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# What Is Drawing Xi's China and Lukashenko's Belarus Closer?

**Abstract:** What are the primary drivers of the relationship between Xi's China and Lukashenko's Belarus? The present research paper uses the historical process-tracing method to provide an answer to this question. Furthermore, it uses quantitative data analysis regarding the economic intercourse between Belarus and China. It examines whether China's opposition regarding the unipolar American-led world order and Belarus's security concerns are the primary drivers of the relationship between Minsk and Beijing. The present article concludes that the congruence of beliefs and Minsk's desire to ensure survival are drawing the two countries closer together. China's new strategy encompasses Beijing's increasing participation in world affairs. China opposes the world order led by a single hegemon, the United States of America. In the interim, Belarus, a relatively weak state insignificant in the global balance of power, shares Beijing's beliefs about the desired nature of the contemporary world order. However, the Belarusian economy's condition, which relies heavily on external funding, does not allow the economic cooperation between Minsk and Beijing to thrive. China gradually increases its engagement with Belarus, yet it obscures its ambitions, for Minsk lies in Moscow's sphere of influence.

**Keywords:** *China, BRI, Belt and Road, Belarus, Lukashenko, multipolarity, world order*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In August 2020, a disputed election result became the spark that lit the Belarus Uprising. To this point, Alexander Lukashenko, President of the Republic of Belarus, has used security forces to hold his post (BBC News, 2020; Abdurasulov, 2020). Amidst this political turmoil, Chinese President Xi Jinping was the first leader to congratulate Lukashenko on his re-

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<sup>1</sup> The author wishes to thank her friend Amy Griffin for the feedback on an earlier draft of the present research paper.

election (Belarusian Telegraph Agency, 2020). In turn, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued the following statement: “We have noticed that there have been some complicated situations in Belarus, and as a good friend and reliable partner, we don’t want Belarus to descend into chaos and oppose outside forces creating division and instability in the country” (Global Times, 2020). Beijing’s reaction to this political turmoil was unsurprising. The Chinese leadership is “haunted” by the fear of instability and chaos, which remind it of the “Century of Humiliation” (Mahbubani, 2020; Khan, 2018; Zheng Wang, 2018). However, China’s reaction draws the scholars’ attention to the presumably “special” relationship between the great power, which challenges American primacy (Mahbubani, 2020), and the country, which is often referred to as “Europe’s Last Dictatorship”<sup>2</sup>.

Regarding the bilateral relationship between Beijing and Minsk<sup>3</sup>, considerable attention has been paid to economic ties. Jakóbowski & Kłysiński (2021)<sup>4</sup>, Iwanow (2020) and Adamczyk (2018) argue that they are minuscule in the context of China’s global trade and investments. Jakóbowski & Kłysiński (2021), Yao Jiahui (2017) Gronskiy (Гронский, 2018a), Iwanow (2020) Adamczyk (2018) identify a variety of problems linked to the given relationship. Specifically, the growth of Belarus’ deficit in trade with China and the absence of Belarus’ exports diversification, and the conditional nature of Chinese credits. Attention has also been paid to Belarus’ significant role regarding the Belt and Road Initiative, as it is a transit route to Western and Central Europe (Yao Jiahui, 2017; Iwanow, 2020; Jakóbowski & Kłysiński, 2020). As demonstrated by Iwanow (2020) and Adamczyk (2018), the bilateral relationship between China and Belarus in the political realm is most noticeable in cases of opposition to the universal concept of human rights and the “Taiwan issue”<sup>5</sup>. Meanwhile, military relations are, according to Adamczyk (2018), not robust, but, in Gronskiy’s opinion (Гронский, 2018b; 2018c), noticeable and fruitful regarding the cooperation in missiles development. Jakóbowski & Kłysiński (2021) and Iwanow (2020) pay attention to Russia concerning the bilateral relationship between the countries and argue that it is a catalyst of Belarus’s attempts to boost its cooperation with China (Marszałek-Kawa, 2011). Matsel (Мацель, 2004) offers an in-depth historical analysis, which focuses on the genesis and

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase, which reflects the authoritarian nature of Belarus’s government, is used by Western media (Pomerantsev, 2017), but also by Al-Jazeera (2019). In the scientific debate the word combination has been used in the most prominent journals (Marples, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Excellent reports exist on the relations between Minsk and Beijing. However, they are of informative character and might serve as a perfect introduction to this rather under researched topic (Шрайбман, 2014; Nizhnikau & Kaczmarek, 2020; Царик, Сивицкий, and Савков, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> The report written by Polish scholars Jakub Jakóbowski and Kamil Kłysiński is the most comprehensive overview of the relations between China and Belarus, which is available in English. The authors question the strategic nature of this relationship by arguing that it results in little and insignificant economic benefits for both parties.

<sup>5</sup> However, more empirical evidence might still be presented.

development of Sino-Belarusian political, economic, cultural and humanitarian ties in the 1990s and early 2000s and highlights the trust and increasing cooperation between the two countries. Tikhomirov (Тихомиров, 2019) analyses Belarus' foreign policy towards China and argues that since the 1990s, the Belarusian leadership has been going to great lengths to develop its relationship with Beijing.

The present research paper offers the analysis of the Sino-Belarusian relationship in the broader context of the countries' national interests, i.e., novel China's approach to world affairs and Belarus' evolving approach to its foreign policy. The present research paper answers the following question: what are the primary drivers of the relationship between Xi's China and Lukashenko's Belarus? The given research paper uses the historical process-tracing method to provide an answer to this question. It builds upon secondary and primary sources (such as press statements, news articles, and official documents). Furthermore, quantitative data analysis is used to examine the economic intercourse between Belarus and China. The given research paper examines whether China's opposition regarding the unipolar American-led world order and Belarus's security concerns are the primary drivers of the relationship between Minsk and Beijing.

The first section unveils China's novel approach to world affairs anchored in its new confidence. The second section explores China's Belt and Road Initiative as a crucial component of China's grand strategy, emphasizing Eastern and Central Europe. The third section unveils Belarus's multi-vectoral approach to foreign policy. The fourth section analyses the relationship between the countries in political, economic, and military realms. The last section offers a conclusion and discussion of research findings.

The given research paper is embedded in two international relations "paradigms", i.e., classical political realism<sup>6</sup> (Morgenthau, 2004) and social constructivism (Wendt, 1999). It is based on the assumption that national interest is the backbone of explanations of states' behavior. Accordingly, cooperation between states should be explained in terms of the congruence of interests. However, it is assumed that ideational factors should be considered, especially in China's case (Lubina, 2019; Johnston, 1995).

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<sup>6</sup> Hence, attention is paid to the statesmen, i.e., China's Xi Jinping and Belarus' Alexander Lukashenko, for they are the ones who act in the name of the states and define the states' national interests (see Morgenthau, 2004, p. 5) Furthermore, both leaders endeavored to consolidate power in their hands. Xi Jinping has been strengthening his grip over China in recent years: in 2017, his ideas were included in the PRC's Constitution and, in 2018, the presidential term limit in the PRC was abolished (Tiezzi, 2019; BBC News, 2018; Phillips, 2017). In turn, Alexander Lukashenko obtained nearly absolute power over the country as a result of the 1996 Referendum (Mironowicz, 2015, p. 127).

## The Chinese Dream

China's spectacular economic and military rise led to a heated debate on whether it would lead to an intense security competition between the emerging power and the established hegemon, the United States of America<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, the Chinese themselves view China's rise as a "return" to a "normal state of affairs" (Kissinger, 2012, p. 45) and emphasize the peaceful nature of China's development in the White Papers (see State Council, 2019). It is also argued that China is a "civilization pretending to be a nation-state" (Pye, 1992, p. 1162). Furthermore, the view of China being a culturally superior civilization is anchored in China's political culture, as, in the times of China's preeminence, the "Middle Kingdom" was perceived as the center of the world order by Chinese themselves (Góralczyk, 2018, pp. 437-462; Kissinger, 2011, pp. 8-13).

Another heated debate is on whether China challenges the existing liberal world order. John Mearsheimer argues that the rise of China resulted in the emergence of the bipolar world, which, in turn, led to the end of the liberal world order (2019). Alastair Johnston (2019) deconstructs the notion of "liberal world order". He argues that there exists a "world of multiple orders in different domains (...) rather than a single, U.S.-dominated liberal order" (2019, p. 12). He offers a descriptive analysis of China's support regarding the eight "issue specific orders" and claims that the level of support is different and varies between strong support in the case of the constitutive order, which is based on such norms as "sovereignty" and "territoriality", and low support in the case of the political development order, which includes such norms as political democratization and political liberties (Johnston, 2019). Meanwhile, China's new confidence and assertiveness are becoming more noticeable, constituting another contested issue (Johnston, 2013).

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping's speech during the "Third Plenum"<sup>8</sup> marked the beginning of "Deng's reform and opening" (Vogel, 2011, pp. 240-248), which resulted in the extraordinary economic growth of China<sup>9</sup>. However, Deng Xiaoping advised the future generations of Chinese leaders to obscure China's capabilities and goals (Góralczyk, 2017b). His political testament was "taoguang yanghui, juebu dangtou, yousuo zuowei" or "avoid the limelight, never take the lead, and try to accomplish something" (Vogel, 2011, pp. 713-714). Nonetheless, in the 1990s, China under Jiang Zemin began pursuing much more active foreign policy. In the decades that followed, Chinese decision-makers have criticized the idea of

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<sup>7</sup> Pessimists from three major schools of international relations (realism, liberalism, constructivism) emphasize the forces that push the two countries towards confrontation; optimists, on the other hand, identify the forces that enable cooperation between Beijing and Washington (Friedberg, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> The "Third Plenum" refers to the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which was taking place in December 1978.

<sup>9</sup> Deng's reforms were aimed at further modernization and development of the Chinese economy (Vogel, 2011, pp. 423-477; Tisdell, 2009; Kissinger, 2011, pp. 396-404).

hegemony as an obstacle and a threat to peaceful global development. They began to call for the building of the multipolar (not multilateral) world. Chinese leaders have also been articulating the idea of cooperation based on mutual respect for different paths of development (Mierzejewski, 2013, pp. 187-213).

Since the fifth generation of Chinese leaders, Xi Jinping – Li Keqiang, ascended to power in 2012/2013, Deng Xiaoping's "taoguang yanghui" was finally shed. Xi Jinping adopted a new global strategy based on the new assertiveness and confidence of China<sup>10</sup> and Beijing's increasing participation in world affairs (Góralczyk, 2017b, 2018, pp. 351-393; Economy, 2019, pp. 2-12; Brona, 2018). Furthermore, Xi Jinping connected the idea of the "Chinese Dream" with the concept of the "great rejuvenation of Chinese nation" and established two goals for the century. First, to build a "moderately prosperous society" by 2021. Second, to transform China into a "prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious modern socialist country" by 2049, the centenary of the PRC (Xi Jinping, 2014a & 2014b).

## **Rebuilding the Ancient Silk Road and Beyond**

Deng Xiaoping's reforms resulted in the extraordinary economic rise of China. However, in the 2000s, the Chinese government and business community realized that the Chinese economy was changing as labor costs increased, resulting in China beginning to lose its comparative advantages. Chinese economy began to show various symptoms of "over-accumulation" and "contraction". The symptoms include the declining capital return rate, overproduction, excess capacity, and increasing financialization of the Chinese economy (Xin Zhang, 2017, pp. 316-319). In Xin Zhang's opinion, these alarming signs indicate that "capital accumulation and expansion under the old economic models in China is no longer sustainable". Consequently, China was pushed to expand the geographical dimension of its capital accumulation<sup>11</sup> (Xin Zhang, 2017, p. 319). From the 1990s onwards, Chinese companies were encouraged to invest abroad by the Chinese government. In 2001, the "going out" policy was officially established, which led to the rapid increase of Chinese foreign direct investments (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 174-178).

In 2013, Chinese leader Xi Jinping brought the official "going out" strategy to a new level, as he announced the Belt and Road Initiative (initially One Belt, One Road). Xi's plan includes two components: the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. It is officially aimed at creating infrastructure, trade, investment, and human linkages between

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<sup>10</sup> Bogdan Góralczyk emphasizes that Chinese leaders began to refer to the relations between the US and China as to the relations between the great powers (2017b, p. 43).

<sup>11</sup> Xin Zhang offers the Neo-Marxist insight into the origins of China's Belt and Road Initiative. However, in the present research paper, it is assumed that national interest understood in terms of power is the main driver of China's foreign policy. Therefore, China's economic wealth is seen as a source of its military might.

Asia, Europe, and Africa. Specifically, on land, the BRI Initiative focuses on connecting China with Eurasia; at sea, the Initiative focuses on linking China with Southeast Asian countries (Czatzky, McBride, 2020; National Development and Reform Commission, 2015; Cai, 2017, pp. 2-3).

While China highlights the win-win face of China's BRI Initiative, it is argued that it is a component of China's grand strategy aimed at the "rejuvenation of Chinese nation" (Rumi Aoyama, 2016; Rolland, 2017). As maintained by Bogdan Góralczyk, the BRI Initiative is a geo-strategic project, which is congruent with two crucial geopolitical concepts: Halford J. Mackinder's *Heartland* and Nicholas J. Spykman's *Rimland* (2017b, p. 45).

Regarding Eastern and Central Europe, it had not been until the 2010s, specifically 2012, when 16+1<sup>12</sup> was introduced, that the region became a component of China's "going out" strategy. Before 2015, the Chinese approach to Eastern and Central Europe was not successful. In 2016, 16+1 was incorporated into the BRI Initiative. Subsequently, the formula was revived, and, thereupon, China managed to conceal its previous failures regarding cooperation with the region (Lubina, 2019, pp. 66-68). Since then, China has focused on economic cooperation between Beijing and Visegrád countries, i.e., Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. Hence, the countries became the beneficiaries of most Chinese investments (Vangeli, 2017, p. 115; Góralczyk, 2017a, p. 157). While the region is relatively small in terms of economic power, in Beijing's eyes, it is a potential "entry point" to the European market and also a "laboratory", which provides the Chinese enterprises with opportunities to master its adjustment to European regulations at a lower cost (Vangeli, 2017, pp. 103-105; Lanteigne, 2020, pp. 201-206; Góralczyk, 2016, pp. 296-299). Meanwhile, Eastern and Central European countries desire Chinese grants, loans, and investments, which might lead to positive structural changes, i.e., moving beyond the EU-dependent development model (Lubina, 2019, pp. 69-71).

In Eastern Europe, one country is unique, for it participates in Russian and Chinese economic initiatives, which have geopolitical implications. Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union<sup>13</sup>, while it also participates in China's Belt and Road Initiative. It might be argued that Moscow's and Minsk's grand projects are contradicting, for Russia desires to be a leader of the Greater Eurasian Partnership<sup>14</sup>, while China seeks to achieve regional preeminence. However, as maintained by Michał Lubina, a peaceful power transition has been taking place in Eurasia: "China is stronger, and Russia does not challenge that" (2017, p. 285). Moreover, in the late 2010s, Moscow gave up on balancing China and

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<sup>12</sup> China – CEEC (formerly 16+1, 17+1) is China's Initiative regarding economic cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries.

<sup>13</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union was established in 2015. It includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

<sup>14</sup> In 2016, Russian President Putin put forward the idea of a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" between the EAEU, the Commonwealth of Independent States, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran (Rolland, 2019, p. 9).

began bandwagoning it instead (Lubina, 2017, p. 288). Moscow does not question China's economic initiatives but instead "plays along" with the BRI (Rolland, 2019, p. 13). In 2015, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin jointly declared that there would be cooperation between the two countries regarding the two integration projects, which allowed creating a platform for a dialogue aimed at joining in/coupling the EUEU and the BRI (Rolland, 2019, p. 10). It is argued that Belarus might serve as a facilitator of "integration of integrations" because Minsk is an initiator and a vocal supporter of the given concept (Rinna, 2021, p. 86; Sputnik, 2018). Meanwhile, as Nadege Rolland nicely put it, "[l]ike Moscow, Beijing hopes to see a new Eurasian order emerge, free of Western influence and integrated to a degree, but with China, not Russia at its center. To preclude a Sino-Russian rivalry, the Chinese elites are willing to exercise self-restraint, show deference to Russia's vision for the region, and even let Moscow don the cloak of Eurasian leadership. What really matters is not the appearance of leadership, but rather the reality of power" (2019, p. 15).

### Lukashenko's Dilemmas

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Minsk's economic dependence upon Moscow predetermined Belarus' pro-Russian orientation. In the 1990s, President Lukashenko had been vociferously calling for the integration between Belarus and Russia. Thus, Russian decision-makers, who became convinced that Lukashenko's Belarus would be in the Russian sphere of influence<sup>15</sup> yet still driven by security concerns (specifically, the prospect of NATO enlargement), accepted the economic costs of maintaining its influence over the territory of Belarus. Between 1995 and 2000, steps were taken to pursue the integration between Belarus and Russia. In 1999, the Treaty on the Establishment of the Union State of Belarus and Russia was signed, whereupon, in 2000, the State Union between the countries was established (however, the sovereign states still exist under the given Treaty). In exchange, Belarus obtained economic benefits; specifically, Russia continued supplying Belarus with raw materials below the market prices. Furthermore, Belarus obtained access to the Russian market (Mironowicz, 2015, pp. 121-130).

In Rafał Czachór's opinion, what Lukashenko truly desired when calling for integration between Minsk and Moscow was to become the successor of then-President of Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, and to get power over united Belarus and Russia (2011, pp. 58-69, 109-110, 115-122). However, in 2000, Vladimir Putin came to power in the Kremlin. The new Russian leader changed Moscow's approach to Minsk and began exerting pressure on Belarus concerning the *de-facto* political integration between the two countries and the participation of Russian companies in the privatization of Belarusian enterprises. The

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<sup>15</sup> The spheres of influence stem from the situations, when "small and weak" states lie in close proximity to mighty states, resulting in them bandwagoning the great powers instead of endeavoring to balance mighty states (Walt, 1985, pp. 8-18).

Kremlin's endeavors fruited in 2007 Agreement on the takeover of Belarusian "Bieltransgas" by Russian "Gazprom". As a result, Alexander Lukashenko lost his trump card: the control over the strategic enterprise linked to the transit of Russian raw materials (Mironowicz, 2015, pp. 131-136). In the years that followed, Russia went to great lengths to take over the Belarusian enterprises to strengthen its control over Belarus (and decrease the economic costs of maintaining Belarus in its sphere of influence), which has resulted in rising tensions between Minsk and Moscow (Mironowicz, 2015, pp. 136-138, 141). Meanwhile, Belarus is highly dependent on the economic intercourse with Russia<sup>16</sup>, albeit opposes further political integration and seeks to maintain its sovereignty (Rumer & Belei, 2017; Шрайбман, 2019).

From 2000 onwards, amidst growing tensions between Minsk and Moscow, a gradual change took place in Minsk's approach to Russia: close cooperation and integration with Russia was replaced by the "multi-vectoral" approach to foreign policy (Czachór, 2011, pp. 165-177; Mironowicz, 2011, pp. 140-142). In 1997, Alexander Lukashenko mentioned the term "multi-vectorality" for the first time. However, before the early 2000s, the policy was simply directed at finding new partners beyond the division between Russia and the West. From 2000 onwards, the primary goal of the policy of "multivectorality" is to "balance" Minsk's dependence on the Russian Federation, especially on the Russian raw materials and trade with Moscow, while maintaining the "strategic partnership" with Russia<sup>17</sup> (Czachór, 2011, pp. 165-172, 181; Mironowicz, 2011, pp. 147-149, 157-158). However, Belarus' record on human rights<sup>18</sup> makes Minsk's cooperation with the Western powers highly unlikely. For example, both the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on the country in response to the government's reaction to the 2020-2021 protests (Psaledakis, 2020; Al-Jazeera, 2020).

## **The Mutually Beneficial Relationship?**

### ***Political Realm: The Congruence of Beliefs***

The genesis of the Sino-Belarusian relationship dates back to the early 1990s. In the eyes of Minsk, China was a rising political and economic power in the international arena. From

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<sup>16</sup> Minsk's dependence on Russia in terms of trade, credits, and energy supplies is still high as demonstrated by Leukavets, Klysiński & Heinrich (2017).

<sup>17</sup> As maintained by Eugene Rumer and Bogdan Belei (2017), Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine became another driving force of Minsk's diversification of its foreign policy.

<sup>18</sup> As reported by Freedom House, as of 2021, under the category of "global freedom" Belarus obtained 11 points, with 100 points being the highest possible score. Meanwhile, in the same report, China obtained a score "9". Human Rights Watch's most recent report (2021, pp. 84-91) also highlights the disrespect for human rights in Belarus, especially, during the above-mentioned 2020-2021 protests.



Beijing's perspective, Belarus was particularly stable in terms of politics and economy compared to other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. In 1992, the Belarusian delegation led by Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich arrived at a state visit to China. As a result, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established<sup>19</sup>, and the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation was signed (Мацель, 2004, pp. 32-36).

In 1995, President Alexander Lukashenko visited China for the first time<sup>20</sup>, and, thereupon, declared the need to develop the bilateral relationship between the countries as a priority of Minsk's foreign policy (Тихомиров, 2019, pp. 78-79). In the years that followed, common political interests were pushing the countries towards cooperation. Specifically, in the late 1990s and early 2000s<sup>21</sup>, Belarusian and Chinese officials were highlighting the countries' similar approaches to international affairs during state visits. In 2001, during Alexander Lukashenko's second state visit to China, both parties called for the emergence of the multipolar world and voiced their opposition against interference in countries' internal affairs (Мацель, 2004, pp. 68-84). Moreover, Belarus has been a vociferous advocate of the "One China" policy from the 1990s onwards: back in 1992, Prime Minister Kebich highlighted Minsk's support for the "One China" principle during the state visit. The principle has also been included in the Agreement on the Establishment of the Diplomatic relations (Мацель, 2004, pp. 94-96).

Since the ascendance of Xi Jinping, the bilateral relationship evolved in terms of official documents. In 2013, the Joint Declaration of the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was issued. In 2015 and 2016, the Joint Declaration of the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China on the Further Development and Deepening of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Featuring Mutual Trust and Win-Win Cooperation were issued, respectively (Белорусско-Китайский Межправительственный Комитет, n.d.; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

Both parties have called for the emergence of the multipolar world and questioned the universal idea of human rights. In 2013, Xi Jinping and Alexander Lukashenko agreed on the

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<sup>19</sup> Specifically, the Agreement on the Establishment of the Diplomatic Relations between the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China was signed (Соглашение между Республикой Беларусь и Китайской Народной Республикой об установлении дипломатических отношений, 1992).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Lukashenko had visited China before he ascended to power as the first President of Belarus in 1994.

<sup>21</sup> From 1995 onwards, President Lukashenko visited China 12 times (while holding his post as the President of Belarus). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Chinese senior state officials were arriving at state visits to Belarus as well. In 2001, Chinese leader Jiang Zemin visited Belarus for the first time. But it was not until 2015 that the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, visited the country (Белорусско-Китайский межправительственный комитет по сотрудничеству, n.d.)

need to promote the multipolar world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). In 2016, President Lukashenko emphasized the crucial role of China regarding the multipolar world by the following statement: “Only multipolar world [order] can maintain and save our planet from destruction (...) One of the pillars of multipolarity is China (...) Provided that there is to be powerful and strong China, there will be strong and independent Belarus” (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2016). A year before, he highlighted that Beijing was a significant player in the international arena and argued that Minsk could not be isolated given the fact that it had a strong partnership with China: “When we are criticized on the West for some of our positions, and here and there, there are voices on isolation, I always provide an example of our cooperation with the People’s Republic of China and state that there could be no isolation [of the state], provided that this state has good and, moreover, friendly ties with the People’s Republic of China” (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2015).

In 2013, Belarus and China also voiced their opposition against interference into countries’ internal affairs on the grounds of the universal idea of human rights. Instead, as the two countries announced, “the universal principle of human rights has to be congruent with the particular national features, every state has the right to choose the development path, which is consistent with the internal reality [within the country] and its historic and cultural traditions” (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2013а). In 2014, during the consultations between the countries’ Foreign Ministries, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus declared Minsk’s support of China on Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). During his state visit to China in 2016, President Lukashenko criticized the universal concept of human rights by claiming that “the root cause of all the crises is the disproportionate cultivation of individual rights and freedoms of humans, which contradicts the public interest (...) Under the umbrella of protection of human rights, the governments are being toppled, the military interventions are being organized” (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2016). In 2017, during the meeting between the leaders of China and Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko drew attention to the fact that the two countries established the Working Group in order to cooperate in combating international terrorism, religious extremism, secessionism and “colorful” revolutions (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2017b).

The countries’ opposition against the universal idea of human rights fruited in mutual support in the international organizations. In 2020, during the 44<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Belarus delivered a statement (on behalf of 46 countries) in support of Beijing’s policies in Xinjiang (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China, 2020). In 2021, during the 46<sup>th</sup> session of the UNHRC, Belarus delivered a statement that supported China’s measures regarding Hong Kong and emphasized the principle of non-interference in countries’ internal affairs, as well as highlighted that Hong Kong affairs were China’s internal affairs (Xinhua, 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). In response to protests in Belarus, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson declared that “China has always respected the development path chosen by the Belarusian people (...)”. He added that “[w]e have noticed that there have been some complicated situations in Belarus, and as

a good friend and reliable partner, we don't want Belarus to descend into chaos and oppose outside forces creating division and instability in the country" (Global Times, 2020)<sup>22</sup>. He also stated that "[w]e are confident that political stability and social tranquility will be restored under the leadership of President Lukashenko. China is ready to continue to push for in-depth development of China-Belarus comprehensive strategic partnership featuring mutual trust and win-win cooperation and deepen bilateral cooperation in all fields to the benefit of the two countries and peoples" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). In 2021, unsurprisingly, China voted against the resolution submitted by the EU to the UNHRC, which expressed concerns over the violations of human rights during the 2020-2021 protests in Belarus (CGTN, 2021).

Finally, Minsk's unequivocal support for the "One China" principle is a crucial component of the bilateral relationship because, in the eyes of Beijing, the island is "sacred" territory<sup>23</sup>. In 2006, Taiwan decided to close its representative office in Minsk in response to the Sino-Belarusian joint declaration, which opposed the island's participation in international organizations (Chang Yun-ping, 2006). Nonetheless, the same joint statements were issued in 2007 and 2013. In 2015, the same joint statement was issued. However, Belarus also vowed not to sell arms to Taiwan<sup>24</sup>. This unusual language regarding Taiwan's participation in international bodies is noteworthy because it is a specific feature of Sino-Belarusian joint statements (Beauchamp-Mustafaga & Drun, 2015).

### ***Economic Realm: The Numbers Say It All***

Before 1995, economic cooperation between China and Belarus was not dynamic. However, following Lukashenko's visit to Beijing in June 1995, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng arrived in Belarus. The result was both countries' representatives agreeing on the need to boost the bilateral trade between the countries. The countries' delegations were meeting regularly, and agreements were being reached (Тихомиров, 2019, p. 79; Мацель, 2004, p. 102).

In the 2000s, Chinese foreign investments, which intensified after announcing the "going out" strategy, began to flow into Belarus. In 2010, amidst the deteriorating economic situation in the country, Alexander Lukashenko began to treat economic cooperation with Beijing as a priority (Iwański, 2012, p. 2). In 2011, the breakthrough took place: the Great Stone Industrial Park agreement was signed between the two countries. However, the idea of establishing the

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<sup>22</sup> As China presented itself as a vociferous opponent of external forces' interference with Belarusian affairs, Chinese expert Li Lifan points out that this opposition might refer to the European Union (Lau, 2020).

<sup>23</sup> As maintained by John Mearsheimer (2014), the logic of nationalism and the logic of security are pushing Beijing towards the *de-facto* unification of Mainland China and Formosa.

<sup>24</sup> In response, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that the statement was "oblivious to international reality" (Shih Hsiu-chuan, 2015).

Sino-Belarusian joint park emerged back in 2010, during the visit of then-Prime Minister of the PRC, Xi Jinping, to Belarus. In 2012, the Presidential Decree on the China-Belarus Industrial Park was signed (Официальный Сайт Республики Беларусь, n.d.). The Decree stipulates that China-Belarus Industrial Park<sup>25</sup> is a special economic zone with a special legal regime (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2012). In 2013, amid the meeting with China's Prime Minister, Li Keqiang, Alexander Lukashenko highlighted that the economic relationship was the cornerstone of the China-Belarus relationship. He also stated: "China today is (...) an empire. It is a country, without which no issues are solved in the world, and it has to go towards Europe. We are ready to facilitate that, first of all, economically". President Lukashenko also added that "Belarus is particularly interested in attracting the investors into the China-Belarus Industrial Park" (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2013b). In 2014, the construction of the Park began (Официальный Сайт Республики Беларусь, n.d.).

In May 2015, during Xi Jinping's historic visit to Belarus, President Lukashenko voiced his unequivocal support for China's BRI Initiative. He stated that "Under no circumstances are we building our relationship and friendship against anyone (...) The proof is the implementation of the Silk Road project, which will provide a strong push for the development of all states" (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2015). In turn, Xi Jinping stated, first, that the two countries were supposed to support each other regarding their choice of the path of development. Second, according to the Chinese leader, the Industrial Park was supposed to be treated as a priority, so it would become a "pearl" of the Silk Road Economic Belt and an "exemplary of mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015b). Xi Jinping also emphasized Belarus' crucial role regarding land transportation between Europe and Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015a). In 2016, the President of Belarus stated that the Industrial Park was supposed to become an example, so "other countries would see that and will be willing to cooperate with China". Furthermore, he called for the "integration of integrations" (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2016). In 2017, the Presidential Decree on the Improvement of the Special Economic Status of the Industrial Park was signed, whereupon the list of economic benefits for the residents of the park was expanded (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2017a & 2017b). Specifically, the benefits include tax breaks, tariff preferences, and a simplified procedure of registration. As of May 14, 2021, the park has 68 residents (Индустриальный парк, n.d.). In 2019, Xi Jinping described the park as "one of the exemplary projects regarding our [Sino-Belarusian] cooperation" (Президент Республики Беларусь, 2019).

However, the tangible outcomes have so far been not consistent with initial plans, which stems from the fact that the Belarusian economy has not yet been transformed (Jakóbowski & Kłysiński, 2021, pp. 17, 25-26; Kłysiński, 2019). While Chinese investments into Belarus have been increasing during the last decade (Figure 1), they are still minuscule compared to Russia's investments in Belarus (Figure 2). The value of China's overseas investment and

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<sup>25</sup> The Great Stone Industrial Park is located 25km from Belarus's capital, Minsk.

construction contracts combined between 2005 and 2020 exceeds 2 trillion U.S. dollars. Meanwhile, in a given time, China's investment and construction contracts in Belarus were worth about 5.3 billion U.S. dollars. That constitutes about 0.0026% of China's overseas investment and construction contracts (American Enterprise Institute, 2020).

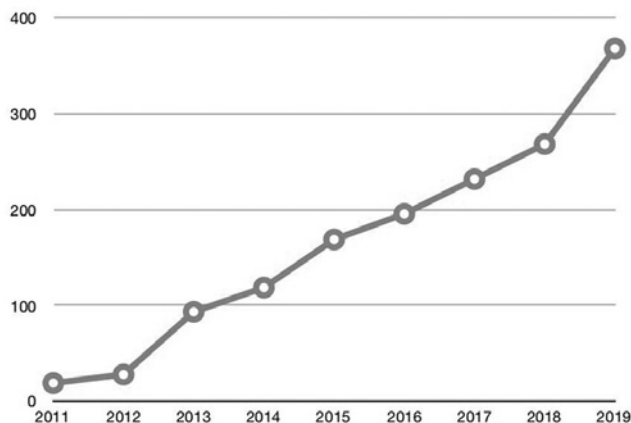


Figure 1. Annual Investment Inflows into Belarus from the People's Republic of China (2011–2019)

Note: all figures are in million USD.

Source: own elaboration based on the data from the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus (Национальный Банк Республики Беларусь, n.d.).

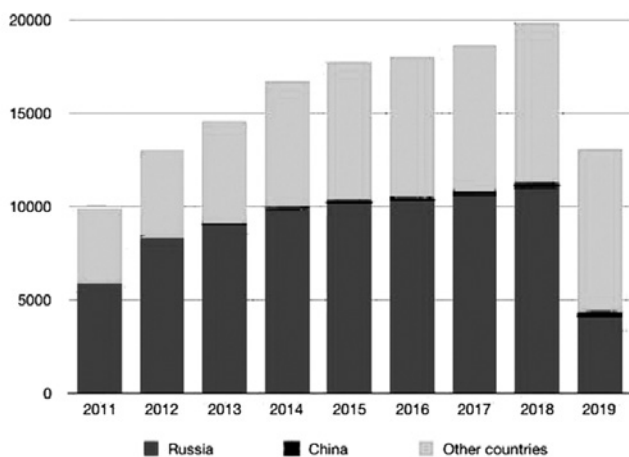


Figure 2. Annual Investment Inflows into Belarus by the Country of Origin (2011–2019)

Note: all figures are in million USD.

Source: own elaboration based on the data from the National Bank of the Republic of Belarus (Национальный Банк Республики Беларусь, n.d.).

While bilateral trade between Belarus and China has increased over the past few decades (Гронский, 2018), the trade statistics demonstrate that the figures remain relatively low (Table 1). In 2020, China's share in Belarus' foreign trade turnover was over six times smaller than Russia's share. However, during 2016-2020, China was the third-largest trade partner of Belarus, and its share has been gradually increasing (Таможенные органы Республики Беларусь, n.d.). Nonetheless, as reported by the Observatory of Economic Complexity, in 2018, Minsk's imports from China amounted to 5.66% of Belarus' total imports, exports to China were just 1.55% of Minsk's total exports (OEC, n.d.-a). For China, Belarus is even much more insignificant as a trade partner. In 2018, China's exports to Belarus constituted only 0.078% of Beijing's total exports; China's imports from Belarus were just 0.034% of Beijing's total imports (OEC, n.d.-b).

Table 1. The Selected Countries' Share in Belarus' Foreign Trade Turnover (2016-2020)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Russia	51,1	51,1	49,5	49,7	48,3
Ukraine	7,5	7,3	7,6	8,2	7,5
China	5,1	5,0	5,1	6,1	7,2
Other countries	36,3	36,6	37,8	36	37

Note: all figures are in percent.

Source: own elaboration based on data from Customs Authorities of the Republic of Belarus (Таможенные органы Республики Беларусь, n.d.).

Meanwhile, growing Belarus' trade deficit with China is pointed out as one of the challenges for the Belarusian economy (Jakóbowski & Kłysiński, 2021; Гронский, 2018a; Adamczyk, 2018; Iwanow, 2020). The graph below shows that between 2016 and 2019, the trade deficit has been increasing (Figure 3). Furthermore, the absence of Belarus' export diversification is emphasized. For example, in 2018, potassic fertilizers accounted for 54.3% of Belarus' exports to China, polyamides – 8.89 %, animal products – nearly 11% (OEC, n.d.-a). The problem stems from the fact that these products are not unique, making the Belarusian economy highly dependent on the prices on the international markets (Yao Jiahui, 2017, p. 125).

Regarding China's credits for Belarus, according to Gronskiy, "Minsk expects that Beijing will provide it with money. Belarusians are especially interested in credits and investments" (Гронский, 2018, p. 174). However, credits provided by China are conditional, which results in Chinese goods and services needing to be purchased by Belarusian companies if the credits are granted. Moreover, the companies might be obliged to use Chinese labor. Hence, it might be argued that these credits do not lead to the development of the Belarusian economy, but are instead aimed at facilitating the expansion of Chinese equipment into new markets (Гронский, 2018a, pp. 167-168; Mironowicz, 2011, p. 218; Тихомиров, 2019, p. 82). As demonstrated on the graph below (Figure 4), the Russian Federation remains

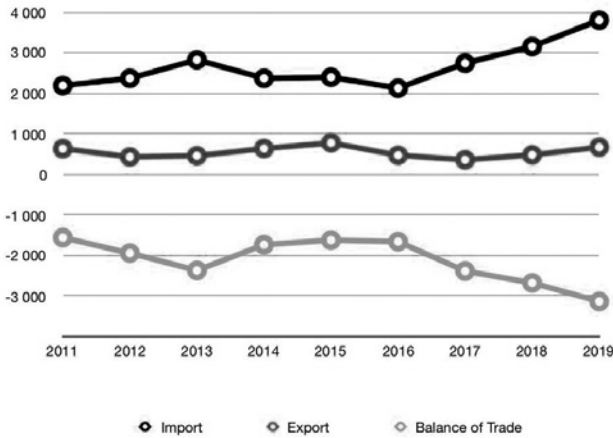


Figure 3. The Republic of Belarus' Trade in Goods with the People's Republic of China (2011–2019)

Note: all figures are in millions of U.S. dollars.

Source: own elaboration based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Republic of Belarus (Национальный статистический комитет Республики Беларусь, n.d. – a & n.d. – b).

the main supporter of Belarus in terms of credits. It is noteworthy that Russia is the main contributor to the Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, its credits should be taken into consideration while assessing Russia's role. However, the graph also shows increasing China's share in Belarus' external public borrowing before the COVID-19 pandemic between 2017 and 2019. Moreover, it is noteworthy that, in 2019, an agreement was signed between China Development Bank and the Belarusian government. Under the document, Belarus was granted a loan of approximately 500 mln USD before the talks with Russia on further economic integration between Minsk and Moscow (Brona, 2020).

Finally, Belarus's geographic position is pointed out as its advantage regarding its relations with Beijing and participation in China's BRI Initiative. The country constitutes the so-called "bridge" between Europe and Asia (Yao Jiahui, 2017; Iwanow, 2020; Jakóbowski & Kłysiński, 2020; Chan, 2018). As a result, strategic transport routes pass through Belarus, which Xi Jinping himself emphasized during the 2015 visit to Belarus (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015a). Specifically, Belarus Railways are crucial for transporting goods through Trans-Siberian Corridors, which are the most efficient for cargo transportation (Jakóbowski, Popławski, and Kaczmarski, 2018, pp. 38-46). Moreover, Belarus is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, which simplifies transporting goods (Jakóbowski & Kłysiński, 2021, p.

<sup>26</sup> Russia's contribution constitutes over 80% of the total contributions of all participants (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tadjikistan) (Евразийский фонд стабилизации и развития, n.d.).

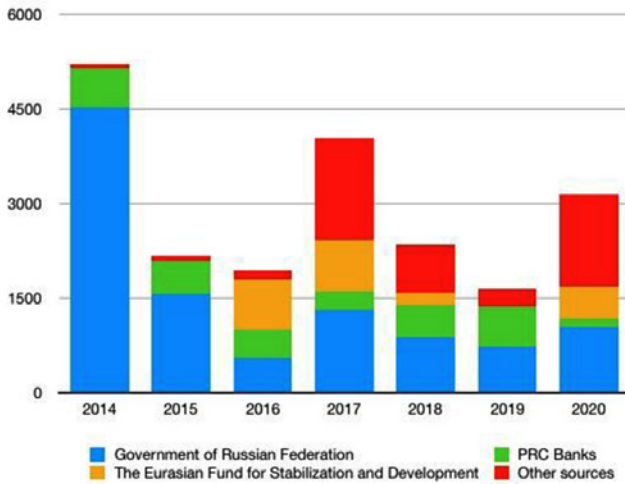


Figure 4. The Republic of Belarus' External Public Borrowing by Origin (2015–2020)

Note: all figures are in millions of U.S. dollars.

Source: own elaboration based on data from the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Belarus (Министерство финансов Республики Беларусь, n.d.).

11). The political situation in Ukraine resulted in transit routes through Belarus becoming even more important (Jakóbowski, Popławski, and Kaczmarski, 2018, pp. 38-46). As the graph below demonstrates (Figure 5), the transit of goods through Belarus, specifically

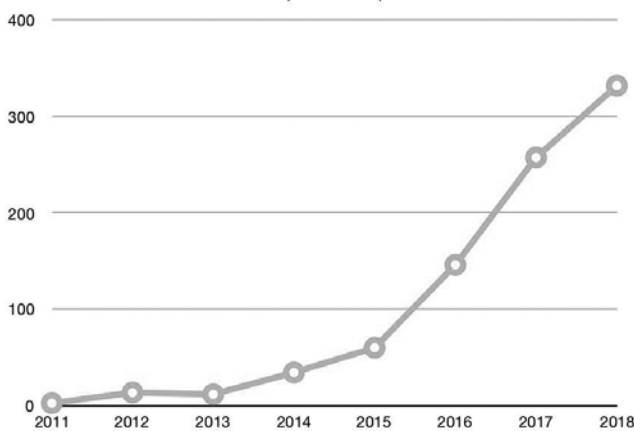


Figure 5. Railway Freight Transport Europe-China: Transit through Belarus (2011–2018)

Note: all figures are in thousand TEU containers.

Source: own elaboration based on data from Belarusian Railways (*Белорусская железная дорога*, 2018).



the ones transported from China to Europe, increased rapidly due to the War in Eastern Ukraine (War in Donbas). However, as argued by Jakóbowski and Kłysiński (who rely on their calculations), while most cargo trains that travel from China to the EU pass through Belarus, it offers Minsk little economic benefits (2021, p. 11).

### ***Military Realm: In the Offing?***

Following the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s, Belarus began selling Beijing old Soviet equipment. In the 2000s, the exchanges of students from the countries' military academic institutions began. In 2017, China and Belarus started to conduct joint military exercises. From 2012 onwards, China began to grant free-of-charge military aid to Belarus under the bilateral agreement between the two countries (Гронский, 2018с, pp. 160-161). In 2012, 22 lightly armored vehicles "Dongfen Mengshi" were conveyed to Belarus (БЕЛТА, 2012). In 2017 and 2018, Belarus received lightly armored vehicles C3/VN3 "Daiiang" from Chinese Ministry of Defense (Военное обозрение, 2018). As maintained by Gronskiy, while Belarus itself can produce the lightly armored vehicles, China's military aid is being accepted for it is, first, free of charge. Second, this allows Minsk to demonstrate its independence from Russian military equipment (Гронский, 2018с, pp. 165-166).

The cooperation between Minsk and Beijing in missile development is more noticeable. In 2006 Belarus tried to launch its first satellite. While the attempt failed, Lukashenko acknowledged the help from Beijing (Гронский, 2018b, p. 144). Finally, attention is drawn to the cooperation between China and Belarus regarding the Polonez Multiple Launch Rocket System, which is in service of the Belarusian army from 2016 onwards. While the form of cooperation between China and Belarus remains a secret, Lukashenko acknowledged China's assistance. In conversation with the Chinese Minister of Defence, the President of Belarus stated: "You helped us create the most advanced missile armaments" (Belsat, 2018). It enabled the Belarusian government to consider establishing its missiles production programme (Алесин, 2020; Ходаренко, 2020).

### **Conclusion: A Fox, A Wolf, and A Sled**

China's new strategy encompasses the Middle Kingdom's increasing participation in world affairs, which means that Beijing is willing to project its power globally. China opposes the world order led by a single hegemon, the United States of America, which calls for the universal implementation of the equally universal concept of human rights. In the interim, Belarus, a relatively weak state, which is insignificant in the global balance of power, shares Beijing's beliefs about the desired nature of the contemporary world order. Moreover, it desires to guarantee its survival understood in terms of existence as a sovereign political entity, for its most important ally, Moscow, demands more political subordination in exchange for economic benefits. It also dreams about prestige in the international arena, which it does

not have, for it breaks the universal rules established by a hegemon. The congruence of beliefs and Minsk's desire to ensure its survival are drawing the two countries closer together. However, the condition of the Belarusian economy, which relies heavily on external funding, does not allow the economic cooperation between Minsk and Beijing to thrive.

Moreover, Belarus is still highly dependent upon the Russian Federation. China gradually increases its engagement with Belarus, especially given that it constitutes a strategic transport route, albeit it obscures its ambitions, for Minsk lies in Moscow's sphere of influence. While Moscow cannot balance China's power and bandwagons it instead, the balance of power between Beijing and Moscow is constantly shifting in China's favor. The military cooperation between China and Belarus and China's economic incentives for Belarus are slowly beginning to challenge the idea of Russia's sphere of influence on the post-Soviet space. To paraphrase Slavic folklore, the fox (China) has placed just one paw on the sled (Belarus), but the wolf (Russia) decided to turn a blind eye. Whether the sled will eventually belong to the fox is an open question, for China is going global.

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