



NATO Foundation
Defense College



***The sensitive strategic position of Belarus
between the Russian Federation, EU and NATO***

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Executive Summary

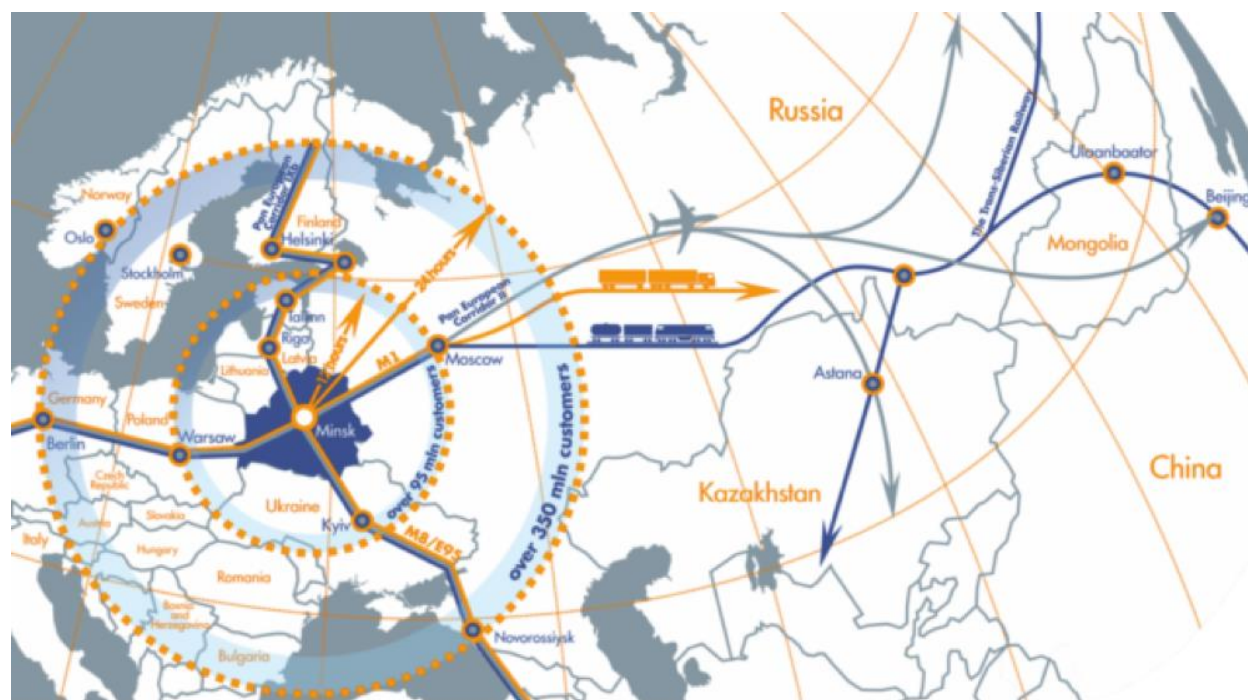
Five main considerations and interests, solidly nested in domestic concerns, guide Belarusian foreign policy:

- 1) The need to maintain Russian funding, fundamental for the survival of the Belarusian economy and for the perpetuation of the country's current social order;
- 2) The need to prevent an acceleration in the integration with Russia, beyond official Pan-Slavic and neo-Soviet rhetoric. The massive entry of Russian structures, that would follow a too "tight" integration, would certainly lead to a substantial reduction in the energy bill of Belarus by Russia. On the other hand, inevitably, it would damage the economic, political and security-sector ruling classes of Belarus. Above all, it would have the effect of bringing the country out of a framework of relative international "neutrality", exemplified also by the absence of permanent Russian military bases on Belarusian soil, that would make it extremely vulnerable in the event of an armed conflict between Russia and NATO.
- 3) Unfortunately, factual neutrality does not match, from a legal point of view, with Belarusian membership in military and security organizations such as the CSTO and the STO (Shanghai Treaty Organization) in which the Russian Federation is present and plays a leading role. Belarus's participation in the Eurasian Economic Union has also inevitable geopolitical implications characterize this economic-commercial union. This disconnect is source of confusion and irritation with Minsk's partners.
- 4) The need to maintain constructive and pragmatic relations with the West, in particular with the EU and NATO. Brussels and Minsk are engaged, in fact, in a dialogue that is limited to the economic (business climate improvement), commercial (barrier reduction for the import of Belarusian goods into the Union), financial (assistance to obtain an adjustment credit from the International Monetary Fund) or technical (introduction of European technical rules, green economy, modernization of transport infrastructures) issues. This dialogue probably helps Belarus maintain its stability and may even compensate for the reduction of Russian direct and indirect aid. This element is therefore crucial for the internal stability of the country and its resistance to the pressures of Moscow. Conditionality is here not always possible, feasible or even desirable.

5) The need to maximize the advantages of a flexible and opportunistic position explains the “hesitant alignment” or “creeping alignment” with Russia, the attempts at mediation with the West and an overall survival strategy that lacks internal coherence, at least in the eyes of both Russian and European partners. We are witnessing a strongly wavering Belarusian policy because clear choices would entail dangerous consequences for the country.

Notwithstanding an accurate assessment of Minsk’s security drivers towards Russia, a clear and explicitly defined “Finlandization” of the country would end a long standing political and security limbo in favour of freedom in trade and in political relations with its neighbours. Russia would have a guaranteed neutral buffer in exchange, but its assent to this solution is should not be taken for granted.

Logistic bases of Belarusian geo-economics



The logistics of Belarus indicate directly the geo-economic factors and indirectly the potential geopolitical options of the country. Source: Logisticpark.by.¹

¹ AOI Logistic Park, FLLC, has been created by an investment contract between AOI (Antwerpse Ontwikkelings-en Investeringsmaatschappij - Antwerp Development and Investment Company) and the Belarusian government.

1.1 Introduction

The choice that leads to neutrality, *de facto*, if not *de jure*, often occurs when a small country tries to protect itself from a bigger and powerful neighbour or to break free from a bond of subordination, vassalage and dependence on its old colonial master. This applies to former colonies of the old European empires as well as to some states of the post-Soviet space, following the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991.

1.2 The geopolitical position of Belarus

Belarus is an Eastern European state of 207.000 square kilometres, wedged between the EU and Russia and especially between Russia and NATO. Its importance is not due to its economic power or to its population but rather to its strategic position between two opposing rival blocs. This explains why, after several years of politically motivated neglect, it has recently entered in the European Union's focus of attention and above all in that of the United States and NATO. From Russia's strategic point of view, Belarus represents a buffer zone or an advanced defence bastion of Russian territory, as witnessed in the experience of the Second World War when Nazi troops attacked Belarus that lost a great portion of its inhabitants. Today, the political situation is obviously very different, but the geographical and strategic fact remains unaltered or at least similar.

From Moscow's political point of view, the control on Belarus or its substantial, concrete neutrality is fundamental as it also represents a bastion against any "coloured revolution" organized by the West and especially by the USA to erode the Russian political and, above all, strategic glacis. This is an important point considering Russia's attention, perhaps even obsession, with the concept of strategic depth. Russia wants or needs to be surrounded by a series of friendly, (пояс дружественных государств), allied states or at least by neutral or not hostile countries to protect its territorial security and allow, to some extent, the projection of its sphere of influence. Conversely, Belarus is fundamental for NATO in the possible defence of the Baltic States from military aggression or hybrid warfare. Perhaps, it is not by chance that the European Hybrid Centre of

Excellence is located in Helsinki.² Four other NATO accredited CoE are located in the same Baltic region.³

1.3 Interplay between Belarus's geographical position and internal politics

This element influences foreign and internal policies and the current neo-Soviet economic context in Belarus, strongly conditioned by Russian financial support to the transit of Russian hydrocarbons towards the European Union. Belarus is fundamental for Russia for both military and political reasons. Militarily, it represents a corridor towards Russian territory, known by analysts under the name of “Smolensk Gates” and the so-called “Suwalki Gap” - a 100 km long border between Poland and Lithuania - that connects Belarus to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, now heavily militarized, renders Belarusian territory an essential passageway for Russia. Politically, Belarus represents a valid example of collaboration and thus serves as a “showcase model” for a possible, gradual, reintegration between Russia and the other states of the post-Soviet area.

For all the above-mentioned military and strategic reasons, Belarus has now become the object of the intense and simultaneous attention of both Russia and the West. The European Union does not have good relations with Belarus and abstains from making any substantial political opening because of the country's unexciting record in terms of respect for human rights. It also generally disapproves the economic guidelines and the actions of President Lukashenko and his opposition to the liberal policies proposed and carried out by the European Union, which inevitably keeps Belarus dependent on Russian economic support.

NATO and, recently, the United States in particular have repeatedly tried to highlight this aspect but the dialogue between the parties on this issue has proved to be scarcely constructive and has quickly come to a stalemate. It only continues at a strategic level as it represents a necessary, pragmatic and, above all, viable choice considering Belarus' main interest in keeping good relations with its great

² The initiative to establish Hybrid CoE originated from the Joint Communication by the European Commission and the High Representative to the European Parliament and the Council “Joint framework on countering hybrid threats – a European Union response”, decided in Brussels on 6 April 2016. The initiative was supported in the Common set of proposals for the implementation of the Joint EU/NATO Declaration, endorsed by the Council of the European Union and the North Atlantic Council on 6 December 2016. The Hybrid CoE was established on 11th April 2017, inaugurated on 2nd October, 2017.

³ Namely, the: Cooperative Cyber Defence (CCD) COE in Tallinn, Estonia; Counter Intelligence (CI) COE in Kraków, Poland; Energy Security (ENSEC) COE in Vilnius, Lithuania and Strategic Communications (StratCom) COE in Riga, Latvia.

Slavic brother to the east, while carefully avoiding becoming a territory of passage for a possible clash between Russia and Euro-Atlantic constellation.

Accordingly, Belarus practices a policy of great openness and transparency during joint military manoeuvres with the Russian Armed Forces, regularly inviting NATO and OSCE observers, operating under the Treaty for the limitation of the forces, deployed on the field and therefore for the strengthening of measures for maintaining safety (OSCE Confidence and Security Building Measures).

An important “shift of the focus” is therefore necessary to transfer attention from the unproductive terrain of human rights or, more precisely, democratization that appears to be a dead-end issue (without, however, giving up completely) to the more productive, pragmatic and concrete issue of security. Adequate measures should aim at maintaining Belarus’ role as buffer zone between NATO and Russia while preventing disturbing interferences on this balance by one or both opposing counterparts, a primary interest of Belarus itself for which it works with great attention and commitment.

This supreme existential and specific interest of Belarus has taken concrete form in a relationship of substantial alliance with Russia, albeit in a context of a strong and incisive claim for autonomy and sovereignty in respect to the will of Moscow. This drive for independence has manifested itself in: the rejection of providing a permanent military base to the Russian Armed Forces; a substantially autonomous foreign policy and a careful distancing itself from Moscow’s most controversial actions in the post-Soviet space. Among these actions, one may mention: the annexation of Crimea; the war in the Donbass or the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to gain the strategic control of the Black Sea and as an anti-NATO lever, since the territorial conflict hinders Georgia’ possible adhesion to the Alliance. This is due, on the one hand, to the need to carry out and manage in the best possible way a multi-vector policy towards the international community and, on the other, to the need to safeguard its autonomy and independence from Moscow by highlighting the differences.

1.4 The essential ambiguity of foreign policy

The multi-vector policy pursued by Belarus obviously presents some evident essential ambiguities. However, the fundamental existential interest of Belarus in pursuing a multi-vector policy is to maintain, as far as possible, its political-economic model made of state-owned industries and of a

private sector that fears an “aggressive” entry of the great Russian business that, should the integration process proceed rapidly, would economically crush the Belarusian one. Presently, Russia’s economic support is directly proportional to Belarusian concessions made in the direction of an accelerated integration progress between the two countries.

Some sectors of Belarusian society, that wish for a structural renewal and above strive for a loosening of the growing political-military tension on its borders, have recently questioned this issue. The potential construction of new American bases in Poland would lead to an immediate Russian response. This, in turn, would imply a growing pressure on Belarus to grant the use of its military bases to Russian Armed Forces and vice-versa a Russian base would lead to an increase of NATO and US military contingents near the Belarusian border.

Hence, the strong and immediate interest of Poland that tries to turn the situation in Belarus in favour of its geopolitical and security interests, as in Ukraine. Hence, NATO’s main interest in keeping Belarus in a *de facto*, if not *de iure*, neutral state as the union of Belarus and Russia would increase the degree of Russian military pressure on its neighbours. Hence, also the strong and evident interest of the Baltic States to significantly improve their relations with Belarus. This would lower the risk of potential military attacks by Russia because Belarusian neutrality implies giving up the idea of an offensive war or, much more realistically, the risk of Russian hybrid warfare actions based on Belarusian territory, envisioned to remain below the activation threshold of article V of NATO that provides for the use of collective military defence.

For all these reasons, Belarus itself has the utmost interest in maintaining an active neutrality or, at least, in ensuring that attacks on neighbouring states do not move from its territory. The urge for a regional de-escalation was clear in the case of Ukraine and Belarus’ offer of its territory as a mediation site to try to reduce the conflict in Donbass, now provisionally regulated by the thus called “Minsk agreements”, still in force although certainly perfectible.

1.5 The position and regional interests of Belarus

Furthermore, Belarus has the need and convenience to use the Lithuanian port of Klaipeda for the export of its products throughout the Baltic area and therefore has a direct interest in maintaining a relationship of active economic and commercial collaboration with its neighbours. All these issues

underline Belarus significance in the regional communication routes and transport infrastructures that make it, in addition to its strategic position between Russia and the West, absolutely central and crucial for the entire Baltic region.

Evidently, the fragmentation of “concessions” or geopolitical options in favour of its various regional partners presently allows Belarus to satisfy its internal commercial, economic and security needs. Belarus leverages on the importance of its geostrategic position between two opposed groupings and raises the price of its concessions and collaboration. This also happens with Serbia, but also the margins of manoeuvre for Belarus are not wide and narrowing progressively. There is, in fact, the internal contradiction between the different, sometimes diverging, concessions or agreements signed with the various state and regional partners. Inevitably and soon partners will ask Belarus to take sides and cease keeping a precarious balance between regional interests and the strongly opposed positions of Russia and NATO. In the next few years, Belarus’ role as mediator between the two opposing parts may prove to be insufficient.

1.6 Political and military relations with Russia

Belarus, in spite of a military treaty signed with Moscow to share military airspace within the unitary state (though state organisms are not yet integrated) believes that it has the right to decide ultimately on how to respond to any invasion or penetration of its airspace by extraneous military forces. In fact, Russian forces do not have the right to stay permanently on Belarusian territory and must obligatorily return to Russian military bases beyond the border at the end of any joint military exercise. However, this situation of relative stalemate in Russian-Belarusian relations could push Putin to force the hand to the President Alexander Lukashenko, a decision that would entail great uncertainty because, despite the good relations between the two countries, Belarusian resistance could prove to be very strong. The question of the political orientation of Belarus could also be determined by economic and ideological factors, such as the progressive replacement of conservatives with free market supporters who would push in the direction of a gradual conversion of the statist economy to a more market oriented one and therefore to wider openings towards the European Union.

As imaginable, however, there is a strong difference between opening to the European Union and opening to NATO. In the latter case, Russian resistance would be strenuous and certainly lead to open and covered interference in Belarusian politics, even more than at present times where Russian propaganda pressure is already felt. At present, though, these hypotheses are totally futuristic and unpredictable.

1.7 The attitude of the Belarusian population between integration with Russia or with the West

The population is divided between a substantial bulk that feels an attachment to the Russian world (*russki mir*) and a slightly smaller portion that would instead look to Europe, between supporters of Lukashenko's patriarchal and highly ideological model and those who would wish for a gradual introduction of market economy. Lukashenko's model is characterized by a tendency to favour relations with Russia that derive from an incipient agrarian, traditional, and paternalistic pan-Slavism that has its roots in the Soviet kolkhoz (collective ownership, collective farm) system and represents a good or conspicuous part of Lukashenko's electoral base. This consensus is inevitably bound to decrease over time due to the ageing of the Soviet-born population, despite the strong government propaganda on the Soviet heritage and on the "Slavic brotherhood", touted also in joint military exercises that bear this same name. However, beyond the more or less traditional aspects, the distinct feature of a Belarusian culture assumes a strong political value in relation to Russia as it emphasizes a specific local culture (*samobitnost*), that is not of Russian, but sheer Belarusian matrix. Something that evidently Russian authorities do not welcome. In fact, beyond the folkloric phenomenon, it represents a clear manifestation of the will to maintain its own otherness or specific local identity.

The attempt to establish a sort of multipolar model with other countries such as China, India or Iran is functional to the emphasising the independent and multi-vector nature of Belarusian politics, besides being obviously profitable for reasons of economic diversification. The maintenance or modification of Belarusian foreign policy will also depend on these elements. Either this substantial alignment with Russia will continue, albeit characterized by some disagreements and distinctions, or it will give way to an approach to Western positions. It would nevertheless be a cautious approach as

Belarusian, clever, multi-vector foreign policy stands on ideological consideration but also takes into account pragmatic concerns based on the objective reality of the facts.

The analysis of these elements explains the *de jure* alignment with Moscow, the tendency towards a multi-polarity in foreign policy seasoned with nuances of non-alignment and, above all, the “Finlandization” trend of a small country nestled between two military blocs characterized by growing and escalating tension. Moreover, Belarus obviously intends to try to decrease or, to use a technical term, to deescalate any possible military build-up at its immediate borders.





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