-243 with a capacity of up to 268 passengers): two flights took place in May, four in June, five in July, and two in August. The connection is not listed in the official timetable.

Military cooperation is a key topic in bilateral talks. During the visit by Defence Minister Viktor Khrenin, Benghazi expressed interest in receiving support from Minsk for the overhaul of MiG-29 fighter jets, pilot and ground crew training, the delivery of spare parts, and the development of cybersecurity capabilities. Discussions also covered the potential involvement of Belarus in developing military infrastructure in eastern Libya, including army bases and the naval base in Tobruk. According to the Haftar regime, between 350 and 400 special forces soldiers from the eastern Libyan army are currently undergoing training in the Vitebsk region. A significant element of the training involves drone operation and the production of drone components using 3D printers. Former Wagner Group members remaining in Belarus are involved in the programme.

Pakistan – importing military training and exporting migrants?

During his April visit to Minsk, the Pakistani Prime Minister expressed interest in importing agricultural and construction equipment, along with buses. The prime ministers' talks were preceded by a business forum, which included discussions on increasing imports of Pakistani goods such as fruit and clothing. The Belarusian side did not hide its disappointment with the low level of trade – in 2024, bilateral trade amounted to just over \$50 million, representing only 0.06% of Belarus's total trade volume.

The marginal importance of economic issues was reflected in the package of bilateral agreements signed by Sharif and Lukashenka. These covered areas such as readmission, cooperation between interior ministries in combating crime, mutual training of police and counter-terrorism units, and military-technical cooperation. Two months later, the commander of Belarus's Air Force and Air Defence Forces, Andrei Lukyanovich, continued discussions in Islamabad on this latter topic. The talks covered pilot and technical personnel training programmes, as well as technology transfers. A further round of consultations in August, focused on planning bilateral military cooperation, signalled a continued intensification of military ties.

A separate issue – of particular importance to Minsk – is cooperation in the area of labour migration. The regime has expressed interest in recruiting skilled workers from Pakistan to alleviate the country's growing labour shortage. In this context, discussions during Prime Minister Sharif's visit included the potential launch of a direct air link between the two capitals. Following further lower-level meetings, Lukashenka approved in August a memorandum on bilateral cooperation in this area and authorised the Ministry of Internal Affairs to sign the final agreement.

At the same time, several unconfirmed reports emerged in the media of a sharp increase in visa applications at the Belarusian consulate in Islamabad. At the end of August, the interior ministers of both countries emphasised that future Pakistani labour migrants would undergo a detailed screening process before travelling to Belarus. This makes it likely that their transfer will begin in the near future.

Iran – visa liberalisation and joint development of Shahed drones

The visit by Iran's president was a demonstration of ideological solidarity between Minsk and Tehran in their shared resistance to what they described as 'unjust and discriminatory' Western sanctions. Leaders of both countries pledged to coordinate their positions in international forums, including the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (of which Belarus gained full membership in 2024). They also announced plans to sign a strategic cooperation agreement in the near future. Economic issues were addressed only in broad terms, with both sides expressing interest in areas such as agriculture, including the potential establishment of an assembly facility for Belarusian agricultural machinery in Iran. Trade between Belarus and Iran remains limited – in 2024, it stood at only \$113 million.

Among the agreements signed was a visa waiver for tourists and the reinstatement of direct flights on the Minsk–Tehran–Minsk route, with at least three flights per week. However, the central focus of bilateral cooperation lies in the military sphere. A joint interagency commission on military cooperation began its work in November 2023, and in August 2025 the two countries signed an agreement covering technology transfers and training programmes, although no further details were disclosed.

It is highly likely that Minsk and Tehran are cooperating on drone production technologies and electronic warfare systems. The Belarusian defence industry is reportedly seeking Iranian support to manufacture combat drones based on the Shahed-136 at facilities in Homel. In July 2024, the Belarusian army unveiled the Kochevnik combat drone, which appears to be a copy of the Iranian model. According to Ukrainian military intelligence, Iran may be seeking technical assistance to restore its air defence systems after recent Israeli strikes. It is also possible that Tehran is interested in acquiring Belarusian-manufactured 122 mm ammunition used by rocket artillery, or in relocating part of its defence industry component production to Belarus.

Real scope of cooperation

Talks between Minsk and Benghazi, Islamabad, and Tehran clearly indicate that bilateral military cooperation and defence sector collaboration are the main priorities. Each of these partners views Belarus as an attractive partner in weapons maintenance and modernisation. A notable training component is present in all cases, with the scope of security cooperation with eastern Libya standing out in particular – effectively forming part of Russia's broader support for the Haftar regime. Military contacts with Pakistan and Iran are also likely coordinated with Moscow.

The publicly highlighted economic aspects serve primarily as a smokescreen and play only a marginal role in practice. While some activity may materialise in selected sectors – such as the export of Belarusian agricultural machinery – logistical difficulties and the fundamentally different nature of African and Middle Eastern markets make any substantial growth in trade or investment unlikely. Similar challenges are evident in Belarus's recent attempts to expand relations with other non-European countries such as Nicaragua, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia.

A common feature across these partnerships is the migration dimension. Visa liberalisation and new air connections with Libya, Pakistan, and Iran introduced by the Belarusian side carry a clear risk of exacerbating the ongoing migration crisis along the EU's eastern border.