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A Distant Ally: The Role of China in Belarusian Policy in the Context of the Deepening Integration of the Union State

Zarys treści: Artykuł analizuje rolę Chin w polityce zagranicznej Białorusi w kontekście pogłębiania integracji z Rosją w ramach Państwa Związkowego. Autorzy przedstawiają ewolucję relacji białorusko-chińskich, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem lat 2020–2025, kiedy to współpraca obu państw nabrąła charakteru nie tylko gospodarczego, ale również ideologiczno-propagandowego. Zbadano także wpływ kryzysu politycznego na Białorusi i wojny w Ukrainie na relacje Mińska z Pekinem. Artykuł odpowiada na pytania dotyczące realnego znaczenia Chin w białoruskiej polityce zagranicznej oraz miejsca tych relacji w układzie Pekin–Moskwa–Mińsk.

Outline of content: The article examines the role of China in Belarus's foreign policy in the context of its deepening integration with Russia through the Union State. It explores the evolution of Belarus–China relations, especially during 2020–2025, when bilateral cooperation expanded beyond economic ties to include ideological and propaganda aspects. The paper also analyzes the impact of Belarus's post-election crisis and the war in Ukraine on Minsk's approach to Beijing, addressing the strategic significance of China within the Minsk–Moscow–Beijing triangle.

Słowa kluczowe: Białoruś, Chiny, Rosja, Państwo Związkowe, partnerstwo strategiczne, relacje patron–klient

Keywords: Belarus, China, Russia, Union State, strategic partnership, patron–client relations



Since 1992, when diplomatic relations between Belarus and China were established, the Belarusian political elites have actively debated and shaped their vision of China's role and its potential significance in Minsk's foreign policy. According to Vyacheslav Kebich, the first Prime Minister of independent Belarus, Chinese support in the early years following the collapse of the USSR could have been one of the decisive factors in revitalising the Belarusian economy.¹ Although 1994, the year of Alyaksandr Lukashenka's rise to power, marked a significant shift in Belarus's domestic and foreign policy, the new president also consistently maintained a pro-Chinese stance and took care to preserve positive bilateral relations.

Over the past 30 years, China's geopolitical role has evolved, further increasing the country's importance to Belarus. Despite the passage of time, Minsk has remained interested in China, its political system, technologies, and investments, as well as its approaches to social engineering and experience with social surveillance. The Belarusian authorities also expected the Chinese state to open its market to Belarusian exports and sought to obtain preferential credit lines.

At times, Beijing actively invested in sectors such as mobile telecommunications, energy infrastructure, and the automotive industry in Belarus. However, it should be noted that all projects were implemented according to the Chinese model, under which financial support came as a package deal – along with credit obligations and commitments to purchase Chinese equipment and technologies, and to employ Chinese contractors.

The calendar of diplomatic contacts between Minsk and Beijing at various levels was extensive, yet the years 2013–2015 proved to be a turning point. During this period, Belarus decided to join the Belt and Road Initiative and the Digital Silk Road. During the visit of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, to Minsk, the two states signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation, and during Lukashenka's official visit to Beijing, a declaration on the strategic partnership between Belarus and China was concluded.²

China's choice of Belarus was certainly not accidental, although Minsk has never been a key partner in Beijing's foreign policy, which is understandable given the disparity in the economic and military potential of the two states.³ Beijing initially centred its European projects around Ukraine, which was geopolitically far more attractive; however, the Russian war forced a revision of these plans. For political reasons, the Baltic states also avoided establishing close relations with Beijing. Belarus's geographic position thus finally began to pay off, as the country became an attractive and promising transit state for China, seeking to secure funds to modernise its transport and transmission infrastructure.

¹ В.Ф. Кебич, *Искушение властью: из жизни премьер-министра* (Минск, 2008), pp. 339–340.

² N. Sheleg, L. Mintzin, 'Economic and Trade Cooperation Between China and Belarus in the Context of the "One Belt and One Road" Initiative', *Society and Economics*, 5 (2023), pp. 55–59.

³ B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Washington, 2015), pp. 132–164.

Undoubtedly, for Belarus, which, alongside Russia, the United Kingdom, and Pakistan, advanced to the highest level of partnership with China, this represented a significant diplomatic promotion. Minsk fit perfectly not only into the economic projects promoted by Beijing, but also into the common space of political values, in which anti-democracy and anti-liberalism were the structural axis. After all, China, despite its officially emphasised commitment to ideologically neutral economic initiatives, openly and willingly developed deeper relations with states marked by varying degrees of democratisation. A less visible but important aspect of bilateral relations is military cooperation between the two countries. In 2010, Belarus and China signed a military cooperation agreement. The collaboration has focused on the production and modernisation of weapons, the re-equipment of the Belarusian army (with the Polonez rocket launcher system as its flagship project), and joint training activities, including officer training and military exercises. Interestingly, the cooperation also extended into the space domain – it was the China Aerospace Science Corporation that placed the Belarusian artificial satellite into orbit. It may therefore be concluded that Belarusian-Chinese cooperation developed quite intensively up to 2020, although Belarus was certainly expecting more tangible results. However, following the 2020 presidential elections, a clear turning point occurred in how Belarus defined its main foreign policy vectors, with China emerging as one of the country's top strategic priorities.

The article aims to address the following research questions: Does the post-2020 rapprochement between Belarus and China hold real significance for the Beijing–Moscow–Minsk triangle, and what stance has Russia taken towards it? And to what extent does the intensification of cooperation with China enable Belarus to actually implement a multi-vector strategy in foreign policy?

For the purposes of this study, a combination of research methods was employed: content and narrative analysis (of official documents, speeches, and media statements), a comparative analysis of relations within the Beijing–Minsk–Moscow triangle based on the patron–client⁴ theory, and both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The intensification of Belarusian-Chinese dialogue in the years 2020–2025

Following the 2020 presidential elections, China clearly emphasised its pro-Lukashenka stance, with President Xi Jinping being the first to send a congratulatory telegram to the Belarusian leader, whose legitimacy was not recognised by part of the international community. At that time, Beijing also officially

⁴ D.A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca–London, 2009), pp. 63–92.

condemned what it termed “external interference” in Belarus’s domestic affairs – a gesture that Alyaksandr Lukashenka regarded as both meaningful and valuable, as it enabled the construction of anti-Western propaganda narratives and the promotion of the thesis that the post-election protests were the responsibility of a Western-funded puppet democratic opposition. It should be noted that this was a highly rational move from China’s perspective, as maintaining Lukashenka’s leadership ensured the kind of “stability” crucial to Beijing’s political and economic interests. At the same time, however, China clearly signalled that addressing Belarus’s internal issues fell within Russia’s sphere of influence and that it had no intention of undermining Moscow’s position. Nevertheless, Lukashenka (with Moscow’s support) managed to stabilise the domestic situation in the country, and Belarusian-Chinese relations acquired a new dimension, not only strategic and economic, but also ideological and propagandistic.⁵ Both sides are attempting to capitalise on the fact that the intensification of the war in Ukraine forms part of a global power struggle, in which some actors seek to exploit the weakness of others. Therefore, various forms of cooperation are often established, enabling the joint implementation of initiatives between a globally ambitious state, such as China, and a small state, such as Belarus, which is systematically weakened by Russia.

Despite the disparity between the two countries’ potential and their differing global and regional roles, both states intensified cooperation across various fields and launched active propaganda campaigns to promote the concept of a multipolar international system and a polycentric world. Minsk and Beijing are united by their rejection of Western hegemony, their aversion to democratic world interference in the internal affairs of states (an anti-interventionist rhetoric), and their promotion of the right to choose one’s own anti-liberal model of development. For Belarus, the pivot towards the Asian vector and its diplomatic activity along the so-called “far arc” represent an attempt to evade the consequences of Western sanctions policy, a strategy of balancing between Moscow and the European Union, and an important propaganda tool for domestic use, serving to reinforce the legitimacy of the leader and the entire political system.⁶ Lukashenka launched a propaganda offensive, one of its key elements being the promotion of the slogan: “The Time Has Come for Asia”.⁷ The Belarusian authorities frequently and enthusiastically praise China’s diplomatic and economic achievements, as well as the pace of its social development, portraying China as a model to follow.

⁵ E. Korosteleva, I. Petrova, ‘Belarus after 2020: Between Russia and China’, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 13, no. 2 (2022), pp. 104–115.

⁶ A. Yeliseyev, O. Aleszko-Lessels, ‘Relations Between Belarus and China in 2020–2022: What Lies Behind the “All-Weather Partnership”’, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2022), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belarus/19851-20221220.pdf> (accessed: 23 Sept. 2025).

⁷ ‘Lukashenko Calls to Find Faster Way Out of Crisis’, <https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-calls-to-find-faster-way-out-of-crisis-153820-2022/> (accessed: 16 Sept. 2025).

They define their relations with Beijing as an “iron brotherhood and eternal friendship”⁸ and as an “all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership”.⁹ They also emphasise the legitimacy of Beijing’s aspirations to co-shape global relations and promote the China-backed idea of a multipolar world, as well as a worldwide order free from American hegemony. Minsk not only refrained from criticising China’s actions towards Tibet or Taiwan but also declared its full support for the Chinese “peace plan” aimed at ending the war in Ukraine. “We will do everything to strengthen the friendship between the Belarusian and Chinese peoples”, assured the Belarusian leader.¹⁰ In return, Beijing reciprocated by supporting, among other things, Minsk’s accelerated accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and by declaring joint efforts to counter attempts at historical revisionism. Zhang Qingwei, Vice Chairman of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People’s Congress and Chairman of the High-Level Committee for Cooperation between the Legislative Bodies of Belarus and China, stated, among other things, that “while unwaveringly safeguarding peace throughout the world, the Chinese side is ready to firmly defend the outcomes of the Second World War and international justice together with the Belarusian side, and to build a community of shared future for mankind”.¹¹ Lukashenka, in one of his statements, emphasized: “We are deeply grateful to the authorities of the People’s Republic of China and the leadership of the National People’s Congress, as well as to the heads of the parliament, for the tremendous support you provide to us on the international stage. And you know perfectly well that we have always responded, and continue to respond, to your support with our own support on all matters concerning the People’s Republic of China in international organisations”.¹²

It is worth noting, however, that despite the Belarusian side’s intensive dissemination of propaganda materials demonstratively promoting the image of effective and promising cooperation between Beijing and Minsk, such messages

⁸ ‘Алейник: визит в Беларусь парламентской делегации КНР направлен на реализацию договоренностей на высшем уровне’, [https://belta.by/politics/view/alejnik-vizit-v-belarus-parlamentskoj-delegatsii-knr-napravlen-na-realizatsiju-dogovorenostej-na-720678-2025/](https://belta.by/politics/view/alejnik-vizit-v-belarus-parlamentskoj-delegatsii-knr-napravlen-na-realizatsiju-dogovorennostej-na-720678-2025/) (accessed: 20 Sept. 2025).

⁹ ‘Снопков: индустриальный парк “Великий камень” – образцовый проект сотрудничества Беларуси и Китая’, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/snopkov-industrialnyj-park-velikij-kamen-obraztsovyj-proekt-sotrudnichestva-belarusi-i-kitaja-639249-2024/> (accessed: 16 Sept. 2025).

¹⁰ ‘Лукашенко и Си Цзиньпин договорились сделать все, чтобы никакие storms and выюги не нарушили edinstvo’, <https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-i-si-tszipin-dogovorilis-sdelat-vse-ctoby-nikakie-shtormy-i-vjugi-ne-narushili-edinstvo-720758-2025/> (accessed: 20 Sept. 2025).

¹¹ ‘Чжан Цинвэй: Китай готов вместе с Беларусью отстаивать правду об итогах Второй мировой войны’, <https://belta.by/society/view/chzhan-tsinvjej-kitaj-gotov-vmeste-s-belarusju-otstaivat-pravdu-ob-itogah-vtoroj-mirovoj-vojny-720770-2025/> (accessed: 20 Sept. 2025).

¹² ‘Лукашенко: Беларусь готова развивать сотрудничество с Китаем, реализуя совместные проекты’, <https://belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-gotova-razvivat-sotrudnichestvo-s-kitaem-realizuja-sovmestnye-proekty-720756-2025/> (accessed: 20 Sept. 2025).

should be approached with caution. Despite Alyaksandr Lukashenka's declaration that "cooperation with China is a great cause",¹³ it appears highly doubtful that Sino-Belarusian relations could constitute any form of competition for Moscow, given the scale and significance of the political, economic, and military ties between Russia and China. These relations are, instead, developed with Moscow's approval and on its terms, although in the Belarusian propaganda sphere, they are portrayed as a great success of Minsk's diplomacy and its leader. One should not, however, overlook the relatively narrow margin of diplomatic autonomy available to Minsk – an autonomy being gradually built amid the deepening integration of the Union State of Russia and Belarus and China's growing influence in the region.

The growing importance of China as Belarus's trade and investment partner between 2020 and 2025

Due to the presidential elections, the escalation of repression against opposition representatives, and Minsk's support for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, a wide range of sanctions was imposed on Belarus, adversely affecting the country's economy. In this situation, in order to minimise the negative consequences of the sanctions policy, efforts have been particularly intensified to build a diversified network of economic relations.¹⁴ Thus, after 2020, China became Belarus's second-largest trading partner (after Russia) in terms of trade balance, while the number of investment and industrial projects has also been increasing, including those in advanced technologies, logistics and transportation infrastructure.¹⁵ For years, the flagship project of Sino-Belarusian cooperation has been the Great Stone Industrial Park near Minsk, modelled on the Suzhou Industrial Park and envisioned as an Eastern European techno-industrial hub comparable to the American Silicon Valley. By 2030, it is intended to become a "city of the future" and a "jewel of the Silk Road". So far, however, the success of this Sino-Belarusian investment has proved highly questionable, and it was not the only unsuccessful joint project – the modernisation of Belarusian cement plants, among others, met a similar fate.

¹³ 'Lukashenko on the Upcoming Visit to China: It Is the Future of Our Country', <https://polbelta.by/president/view/lukaszenko-o-zblizajacej-sie-wizycie-w-chinach-to-przyszlosc-naszego-panstwa-12123-2025/> (accessed: 20 Sept. 2025).

¹⁴ J. Jakóbowski, K. Kłyściński, *Partnerstwo niestategiczne. Stosunki białorusko-chińskie*, Prace OSW Series, no. 81 (Warszawa, 2021), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/prace-osw/2021-01-25/partnerstwo-niestategiczne> (accessed: 15 Sept. 2025).

¹⁵ M. Kaczmarski, *Russia-China Relations in the Post-Crisis International Order*, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, 101 (Abingdon, 2015), pp. 134–140.

Through its relations with Beijing, Minsk is building an alternative not only to its Russian but also to its Western connections. However, it should be noted that this cooperation entails a deepening dependence on China, both financially – through a growing trade deficit and foreign debt – and politically. Minsk continues to seek opportunities to open new, non-Russian markets, mainly for Belarusian food and agricultural products, and sees cooperation with the Chinese side as a way to obtain funds and technologies to modernise the Belarusian economy. However, it is still important to remember that despite attempts to implement these plans, Russia remains Belarus's leading trading and investment partner, its principal creditor, and the primary source of raw materials supplied on preferential terms. In the context of deepening political, economic and military dependence, Minsk's attempts to increase China's involvement in Belarus will be tolerated by Moscow (especially in the context of the war in Ukraine), but only until a collision occurs between Russian and Chinese interests in key sectors of the Belarusian economy.¹⁶ Such a confrontational scenario appears rather unlikely, as China pursues a cautious, well-calibrated policy that avoids excessive displays of ambition and carefully refrains from infringing on Moscow's interests, particularly in the security sphere. The Russian pressure on Belarus and the accelerated integration of the Union State have undoubtedly stimulated Belarusian-Chinese contacts; however, they have not altered Minsk's strategic position, particularly following the outbreak of the full-scale phase of the war in Ukraine. China, despite its close relations with Moscow, avoids taking explicit positions regarding NATO or the war in Ukraine, although it undoubtedly gathers around itself some anti-Western actors from the Global South and the Global East.¹⁷ The change in the security situation in Eastern Europe has significantly reduced Belarus's ability to pursue its long-standing policy of balancing between Moscow and the European Union, thereby diminishing, for example, Belarus's transit attractiveness, a matter of considerable importance to China. In situations where Chinese interests were affected, Beijing influenced, at least several times, adjustments to Belarusian policy, for example by urging Minsk to withdraw from disseminating overtly anti-Western propaganda, to soften its confrontational narratives, and to reduce migratory pressure along the Polish-Belarusian border.¹⁸

¹⁶ R. Lisiakiewicz, 'China as a Strategic Economic Partner in the Concepts of Russian Foreign Policy in the 2020s', *New Eastern Policy*, no. 3 (2021), pp. 43–65, <https://doi.org/10.15804/npw20212803>.

¹⁷ M. Adamczyk, 'Chińska perspektywa kryzysu na wschodniej granicy Unii Europejskiej (2021–2022)', *Wschodniozawstwo*, 16 (2022), pp. 157–175, <https://doi.org/10.4467/20827695WSC.22.011.16760>, <https://ejournals.eu/czasopismo/wschodniozawstwo/artykul/chinska-perspektywa-kryzysu-na-wschodniej-granicy-unii-europejskiej-2021-2022> (accessed: 23 Sept. 2025).

¹⁸ M. Słowiński, 'Echa (niespodziewanej) wizyty Aleksandra Łukaszenki w Chinach', Blog OSA (7 Dec. 2023), <https://www.osa.uni.lodz.pl/publikacje/blog-osa/szczegoly/echa-niespodziewanej-wizyty-aleksandra-lukaszenki-w-chinach> (accessed: 23 Sept. 2025).

The Beijing–Moscow–Minsk triangle: cooperation or conflict of interests?

Back in 2019, Lukashenka emphasised that “in an ideal scenario, the western and eastern vectors of Belarus’s foreign policy should balance each other. We will only achieve balance when the EU market becomes a real alternative to the Russian one, not on paper, but in reality, based on concrete results”.¹⁹ At the same time, the ‘balancing problem’ was also analysed within the Belarusian expert community. For instance, Yevgeny Preiherman, when considering the optimal model of foreign policy equilibrium, observed that, for Belarus, such a balance should primarily rest on risk management.²⁰ In a similar context, another Belarusian scholar, Alyaksandr Tikhomirov, examined this issue, describing the strategy of “balancing” as a manifestation of independent behaviour in foreign policy between the European and Eurasian political, economic, and military spheres. This strategy, he noted, was reflected in the desire to create a “belt of good neighbourliness” in Europe, to strengthen cooperation with the countries of the “collective South”, and to elevate relations with some of these states to the level of “strategic partnership”.²¹ Thus, discussions on the need to balance and adopt a multi-vector approach have dominated Belarusian academic and analytical circles and the Belarusian power elite for years.

In essence, the implementation of such a foreign policy strategy resembled an expanded version of the concept of Belarus as a geopolitical and cultural “bridge” between the Slavic and non-Slavic nations of Europe, a notion developed in the early 1990s by Stanislau Shushkevich, then Chairman of the Supreme Council. According to him, Belarus, having for centuries been an arena of confrontation between the West and the East, should finally become a space where the West and the East meet as “good neighbours”.²² It can therefore be concluded that this idea was not new to Belarusian foreign policy, and efforts to implement it were made at different times, with varying results. The Chinese foreign policy vector has been present in political and journalistic discourse for years, which should not be surprising, especially since Minsk and Moscow had numerous economic and information conflicts before 2020. Against this background, relations with China have been, and continue to be, the most stable and least turbulent among Belarus’s

¹⁹ ‘Лукашенко: западный и восточный векторы белорусской внешней политики должны уравновешивать друг друга’, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-zapadnyj-i-vostochnyj-vektory-beloruskoj-vneshnej-politiki-dolzhny-uravnoveshivat-drug-338921-2019/> (accessed: 23 Sept. 2025).

²⁰ Е. Прейгерман, ‘Внешняя политика Беларуси: в поисках оптимального баланса’, <https://minskdialogue.by/research/analytcs-notes/vneshniaia-politika-belorussii-v-poiskakh-optimalnogo-balansa> (accessed: 23 Sept. 2025).

²¹ А. Тихомиров, ‘Внешняя политика Республики Беларусь: итоги двадцати лет’, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/290234809.pdf> (accessed: 23 Sept. 2025).

²² А. Смолянчук, ‘Білорусь у ХХ столітті: геополітичне становище і спроби формування власної політики’, І, 18 (2000), <https://www.ji.lviv.ua/n18texts/smalanch.htm> (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025).

major foreign policy partnerships. While Lukashenka's traditional manoeuvring had previously taken place solely along the West (the United States, the European Union)–Russia axis, China's role in this process had long been of secondary importance to the Belarusian authorities.

After 2020, however, the international context in which Belarusian-Chinese relations developed proved to be just as significant as their intensity. Belarus's dialogue with the United States and the European Union was complicated by the West's continued tightening of sanctions in response to Belarus's internal political developments. It should be noted, however, that despite these sanctions, Minsk's trade relations with European countries remained surprisingly strong up until 2020. However, the progressive de-democratisation of the Belarusian state following the presidential elections led to a *de facto* freezing of dialogue with the West, prompting Belarus to turn even more decisively towards the East. During the same period, Belarus–Russia relations were primarily characterised by Moscow's attempts to undermine Belarusian sovereignty. At the same time, however, Beijing and Moscow entered into an intriguing tangle of mutual dependencies.²³

Relations between Belarus, China, and Russia after 2020 may be analysed, for instance, through the lens of the patron–client relationship model, which describes asymmetric dependencies between states.²⁴ Within the Minsk–Beijing–Moscow triangle, we observe a complex configuration of mutual influences, in which Belarus serves as a client seeking to balance between two powerful patrons: Russia, the regional hegemon, and China, a global actor with expanding ambitions. At the same time, Moscow plays the role of a client towards Beijing.²⁵

As a result of its relations with both China and Russia, Belarus has been losing part of its independence in exchange for financial, political, and military support. At the same time, however, through the creation of political and economic mechanisms, it seeks to expand its margin of autonomy vis-à-vis its main patron, Moscow, and to minimise the losses resulting from the rupture of relations with the West.²⁶ The intensively developed multi-vector foreign policy, supported by

²³ R. Turarbekava, 'The Second "Pillar" of the Foreign Policy of Belarus: Relations with China', Belarus Network for Neighborhood Policy (2023), https://belarusnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Roza-Turarbekava_Analytical-Article.pdf (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025).

²⁴ N. Morgado, T. Hosoda, 'A Pact of Iron? China's Deepening of the Sino-Russian Partnership', *Frontiers in Political Science*, 6 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1446054>.

²⁵ M. Słowiński, 'In the Shadow of War: Strategic and Ideational Determinants of Russia's Policy Towards Belarus After August 2020', *Przegląd Strategiczny*, 17 (2024), pp. 153–164, <https://doi.org/10.14746/ps.2024.1.10>, <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/server/api/core/bitstreams/c9bf5e8a-33ad-4818-85af-06bc66b180a7/content>.

²⁶ J. Olędzka, M. Rust, "Żelaźni bracia" na "każdą pogodę". Nowe priorytety w relacjach chińsko–białoruskich', in *Raport XI: Gospodarka, polityka i propaganda z wojną w tle: niejednoznaczne wyzwania*, SEW UW & Grupa Analityczna „Białoruś – Ukraina – Region” Series (Warszawa, 2024), pp. 31–37, https://studium.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Raport_11.pdf (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025).

China on the international stage, undoubtedly strengthens Lukashenka himself, yet the fundamental question remains whether it also strengthens Belarus as a state. After all, this diversified international activity is conducted on terms and within boundaries defined by Beijing and Moscow. What certainly unites Belarus, Russia, and China, however, is their shared pursuit of promoting a multipolar world order – one from which all three states stand to benefit.

Conclusion

The political crisis in Belarus in 2020 and the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine led to Belarus's diplomatic and political isolation from the West, accompanied by accelerated Belarusian-Russian integration and a strengthening of Belarusian-Chinese ties. The strengthening of relations with China after 2020 represents Belarus's attempt to reduce its dependence on Russia; however, the effectiveness of this strategy remains limited, as for China, Belarus is not a key geopolitical partner but rather one component of the continental Belt and Road projects, subordinate to Minsk's overall strategy towards Moscow.²⁷

Cooperation with China cannot provide Belarus with a genuine economic alternative to its relations with Russia or restore balance in its foreign policy. It does, however, serve as an instrument of both domestic and international legitimisation for Lukashenka's regime. Contrary to the Belarusian propaganda narrative, the cooperation with China has so far failed to produce any spectacular economic results, such as structural transformations of the Belarusian economy, but this goal remains secondary to the immediate image gains sought by the Minsk regime.²⁸

It may be stated that China is a detached and pragmatic ally of Belarus, though not in the classical sense of a close political or military alliance, and that the Sino-Belarusian partnership, while mutually beneficial in intent, is strongest at the declarative and propagandistic level.²⁹ Belarus, much like Russia, needs China; however, there are no prospects for it to become a priority partner for Beijing, which has already signalled its interest in participating in Ukraine's postwar reconstruction.

The study identifies key determinants influencing the dynamics of Belarus-China relations after 2020: the consequences of the political crisis following the presidential elections in Belarus; the country's role in Russia's war against Ukraine

²⁷ T. Iwanow, 'Białoruś i nowe chińskie inicjatywy strategiczne', *Wschodnioniemieckie Studia Naukowe*, 13 (2019), pp. 119–136, <https://ejournals.eu/czasopismo/wschodnioniemieckie-studia-naukowe/artykul/bialorus-i-nowe-chinskie-inicjatywy-strategiczne> (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025).

²⁸ R. Turarbekava, 'The Second "Pillar" of the Foreign Policy of Belarus: Relations with China', Belarus Network for Neighborhood Policy (2023), https://belarusnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Roza-Turbekava_Analytical-Article.pdf (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025).

²⁹ 'Cooperation and Dependence in Belarus-Russia Relations', RAND Corporation (20 June 2024), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2061-3.html (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025).

and its attempts to mitigate the effects of sanctions imposed on Minsk; as well as the asymmetric nature of the interdependence between Minsk and Beijing, Beijing and Moscow, and Moscow and Minsk. In response to the research questions outlined in the introduction, it should be noted that the rapprochement between China and Belarus does not constitute direct competition to Belarus–Russia relations, which, due to their multidimensional nature and intensity, appear stable and unthreatened. Sino-Belarusian relations have continually been strengthened within limits acceptable to Moscow; their form and intensity have never posed a threat to Russia's strategic, political, or military dominance over Belarus, nor have they undermined Russia's economic interests.³⁰ Minsk, however, undoubtedly takes advantage of its cooperation with Beijing, whose ambitions are global, to present itself as a serious and credible partner in international politics. Unlike the West, China finds Belarus's approach to domestic governance acceptable; therefore, it supports Lukashenka's leadership and the external legitimisation of the political system he has established.³¹

Abstract

The article examines China's role in Belarus's foreign policy amid deepening integration with Russia within the Union State framework. It focuses on the evolution of Belarus–China relations, especially between 2020 and 2025, when cooperation expanded beyond economic ties to encompass ideological and propaganda elements. After the 2020 presidential elections and Belarus's involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine, the country faced significant international isolation. In response, Belarus sought to strengthen ties with China as an alternative to the West while reducing its dependence on Russia. However, these relations are asymmetrical, driven by China's interests, as it views Belarus primarily through the lens of its Belt and Road initiatives.

China supports political stability in Minsk but does not challenge Russian influence. The cooperation spans investments, military projects, and propaganda promoting a multipolar world. Using patron-client theory, the article describes how Belarus attempts to balance its relations with Beijing and Moscow. While cooperation with China enhances the Lukashenka regime's international standing, it does not grant Belarus true independence. Despite viewing China as a source of investment, technology, and an authoritarian model, the partnership remains limited. China has become Belarus's second-largest trade partner after Russia, but many joint projects have achieved only modest success. The article concludes that while China offers some support to Belarus, it remains a distant ally and fails to provide a genuine alternative to Russian dominance.

³⁰ K. Kluczevska, K. Silvan, 'Post-Soviet Dependence with Benefits? Critical Geopolitics of Belarus's and Tajikistan's Strategic Alignment with Russia', *Geopolitics*, 30, no. 2 (2025), pp. 641–678, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2024.2368621>.

³¹ A. Гронский, 'Белорусско-китайские экономические отношения', *Экономика и Политика*, no. 2 (2018), pp. 165–175, <https://doi.org/10.20542/2073-4786-2018-2-165-175>, https://www.imemo.ru/files/File/magazines/rossia_i_novay/2018_02/17_Gronskiy.pdf (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025); A.B. Тихомиров, 'Китай как приоритет внешней политики Республики Беларусь (1992–2019 гг.)', *Актуальные проблемы международных отношений и глобального развития*, 7 (2019), pp. 71–89, https://elib.bsu.by/bitstream/123456789/237202/1/tihomirov_2019_Actual_probl_IR_V7.pdf (accessed: 10 Sept. 2025).

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