



BELARUS ARMS TRADE

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The events in Libya have once again put focus on Belarus as an arms exporter. According to the Congressional Research Service, Belarus has sold or delivered weapons worth an estimated US\$1.1 billion during in 1999-2006. A significant number of these sales went to state-sponsored terrorism, extremist groups or states involved in conflict. Belarus is also one of the top arms exporters to rogue states.

As the regime of Mr. Gadhafi launched a military offensive against its own population putting Libya on the brink of a civil war, Charter97.org reported that special envoy to Mr. Gadhafi, Mr. Abderrahman Seyid, arrived in Minsk on February 24 with a special request for arms supply. A report issued by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute went even further, when it claimed that Libya might have already received shipments of military equipment from Belarus more than one month ago. An Ilyushin Il-76 aircraft that left a military base near the Belarusian city of Baranovichi and landed at the Sebha desert airport in Libya on February 15, 2010.

All this happened after a recent request in the UN Security Council made by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to investigate Belarus arms trade due to an alleged shipment of three helicopters from Belarus to Ivory Coast, regarded as “a serious violation” of an embargo in place on the African nation since November of 2004.

Belarus and Weapons Export

Prevention of illicit and destabilizing arms transfers is a problem of significant concern for the international community. A number of initiatives have been introduced since the end of the Cold War to promote transparency and control arms sales at the United Nations. At the same time, there are many regional and bilateral instruments that have been signed with the purpose of guaranteeing the transparency of arms trade.

Eventually, these measures proved ineffective in preventing illegal arms trade. Belarus serves as an eloquent example of how to benefit from the shortcomings of the existing system.

Although the Belarusian government says it participates in the international and regional systems of arms control, enhancement of confidence and security-building measures within the UN and OSCE frameworks, the reality seems to be different.

Several factors determined the rise of Belarus as an arms exporter: a significant stock of arms that was left in Belarus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the criminal and corrupt nature of the political regime in Belarus, close relations with rogue regimes, and the military, political and economic alliance with Russia, and Belarusian international isolation.

Belarus has been involved in arms export since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Having been one of the most militarized entities of the USSR, it was left with a significant stock of weapons including T-80 tanks, helicopters, ammunition, anti-aircraft systems and spare parts of military hardware dismantled (according to the Treaty of Conventional Arms and Armaments in Europe). A large part of these weapons were sold to other countries in 1992-2001.

Though a high degree of secrecy in arms trade surrounds Belarusian activities, reports from official U.S. sources and intelligence analysts have shown that Belarus became a source of arms for rogue states and extremist groups, accusations that Belarusian authorities have fiercely denied.

According to the U.S. House of Representatives’ (H.R. 4436), Belarus Arms transfers Accountability Act of 2009, “Belarus has been a significant supplier of [weapons] to Palestinian extremist groups and to state sponsors of terrorism, such as Iran and Syria, as well as Mi-24 helicopters, artillery systems and Russian-origin armored combat vehi-



cles to the Government of Sudan, tanks to the communist regime in North Korea, and military aircraft and aircraft engines to Iran.”

The Role of Russia

Despite the depletion of armaments left by the USSR, Belarus is still active on the arms trade market. This would be difficult to understand if the strong military cooperation between Belarus and Russian Federation is not taken into consideration. An editor of Jane’s Air-Launched Weapons, Robert Hewson, stated in 2009 that “Belarus is the proxy route whenever Russia wants to deny it is doing the sale.” According to the H.R. 4436 Act, “the Government of the Russian Federation has offered no cooperation to the United States in dissuading Belarus from sales of its arms to state sponsors of terrorism and other parties in conflict, instead increasing its military cooperation with Belarus.”

There are cases like, for instance, sales of Mig-29 fighters to Peru and Algeria that did not reduce the Belarusian air fleet, which is a clear indication that re-export of Russian material has taken place.

Belarus and Russia cooperate closely militarily both on the bilateral level and within the framework of regional organizations such as Commonwealth of Independent States and Collective Security Treaty Organization. Belarus is given access to Russian armaments and military equipment and a possibility to buy it at the same price level as for the Russian army, including the latest state of the art products.

At the same time the Belarusian industrial complex mostly specializes in components and accessories for Russian weapons – aircrafts and antimissile defense systems as well as their modernization. Belarus specializes in the production of radio electronic systems and devices for various weapons types, computer-aided hardware and military-purpose systems including automated control systems for weapons and troops, electronic-optic and laser military-purpose systems, communications, components of missile and space defense systems, chassis for various types of hardware and repairs of different types of military vehicles and devices.

The well-known Belarus arms show MILEX (Military EXPO) is visited by senior officials from Iran, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela and China among others, while Russian state arms exporter Rosoboronexport organizes the exhibit at

the show displaying its state of the art production.

It has been suggested that Belarus and Russia compete on the market. But it seems more likely that Belarus and Russia cooperate for mutual benefit, taking into account different niches in the market and the sensitivity for Russian authorities of the issue of certain types of arms transfers.

Bilateral Military Relations with Rogue Regimes

During the last decade, Minsk has pursued policies of building closer cooperation with internationally blacklisted regimes.

Belarus-Venezuelan cooperation

Intense cooperation and contacts characterize Belarusian relations with Venezuela, a country that the U.S. Department of State determines as not cooperating fully with U.S. anti-terrorism efforts. Victor Sheiman, a close aide to Mr. Lukashenka, who heads a special commission on Belarus-Venezuelan cooperation, has been mentioned in documents of FARC on armament supply captured by the Columbian army. According to U.S. intelligence reports, there is evidence that some arms deliveries may have been destined for groups blacklisted for suspect activities. A military cooperation agreement was signed by the parties in September 7, 2006. According to Viktor Sheiman and the Venezuelan government it was worth US\$1 billion. Venezuela seeks to expand what the treaty covers, by Belarus helping with transfer of military technology and modernizing and servicing Venezuela’s anti-aircraft defense systems as well as production, updating, servicing, repair, purchase and sale of supplies and techniques for aviation, and land troops.

Belarus-Iranian cooperation

Belarus-Iranian “strategic partnership” has a significant military component. According to the UK-based Conflict Studies Research Center, Iran obtained from Belarus access to advanced technology and specialists to help develop its civilian nuclear power program. Parties also agreed on a military technology exchange in 2007. However, experts point out that it is impossible to evaluate the full extent of the military cooperation between Belarus and Iran.

In August 2010 the Iranian information agency Tehera reported that Teheran had bought two S-300 missile sys-



tems from Belarus and more from “another state.” The Fars information agency reported in August that Iran had obtained four such missiles. In January 2008 Jane’s reported that Teheran was in the final stage of negotiations with Belarus for the acquisition of two surplus trailer-mounted towed S-300PT (SA-10A ‘Grumble’) systems; the matter of disagreement was purchase price.

Belarus-Syrian cooperation

In 2009 the Belarusian defense minister made a statement in which he said that Syria was a key partner in the Middle East, and stressed the importance of intensification of military and technical cooperation between the countries. Agreements on military-technical cooperation were signed by Belarus and Syria. In April 2010 Syrian media reported the results of the session of joint commission on military cooperation in Damascus, stating that the two sides “had reached agreement on all issues of the cooperation between the military-industrial complexes and armed forces of the two countries.” The Israeli analytical center DEBKA has reported that the government of Syria was negotiating with Minsk on the purchasing of S-300 systems. Prior to that, in 2008 the *Washington Times* reported that Belarus during 2001 alone secretly sold weapons worth US\$500 million to Syria, which was subsequently used against Israel by Hezbollah.

Belarus on the African arms market

In 2006 Belarus and Sudan signed a military cooperation protocol. They had developed close military ties for several years, particularly over the supply of armored personnel carriers, the same type of which have been seen in Darfur (March 2007). On May 26, 2004, the government of Belarus reported that during 2003 it had exported to Sudan nine BMP 2 military vehicles, 39 BRDM 2 military vehicles, 32 122mm guns, including howitzers, all of Russian origin.

In November 2008, the Libyan head of state visited Belarus along with Russia and Ukraine to secure the best possible arms deals. Although no deals were announced, former Defense Minister Pavel Kozlovsky said that Lukashenka was likely to hide any potential military cooperation with Libya from public view.

”Warm relations with Lukashenko, and their status as world outcasts, can only help ... Belarus and Libya reach a deal,” Kozlovsky told the AP. In December 2009 Libya and Belarus signed a protocol of cooperation in defense matters.

Implications

Belarusian cooperation with countries that are sponsoring terrorism or under UN Security Council sanctions or are engaged in violent conflict is to be noted. Iran and Syria actively support Hezbollah and Hamas; Venezuela has frictions with Colombia and according to a number of sources supports terrorist groups like FARC; Libya has internal problems, at the same time as it supplies weapons to conflict zones in Africa, militant groups in Chad and Sudan; Sudan has been engaged in violent domestic conflict in Darfur. Furthermore, Belarus possesses nuclear material enough to produce several nuclear weapons; prior to presidential elections in December 2010 Minsk agreed to give them up by 2012.

Money Laundering

In addition to the above facts, it has to be noted that the secrecy of sales as well as the lack of transparency and accountability creates the possibility of making huge “black” profits that somehow have to be “cleaned.” Transparency International has pointed out that accurate accounting of the composition and volume of the world trade in weapons is a difficult task for a variety of reasons, including the secrecy surrounding the size of defense budgets, the large amount of money involved, and the prevalence of middlemen in transactions. While certain reporting is mandated under UN rules, such rules do not cover all military-related weapons sales and are not universally followed. The U.S. Department of Commerce estimates that corruption plays a role in half of the arms deals.

There is no direct evidence that revenues from arms sales are laundered by Belarusian authorities or some specific groups or persons. However, the corruption that Russian and Belarusian authorities are involved in, including alleged connections with criminal groups, gives commentators and experts ground to suspect money laundering. The connections of Belarusian authorities with the Austrian Raiffeisen Bank, which was accused of money laundering in Russia and which bought one of the banks in Belarus (Priorbank) in 2002, is a hint that money laundering could be a part of this business.

Moreover, in 2004 the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) under the U.S. Treasury reported that



the U.S. Government had evidence that Belarusian Infobank laundered money for the regime of Saddam Hussein. In 2001 the Libyan Arab Foreign Bank owned by the Libyan Central Bank bought 35% of Infobank. If this is the case, involvement in money laundering of Belarusian officials who are responsible for arms trading should be no surprise.

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