

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

Good afternoon to everyone! I am very grateful to have this opportunity to present our article “China-Belarus cooperation as the factor of the foreign policy self-identification of the Republic of Belarus (2000 - 2022s)” at the 11<sup>th</sup> East Asian Conference on Slavic-Eurasian Studies.

As everybody knows, Belarus is one of the small states that are located at the intersection of roads, connecting Europe and Asia. After the collapse of the USSR, Belarus faced a lot of difficulties in the way of its development as an independent state. In the context of modern challenges and tensions that states may face today, 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, the cooperation of countries is crucial for their development. Joint development and cooperation help to solve different problems arising in society and in the world, and encourage together resist modern challenges.

The foreign policy of self-identification is a relatively new concept in international relations. In short, we can define it as 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. Thus, there are several facts that influenced a lot on Belarus’ 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 organizations. 2) Belarus is a medium-sized state. 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 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 that 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.

The official relations between China and Belarus were established in one year after the collapse of the USSR in 1992. Belarus and China over the past few years had become highly reliable partners, which is evidenced by their stable, friendly, and supportive relations year by year. 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. This year at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Samarkand, the Sino-Belarusian relationship reached a new level of their development, the two countries signed the “Joint Declaration of Belarus and China on the establishment of relations of all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership”, and also signed documents on cooperation in different fields.

The cooperation between China and Belarus in the 2000s was not as deep and wide as they are now. However, 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. 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. The

Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Belarus was signed in 2001, which was one of the important steps in bilateral relations. From 2004-2013 Sino-Belarusian relations began to develop more intensively, it confirmed by the noticeable growth of commodity turnover. During that time there were several official visits between two countries that deepen their relations and cooperation, plans for a variety of the joint investment projects. The Joint Declaration of China and Belarus was adopted in 2005, the Belarusian-Chinese Technopark in Changchun was created (2010). During that time, there was an agreement to create China-Belarus Industrial Park in Belarus, the agreement on military cooperation between the two countries' ministries of defense was signed. There were a lot of projects on educational and cultural exchange. From these facts, 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.

In 2013, China initiated the "One Belt and One Road" initiative, proposing to connect Asia with Europe and Africa, and 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, 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, but the Russia-Ukraine conflict, beginning in 2014 is meant for the Chinese side to adopt a cautious attitude toward Ukraine. Due to continued hostilities in Donbas 2014-2022 China has some difficulties in sending its cargo through Ukraine. 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.

Belarus is the founding country and participant of the Eurasian Economic Union. 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. 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 EAEU. Thus, the EAEU and China agreed to work on joint projects in infrastructure and trade facilitation that would lead to the connectivity of two initiatives. This agreement also shows us that China-Belarus relations widen and deepen, even through the participation in different international organizations. Moreover, there is mutual support between China and Belarus in the fight against coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

During the Russia-ASEAN summit 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). 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 Organization. Nevertheless, it's important to point out the fact that almost all the 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 state), and Armenia is the SCO dialogue partner. Hence, we can say that the cooperation between the EAEU and the SCO has already deep. 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 China. The EAEU has Free Trade Zones with Vietnam, Singapore, and Serbia. More than 50 countries show interest in this organization. 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.

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, support each other in the political arena but also for the growth of the competitiveness of national economies in order to improve their populace’s well-being in both countries.

To draw the conclusion, one can say that all these show that the political and economic situation in the world and the sanctions that were posed by the West and America also influenced Belarus’ foreign policy self-identification. 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 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 China’s plans and projects. 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 Belarus and China on the establishment of relations of all-weather and comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2022. 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.

This year, China and Belarus celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of 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.

Thank you!