

China-Belarus cooperation as the factor of the foreign policy self-identification of the Republic of Belarus (2000 - 2022s).

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Belarus is one of the small states that are located at the intersection of roads, connecting Europe and Asia. As a small state, after the collapse of the USSR, Belarus faced a lot of difficulties in the way of its development as an independent state and had difficulties in choosing the right direction for the country's development. The official relations between China and Belarus were established in one year after the collapse of the USSR in 1992. The People's Republic of China has gone through a long and difficult path of development to achieve the results that we can observe today – China became one of the superpowers on the political stage, and it is generally agreed today that China is the second economy in the world. China's economy is closely connected with the world economy; hence, China is one of the important centers of world politics that is why these all obliged the People's Republic of China to put forward very ambitious projects in different fields, such as economy, politics, culture, science and technology, and in other fields, which are aimed not only upholding and adheres its national interests but also promote ideas of international character that have value for each country in the world. In the context of modern challenges and tensions that states may face today in the international arena, there is no such a state that can rely only on its own strength and abilities in wishing to achieve prosperity, modernization, and stability for its people. Therefore, cooperation and the integration of countries' interaction are crucial for their development. It contributes to joint development and cooperation in solving different problems arising in society and the world, and encourages together resists modern challenges. This article will consider Sino-Belarusian cooperation as the factor of Belarus' foreign policy self-identification within the 2000-2022s time period. We are going to analyze the Sino-Belarusian relations and try to determine and evaluate Belarus' foreign policy self-identification in the aspect of cooperation between China and Belarus.

The first thing that we need to know before starting to analyze the foreign policy self-identification of the Republic of Belarus is what the foreign policy of self-identification is itself. It's a relatively new concept in international relations. According to Tsyrfa, the foreign policy identity in international relations can be defined as the perception of a state, its particular role and significance within the global political process by its other participants, formed by analyzing its foreign policy as a formalized strategy of behavior in the international environment and aimed at ensuring influence on the behavior of other subjects of international relations, its adaptation to the consequences of processes occurring within a certain international system¹. According to other think tanks, the foreign policy identity of a state is a unique identity that is formed on the basis of mythologized ideas and ideas about the established and/or its desired world order, the place, role, and status of a particular state in the world, its potential and real allies, enemies and rivals. This kind of state identity is collective

¹ Tsyrfa I.A., "Theoretical basis of formation of the international relations actor foreign policy identity", Vector of Science of Togliatti State University. 2014. No1(27). pp.174-179;

and relatively unchangeable over time, it takes into account the common historical memory, cultural and historical foundations of a state.² Thus, in short, we can define the foreign policy identity of any country as it is the combination of ideas about the state, and its global role, which are formed through its relationship with other states in different spheres and political communities.

Belarus was, is, and will be a close ally of Russia. The relations between Russia and Belarus have deep historic roots. Common mentality, culture, and history make these two countries to be “brothers” not only in the political arena but also among their peoples themselves. Moreover, there are other reasons that encourage Belarus to ally with Russia, such as the actual blockade of the direction of European integration for Belarus, associated with the unconstructive position of the EU leadership, Poland, and the Baltic States toward Minsk (Therefore, the identification associated with Europe and the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, at the moment has lost its former relevance for Belarus, although it cannot be completely excluded in the future). Nowadays the relations and cooperation between China and Belarus are developing, and here raises the question of whether the closest cooperation with China is the factor of the choice of Belarus’ foreign policy self-identification in the political arena or not. The answer to this question is complicated, and let us try to understand the development of Sino-Belarusian relations first.

The Republic of Belarus and the People’s Republic of China over the past few years had become highly reliable partners, which is evidenced by their stable, friendly, and supportive relations year by year. Moreover, it can be confirmed by the comprehensive, prosperous, and fruitful business relationships between these two countries. Despite different international situations and challenges faced by the two countries on the international stage, the China-Belarus relationships continue to develop and deepen their comprehensive relations and today they have reached a high level of cooperation. On September 16, 2022, at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand, the Sino-Belarusian relationship reached a new level of their development. Following the results of the two leaders’ personal meeting, the two countries published and signed the “Joint Declaration of the Republic of Belarus and the People’s Republic of China on the establishment of relations of all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership”, and also signed documents on cooperation in the fields of science and technology, justice, agriculture, e-commerce and other fields of cooperation³.

We should admit that for Belarus there are several facts that influenced a lot on its foreign policy self-identification: 1) A legacy of the common Soviet past, the Belarusian economy is structurally highly dependent on Russia and this dependence on Russia seriously constrains Belarus’s freedom of political maneuver, its choice of development and the way of developing its relations with other states in the world, and participation in different

² Raschekhmarova O.D., “The concept of foreign policy identity in the psychology of international relations”, URL:https://lomonosov-msu.ru/archive/Lomonosov_2020_2/data/19387/118416_uid502261_report.pdf?ysclid=lajmvwri2i700523528, date of access: 2022.11.10

³ The article “About the meeting between President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko and President of the People’s Republic of China Xi Jinping”, URL: <https://china.mfa.gov.by/ru/embassy/news/d8df93753fd0c54b.html>, date of access: 2022.11.13;

organizations⁴. 2) Belarus is a medium-sized state (a relatively small state), the total area of which is 207,600 km², or about 2% of the total area of Europe⁵. These make it impossible for Belarus to rely only on its own strength and capability for its survival in the political arena. Hence, diversifying international partnerships is an “open door” for Belarus to get some kind of its own autonomy in its political actions and helps to form its foreign policy self-identification. Belarus’s multi-vector foreign policy has led to several breakthroughs in the development of Belarus that helped it to develop and understand its position in the world order after the collapse of the USSR.

It cannot be denied that the cooperation between China and Belarus in the 2000s was not as deep and wide as they are now. These relations were just emerging, which gave Belarus the opportunity to understand its role in the development of these relations and learn the Chinese experience in the development of the country. The President of Belarus – Alexander Lukashenko visited China during his parliamentary work and back then he said that China is the future, and we need to learn how to cherish the past and look to the future.⁶ After the first official visit of the Belarusian President to China in 1995, he emphasized that Belarus needs to cooperate and develop special relations with China, learn and adopt the Chinese experience. It should be noted that this vector of thoughts shows the willingness of the Belarusian President to cooperate with China, moreover, it is the way for Belarus to diversify its contacts and, especially, to reduce its high economic dependence on Russia. The development of this relations may change the perception of Belarus in the political arena. In 2001 the Joint Declaration of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Belarus was signed, which was one of the important steps in bilateral relations. From 2004-2013 Sino-Belarusian relations began to develop more intensively, as the growth of commodity turnover became noticeable (see Table 1 “China exports to Belarus historical chart from 1991-2021” and Table 2 “China imports from Belarus historical chart from 1991-2021”); there were several mutual official visits between two countries that deepen their relations and cooperation, plan a variety of the joint investment projects. “The dynamics of the development of the Belarusian–Chinese trade can be judged by the fact that within twenty–five years since the establishment of diplomatic relations, mutual trade has increased almost 100 times: from 34 million dollars in 1992 to more than 3.6 billion dollars”⁷. In 2005 the Joint Declaration of the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of Belarus was adopted. In 2010 the Belarusian-Chinese Technopark in Changchun was created. During that time, the Belarusian Ministry of Economy and the Chinese Engineering Corporation CAMC (CAMCE) agreed to cooperate on the creation of a China-Belarus Industrial Park in Belarus. “The ‘Great Stone Industrial Park’ near Minsk International

⁴ Anaïs Marin, “Rapport: THIRD POWERS IN EUROPE’S EAST – Chapter 8 The third powers and Belarus”, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) (2018), pp. 71-76, p.71-72;

⁵ Key facts of Belarus, URL: <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/numbers/facts> , date of access: 2022.11.13;

⁶ The Article, “Lukashenko: no one has any doubts that China is the future” from 2022.05.20, SB news <https://www.sb.by/articles/lukashenko-uzhe-net-ni-u-kogo-somneniy-cto-za-kitaem-budushchee.html?ysclid=lajame59t122899463> , date of access: 2022.11.13;

⁷ Hushcha, P.V. and Gribov A.V., “The current state and prospects of economic cooperation between Belarus and China”, Economics and banks. 2018. No 2, pp. 72-80, p. 74;

Airport was the first joint industrial park agreed with China in the region (2010)⁸.” Moreover, the agreement on military cooperation between the two countries’ ministries of defense was signed. During that period there were a lot of projects on educational and cultural exchange, for example, the first Confucius Institute was opened at Belarus State University in Minsk (2006); the center of Belarusian culture was established at East China Normal University in Shanghai (2011) and etc. From these facts, that we have mentioned above, we may conclude that one of the main objectives of China-Belarus comprehensive cooperation is the realization of the potential and mutually beneficial cooperation in different spheres.

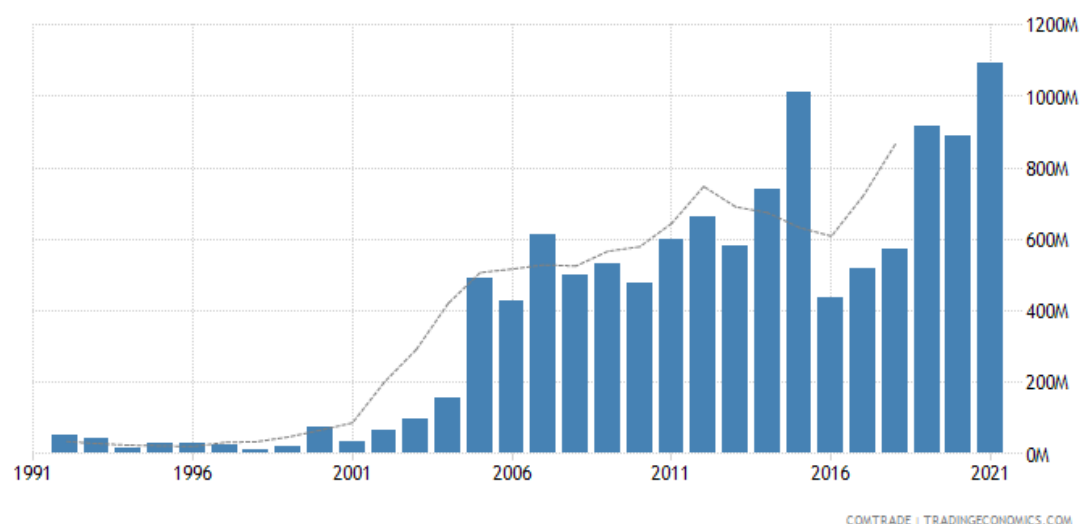


Table 1 – “China exports to Belarus historical chart from 1991-2021”⁹

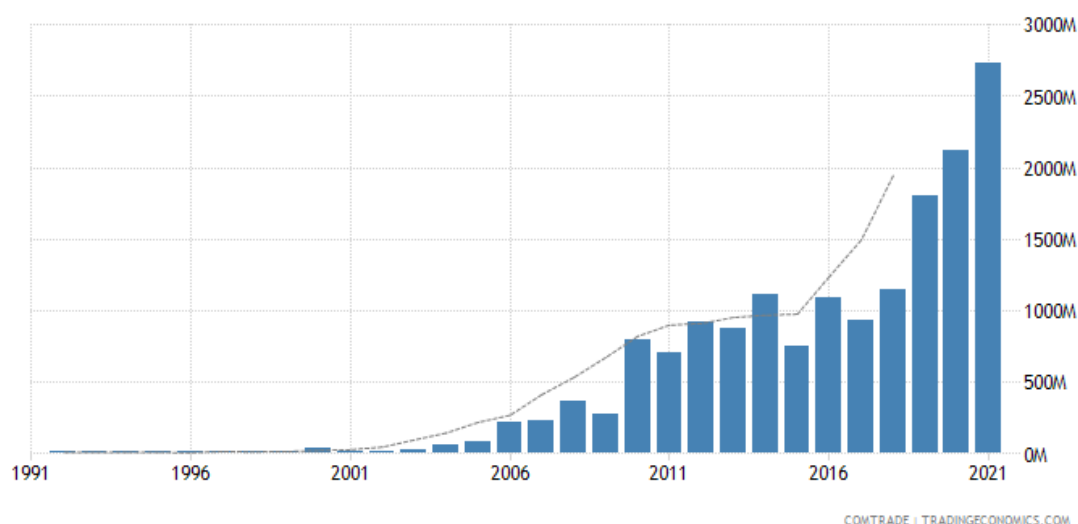


Table 2 – “China imports from Belarus historical chart from 1991-2021”¹⁰

⁸ Thomas S. Eder, “Chapter 1 Chinese approaches to the eastern neighbourhood”, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018, pp. 13-20, p.15.;

⁹ The source is “Trading Economics”, URL: <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/belarus>, date of access: 2022.11.18;

¹⁰ The source is “Trading Economics”, URL: <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/imports/belarus>, date of access: 2022.11.18;

In 2013, China initiated the “One Belt and One Road” initiative, proposing to connect Asia with Europe and Africa with a single network of roads, railways, sea routes, gas and oil pipelines, etc. Belarus showed its willingness to participate in the BRI. It is obvious that the geographical position of Belarus gave it an advantageous opportunity to become a part of China’s initiative. From this fact, one may conclude that this initiative is a good opportunity for Belarus to assert itself economically and politically, besides, the BRI influenced Belarus’ self-identification as it become one of the “main chains” in the connection between China and Europe. That year the character of Sino-Belarusian cooperation changed by signing the Declaration on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Belarus and China, which put the relationship between the two countries on a new level. However, we should also point out the fact that Ukraine’s geographical position also has its advantages, it is rivals with Belarus, but the Russia-Ukraine conflict, beginning in 2014 is meant for the Chinese side to adopt a cautious attitude toward Ukraine, despite its advantageous geographical position. In spite of the fact that Ukraine offers the shortest route that can connect China and Europe through Kazakhstan, Rostov, and Donbas, but due to continued hostilities in Donbas 2014-2022, as well as Russia’s transit ban, China has some difficulties in sending its cargo through Ukraine to Slovakia and further on to Europe¹¹. Moreover, the beginning of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine (February 2022) also deepens Belarus’ foreign policy self-identification as one of the important “hubs” for economic relations between China and Europe in the frame of the BRI. It would be unfair not to mention the fact that Belarus is the founding country and participant of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU or EEU). This fact also has a big influence on the development of China-Belarus relations as their comprehensive cooperation gives China access to the EAEU market on very lucrative and good terms. “It’s obvious that almost all governments of the post-soviet countries actively seek out China as a partner that might help a country to hedge against Russia, or relations that may provide some kind of “implicit deterrence” due to close relations between Moscow and Beijing. Importantly, China’s support of (semi-)authoritarian governments in the post-soviet countries, and agreement to coordinate its Belt and Road Initiative with the EAEU, are at the same time very much in line with Russian interests”¹². In 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin offered to combine two economic initiatives: China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union, and proposed to coordinate the BRI with economic integration within the EAEU¹³. This initiative was reflected in a document “the Joint Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on Cooperation in Coordinating Development of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt” which was signed between Russia and China. According to this agreement, the EAEU and China agreed to work on joint projects in

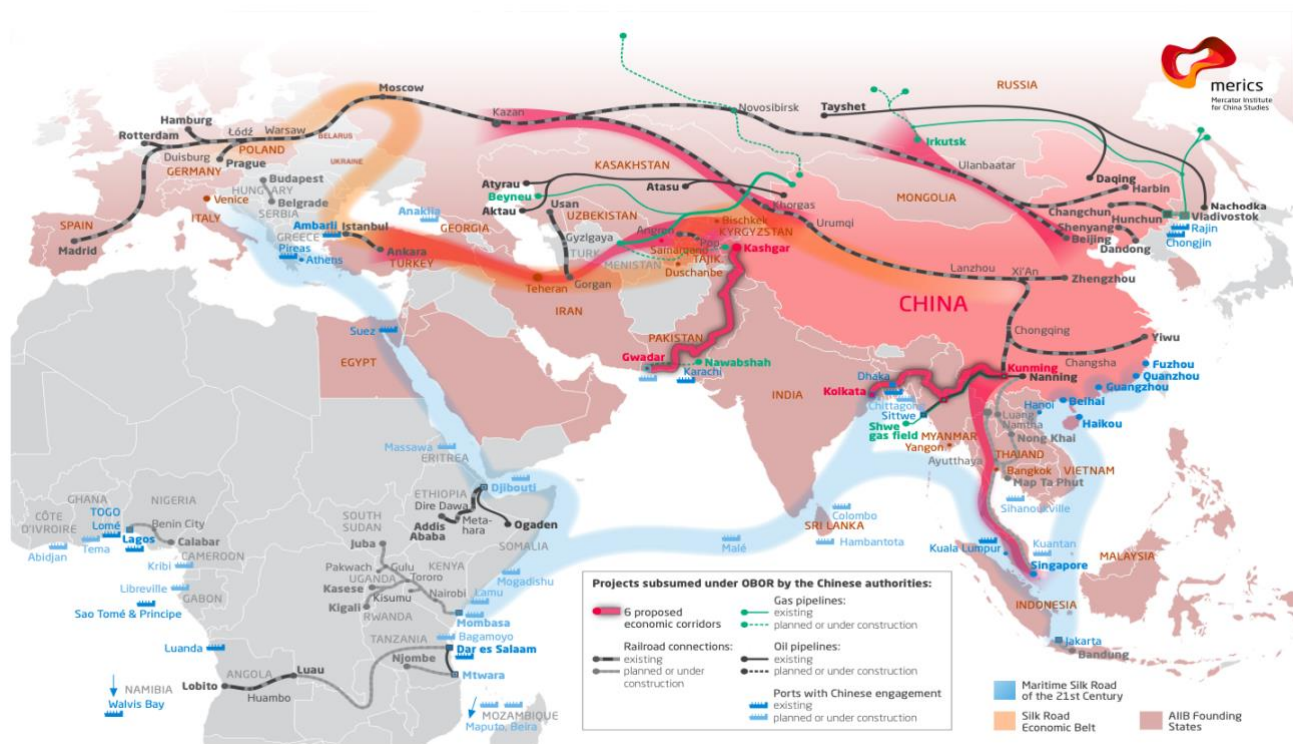
¹¹ Michal Makocki, “Chapter 2 China, the new Silk Road and the EU’s eastern neighbourhood”, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018, pp. 21-28, p. 25;

¹² Thomas S. Eder, “Chapter 1 Chinese approaches to the eastern neighbourhood”, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2018, pp. 13-20, p. 20.;

¹³ The Article “Putin in Beijing: how Russia is integrating into the Chinese Silk Road”, 2017.05.14, RBC News, URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/05/2017/59159e0d9a7947318586f81f?ysclid=lapjr3iknv39157566>, date of access: 2022.11.18;

infrastructure and trade facilitation that would lead to the connectivity of two initiatives. The project implied the involvement of six countries: China and 5 country members of the EAEU¹⁴. This agreement also shows us that China-Belarus relations widen and deepen, even through the participation in different international organizations. In 2018 two countries signed an intergovernmental agreement on a mutual visa-free regime for 30 days (90 days in a year). In 2019 Belarus and China agreed to mutually recognize educational documents. In 2020 Belarusian-Chinese Friendship center was opened in Minsk. Belarus and China signed a memorandum on strategic cooperation in the agriculture field in 2020. Moreover, there is mutual support between China and Belarus in the fight against coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹⁵



During the Russia-ASEAN summit in Sochi in 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin put forward a proposal to connect the EAEU, the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that would be so-called the “integration of integrations”. Russia proposed to organize a free trade zone between the EAEU and ASEAN, as well as to create a partnership between these two associations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization¹⁶. Nevertheless, we need to point out the fact that almost all the

¹⁴ Gaziza G. Shakhonova, “The Belt and Road Initiative and the Eurasian Economic Union: Exploring the “Greater Eurasian Partnership”, Current Chinese Affairs, May 2020, pp. 2-25 p. 8;

¹⁵ The source is “Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)”, URL: <https://www.merics.org/en/belt-and-road>, date of access: 2022.11.13;

¹⁶ The Article “At the summit in Sochi, Russia proposed to combine the potential of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations” 2016.05.24, News portal “Souznoe Veche”, URL: <https://www.souzveche.ru/articles/politics/31023/?ysclid=lap9d5wfkv148737931>, date of access: 2022.11.19;

EAEU member states are involved in the work of the SCO. Thus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan are SCO members, Belarus is an observer country (Besides, in 2022 Belarus officially applied to join the SCO as a full member state¹⁷), and Armenia is the SCO dialogue partner. Hence, we can say that the cooperation between the EAEU and the SCO has already deep. The EAEU includes 5 member states: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. The observer countries are Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Cuba. The EAEU Free Trade Zone are Vietnam, Singapore, and Serbia. Negotiations on entering the EAEU Free Trade zone are underway with Egypt, Israel, India, China, Mongolia, and Thailand. Several other countries (more than 50 countries) show interest in this, including Chile, Tunisia, Laos, Syria, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan, Hungary and etc¹⁸. In 2019 the EAEU signed the agreement on trade and economic cooperation between the EAEU and China, and it comes into force at the end of October 2019. The document is not an agreement on the EAEU Free Trade Zone, but it defines a single format of trade cooperation between the EAEU and the People's Republic of China¹⁹. These facts, of course, deepen the comprehensive cooperation between China and Belarus and raise the value of Belarus in the development of comprehensive mutually beneficial relations.



Map of the Eurasian Economic Union²⁰

¹⁷ The Article, “SCO Secretary General: Belarus' application to join the organization has been received” from 2022.07.15, BELTA News, URL: <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/gensek-shos-poluchena-zajavka-belarusi-na-vstuplenie-v-organizatsiju-513755-2022/?ysclid=lapamnglk1613535292>, date of access: 2022.11.17;

¹⁸ The Article “Sergey Lavrov: About 50 countries want to cooperate with the EAEU” 2017.01.25, News portal “Souznoe Veche”, URL: <https://www.souzveche.ru/articles/politics/35309/?ysclid=lapht7hvh718621927>, date of access: 2022.11.19;

¹⁹ The Article “Free trade zones with the EAEU” 2019.10.01, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/zony-svobodnoy-torgovli-s-eaes/?ysclid=lapd8vwekd390550770>, date of access: 2022.11.19;

²⁰ The map is created based on the Eurasian Economic Union information.

Chinese-Belarusian cooperation allows Belarus to feel and identify itself as a significant component of the emerging space of “Greater Eurasia”. As this bilateral mutually beneficial cooperation allows Belarus to not rely only on post-Soviet countries, especially Russia but also has a very reliable partner – China. The cooperation between Minsk and Beijing has already proven itself many times. The two countries not only stand for mutually beneficial comprehensive cooperation, but also for the growth of the competitiveness of national economies in order to improve their populace’s well-being in both countries.

In conclusion, the arguments we have discussed show that the political and economic situation in the world and the sanctions that were posed by the West and America also influenced the foreign policy self-identification of the Republic of Belarus. The previous options that Belarus had for solving the problems, using its “political maneuver” with Europe and Russia through participation in other projects have shown their incompleteness and decreasing inefficiency in the conditions of the crisis in international relations unfolding today. However, China has been and remains a reliable partner of Belarus. During these years the development of bilateral relations with China has become one of the key directions for Belarus in its foreign policy. However, one may say that the increasing pressure of the sanctions from the European Union and the United States after the 2020 Presidential elections in Belarus, and after the beginning of the Russian special military operation in Ukraine can complicate the further development of relations between China and Belarus since China sees Belarus more as a “trade bridge” between China and Europe in the implementation of its BRI. Furthermore, the pressure in the form of some isolation of Belarus by the West, of course, put some doubt on the implementation of some China’s plans and projects. However, despite these facts, the cooperation between China and Belarus is at a high level. Moreover, both countries deepening their relations and cooperation, what is evidenced by the signing of the “Joint Declaration of the Republic of Belarus and the People’s Republic of China on the establishment of relations of all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2022. The Republic of Belarus supports and adheres to the one-China principle. Belarus recognizes that the government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government that represents the whole of China and Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory. The Belarusian side opposes any form of “Taiwan independence”, and supports all efforts made by the Chinese government for national reunification. China has repeatedly stated that it supports the independence of Belarus and opposes any outside interference in the internal affairs of the Republic of Belarus. Belarus’ foreign policy is also formed from the economic perspective, the strategic partnership with China, along with the allied relations with Russia, integrates Belarus into the emerging space of “Greater Eurasia”, which is a space of fundamentally new opportunities for Belarus’ development. The Sino-Belarusian relation allows Belarus not to be confined to more local projects that limit its capabilities, or only develop its relations with the post-soviet countries, but to cooperate and establish trade relations with the whole world and, especially, with countries that are members of organizations, such as ASEAN, SCO and etc. The Chinese-Belarusian cooperation allows Belarus to implement a strategy of complex integration into a

large area of Eurasia, which is more comprehensive and balanced than the usual bandwagoning strategy for small and medium-sized countries.

This year, in 2022 China and Belarus celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Chinese-Belarusian diplomatic relations. These two countries have done a lot over the years. It can be argued that the relations between these two countries have passed the test of time and proved that the two countries can trust each other and count on help in difficult situations, for example, good relations can also be confirmed by mutual help during the COVID-19 outbreak, mutual support in the political arena and etc. There are still many ambitious joint projects ahead that will only strengthen the cooperation and relations between China and Belarus, and therefore the two peoples.

Abstract

Belarus is one of the small states that are located at the intersection of roads, connecting Europe and Asia. As a small state, after the collapse of the USSR, Belarus faced a lot of difficulties in the way of its development as an independent state and had difficulties in choosing the right direction for the country's development.

The article will touch on the topic of Sino-Belarusian cooperation as the factor of Belarus' foreign policy self-identification within the 2000-2022s time period. We are going to analyze the Sino-Belarusian relations and try to determine and evaluate Belarus' foreign policy self-identification in the aspect of cooperation between China and Belarus. The official relations between China and Belarus were established in one year after the collapse of the USSR in 1992. However, we should admit that the big step in the development of their relations is observed in the announcement of Belarus' willingness to become a part of China's "One Belt One Road Initiative". The geographical location of Belarus is one of the big advantages of the country that makes it a valuable participant in the initiative and gives it the opportunity to develop closer and mutually beneficial relations with China. However, we cannot ignore the fact that Belarus was, is, and will be a close ally of Russia. The relations between Russia and Belarus have deep historic roots; common mentality, culture, and history make these two countries to be "brothers" not only in the political arena but also among their peoples themselves. Nowadays the relations and cooperation between China and Belarus are developing, but here raises the question of whether the closest cooperation with China is the factor of the choice of Belarus' foreign policy self-identification in the political arena or not.

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