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## **Belarusian Foreign Policy: Analysis of the Far Arc 2017-2022**

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# **Belarusian Foreign Policy Analysis of the Far Arc 2017-2022**

*the powerful exact what they want, while the weak exact what they can.*

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MA Thesis Russian and Eurasian Studies

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## **I 1. Introduction**

Belarus has been on and off a subject of academic interest over the past decades. Every time there is talk about progress in regards to the Union State of Russia and Belarus, trade wars between Russia and Belarus or to a certain extend elections in Belarus, there seems to be a renewed interest in Belarus for a moment, but this interest never stays long. As the 2014 Maidan revolution took place in Ukraine, interest in Belarus once again renewed as it started to play an interesting and unique role in the events that happened. As Russian troops invaded Crimea, Belarus started to show some signs of discomfort with the action of its partner and direct neighbor Russia. As such Belarus slowly but surely (re)started its attempts to gain some more maneuverability. Since 2009 Belarus has been looking more and more to gain some more freedom, by reducing its dependence on Russia and regaining some of its economic and political independence it once traded with Russia. In order to achieve this goal Belarus had to and has to work in a very difficult setting of political desires, policies, economic goals and spheres of influence. One way to avoid some of these difficulties for Belarus turned out to be looking beyond the region and deploy a strategy which has been called multi-vectorism . As such Belarus started to look for partners in Asia, Latin-America, Africa and the Middle East. These nations, with the exception of China and sometimes Vietnam, are referred to as the 'Far Arc'. When looking at the Far Arc it turns out that Belarus has found more than one ally, which can provide Belarus with the means and tools to act a little more independent from Russia than in the past decade. At the same time Belarus seems to have failed to forge strong bonds with another major power, which can truly protect Belarus from pressure as well as allowing Belarus to continue the way it is going. The best way to describe Belarus is still: powerful exact what they want, while the weak exact what they can.

## **I 2. Methodology**

In order to look at how Belarus has been able to keep its head above water in the hard and difficult political climate, this research will look into the foreign policy of Belarus and how this has changed. One term often used both by Belarus as well as by a broad range of academic works to define its foreign policy is multi-vectorism or multi-vector foreign policy (Minasyan, 2012). Multi-vector foreign policy entails, that instead of focusing on one area or power, policy is split into pieces and focus is split into multiple directions. The

problem is however that multi-vectorism can take many shapes and forms and can make use of almost every thinkable foreign policy tool a nation has at its disposal. This paper will, however, focus first on the way Belarus interacts with nations before looking at the grand picture. In order to understand the interaction between Belarus and other nations and to help understand possible implications, this paper will draw on realist theories. The reason to use realist theories is twofold. On the one hand has realist literature been widely used to analyze the relationship between Belarus and its direct neighbors, but it has not been used to look beyond that, while this paper argues that there is more to the foreign policy of Belarus than just its direct neighborhood. On the other hand, while researching this subject, it became clear that realist theories combined give at this point in time the most insight into the behavior of Belarusian foreign policy as well as providing the most useful tools and terms to talk about the exact nature of Belarusian foreign policy.

The focus area of this paper will be the Far Arc including China, because there has been a lot of focus in the past and recently on Belarus Russia relations, on the way Belarus operates in its neighborhood and with the Eurasian Economic Union as well as focus on the economy of Belarus both its domestic and international aspect. At the same time there is not a lot of academic work on Belarus and the members of the Far Arc, except China. The reason this research will include China in the analysis, is because China plays an interesting role in the foreign policy of Belarus as well as the fact that Belarus and China do have stronger relationship than some other countries, which have been looked at. Furthermore this research attempts to further the understanding of Belarus internationally by expanding on the existent literature and at the same time add a more modern view, as the situation around Belarus has changed a lot. As such this paper will look at Belarus from 2017 onward, as from this moment on the amount of literature about Belarus starts to decline significantly. Furthermore this allows for a broad picture of Belarusian policy over five to seven years. Previous years on the other hand will not be disregarded as foreign policy can not be understood when it is picked apart. It needs to be seen as a whole in order to understand (Deyermond, 2004).

In order to understand the international position of Belarus and see how this has changed over the years the following question will be central to this paper: How has the relationship between Belarus and the states of the Far Arc changed since 2017? This question will be answered by looking at several elements of Belarusian foreign policy as

well as the actions and reactions of the partner states. The first element will be derived from mostly primary sources taken from the embassy of Belarus in the respective country as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the respective country. In case the ministry of foreign affairs was unavailable sources from domestic newspapers from the nation in question will be used as substitute. Newspaper sources have as benefit, that in regards to foreign policy, they often quote from the press section of a ministry of the respective nation. Furthermore most nations this paper focuses on still have a state-controlled media outlet, which allows for source material equal to the press releases found on the websites of the ministries of foreign affairs. The reason for looking at these sources as such is to see how Belarus and its partner nations speak about each other officially.

The second element will be a review of secondary sources, both academic as well as think tanks and third party sources in order to get a clear understanding as to what Belarus is actually doing. This will be mainly looking at how third parties see the actions of Belarus and whether or not they think Belarus is actually doing what it says it is doing. Moreover this review should also provide further insight in the political action Belarus deploys internationally.

Lastly there will be a short comparative analysis of the first and second element combined with the theories from academic literature review. The analysis will look at the possibility of explaining the actions of Belarus using academic theories. Most of these theories are (neo)realism theories as they turn out to be the most commonly used theories to look at the region of Russia, Belarus Ukraine. The paper will, however, note, that realism on its own does not give a satisfactory nor complete explanation of the foreign policy of Belarus. This is partly due to shortcomings in the realism theory, having a very large amount and wide scale of theories, as well as the fact that this paper focuses only on the Far Arc states and pays much less attention to Russia, Ukraine or the European Union, as the focus of this paper is to look at policy changes towards the partner states of the Far Arc.

Furthermore this paper will focus on partner states of Belarus in Latin-America, the Middle East and Asia. There will only be a small section regarding Africa and partner states in Africa, because research has shown, that separate nations in Africa have little to no information in regards to this research. The section covering Africa will further expand on

this matter.

In order to determine which states to focus on, the Belarusian foreign policy goals have been used to come up with three criteria: political interaction with Belarus, economical interaction with Belarus, available information regarding interactions (President of the Republic of Belarus, visited 06-2022). These criteria are arbitrarily and had no further use than determining which nations this paper will look more in depth at. Moreover last criterion has not been determined by the foreign policy goals of Belarus, but has been added in the early stages of research. As it turned out, some nations met the political or economic interaction criteria, but there was an insufficient amount of available data for any further research. The interaction criteria were used to narrow down which states needed further investigation. As it turned out African nations met the economic interaction criteria, but had beyond that little to offer. Countries in Asia, Latin-America and the Middle East on the other hand met both the political and economic interaction criteria and had plenty of sources available.

Lastly there are a few issues this paper needs to address. As the focus of this paper is Belarus, the name of the president of Belarus will be written as Lukashenka as this is the proper translation from Belarusian to English. Other names in this paper will be written as encountered in the source material or as written on the official website from the respective ministry or organization the person is part of.

Furthermore this paper will not pay any attention to the ongoing war in Ukraine after this note, neither will this paper include any analysis of possible changes of relations between Belarus and its partners caused by the war in Ukraine. The reason to leave out such an important and influential moment in history is, that at the moment of writing of this paper the war is still going on and no end is expected in the near future. As such information, which can be objectively be verified, is very hard to obtain and there is not much of it. As such this paper will not move into the realm of making assumption or attempts of future tellings.

### **1 3. Review of Belarusian foreign policy**

The foreign policy of Belarus has been a subject of debate for years. Every time new sanctions are put into place or the relationship with the European Union thaw Belarus

becomes interesting for researchers again. Since 2014 Belarus once again has been in the spotlight in regards to their actions during the conflict in Ukraine and later the unrests in the Donbas region as well as the events in Crimea (Kryvoi and Wilson, 2015)(Council of Europe, visited February 2022)(Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase, 2009)(Jarábik, 2009)(Korosteleva, 2016)(Korosteleva, 2011)(Portela, 2011)(Titarenko, 2018). But how has Belarus been able to survive in all the unrest? How has Belarus been able to resist the growing Russia pressure in the region and what, if any, strategies managed to give Belarus the space to keep its head above water?

Since 2009 survival has become one of the most important goals of Belarus overall (Kryvoi and Wilson, 2015)(Korosteleva, 2011). To increase its chances of survival Belarus has been looking into other option than Russia for its economic as well as political needs (Korosteleva, 2011)(Ioffe and Yarashevich, 2013)(Yarashevich, 2014). Looking for other options is, however, not without its dangers for Belarus.

One option for Belarus might be to turn to China. China has slowly, but surely become one of the largest trading partners of Belarus, offering Belarus not only a third option besides the European Union or Russia, but also being somewhat supportive or at least not as critical of the Belarusian regime, looking more at economic and security cooperation (Lim, 2015)(Rousseau, 2012)(Murphy, 2019).

Further cooperation with China could open for Belarus a new line of opportunities and benefits. The biggest benefits Belarus hopes to gain from China are access to Chinese capital, investments in the Belarusian economy, especially since Russia has started to cut into its subsidies towards Belarus, and becoming a trade hub for China between Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union on the one side and the European Union on the other side (Murphy, 2019)(Astapenia and Balkunets, 2016).

Further cooperation with China is, however, not without its danger and potential problems for Belarus. One danger for Belarus is that it will become very dependent on China. This in turn could lead to pressure from China to accept less favorable terms on loans or investments for Belarus (Astapenia and Balkunets, 2016)(Murphy, 2019). The second danger for Belarus comes in the form of how Russia perceives the cooperation between China and Belarus. Marin (2018) notes, that Russia is especially not pleased by the fact, that Belarus has been able to avoid and counter its oil and gas strategies by finding third party partners outside the region, effectively avoiding the pressure from Russia as well as gaining some freedom of movement.

In addition to dangers from cooperating with China, moving away from Russia could cause Russia to retaliate in form of sanctions or political countermeasures. In addition to the economic power asymmetry between Belarus and Russia there is also the political aspect. By interacting with Belarus as Russia does, it in fact keeps the administration of president Lukashenka in place (Ioffe and Yarashevich, 2013) (Yarashevich, 2014). Walking away from Russia could endanger the position of Lukashenka and his administration. This danger is, however, somewhat decreased by the actions of China and the investments it did made in Belarus Yakouchyk (2016).

At the same time the European Union could be another option for Belarus to look to. Research shows, that relations between the European Union and Belarus have in the past improved several times, but have at the same time declined the same amount of times (Kryvio and Wilson, 2015)(Portela, 2011)(Jarábik, 2009)(Titarenko, 2018) (Korosteleva, 2011). Relations improved in general when Belarus-Russia relations were in decline and Belarus seemed to be looking at other options to gain benefits from. This happened for example during the trade disputes with Russia in the period 2004-2011. Also during the Ukraine conflict Belarus decided to change from a mainly Russian focused position to a position, where it also looked at improving cooperation with the European Union (Kryvio and Wilson, 2015)(Titarenko, 2018)

A shift from Russia focused to European Union focused is, however, unlikely as there are still some constraints, which keep Belarus from making this shift. First of all the trade disputes have shown Belarus how dependent it is on Russia for its economy. Secondly cooperation between the European Union and Belarus are not without its hurdles. As Jarábik (2009, p.1) notes already in 2009, the European Union will not just start cooperating with Belarus, but is more most likely to set a wide range and large amount of conditions Belarus needs to comply with.

Moreover there are also the sanctions Belarus will need to get lifted in order to be able to fully cooperate with the European Union. These sanctions, however, also have conditions Belarus needs to meet in order for them to be lifted (European Council, visited February, 2022). At the same time Belarus might be motivated to keep the situation with the European Union as it is. Ambrosio (2006) argues, that the pressure Belarus experiences from the European Union and the support Russia offers, may allow Belarus to counter both at the same time. On the one the one hand, if Belarus were to comply with the conditions set by the European Union, it could endanger the position and influence of

Russia in Belarus as well as incur high costs both internal and external. The trade disputes with Russia have shown how much economic pressure Russia can put on Belarus. At the same time complying with the European Union could cause high internal costs due to the norms and values the European Union would like to see adopted (Portela, 2011, p.497). ( On the other hand the support from Russia, both politically as well as economically, make Belarus more and more dependent on Russia, but at the same time allow Belarus a very strong way to counter the sanction the European Union has imposed on Belarus (Ambrosio, 2006).

There is, however, still ongoing debate in regards to the effectiveness of the sanction against Belarus. The sanctions against Belarus have on the one hand hurt the economy of Belarus, damaging especially the foreign direct investments (FDI). This may also have had influence on the foreign policy of Belarus, but it is impossible to link any events directly to this (Portela, 2011).

On the other hand Korosteleva (2012) and Kryvio and Wilson (2015) argue, that sanctions were very ineffective. The main reason that the sanction have had so little effect, is due to the fact, that in general authoritarian states are very good in generating rents, which are then redistributed among their allies. Moreover Belarus has a very strong economic bond with Russia, as described above, and can as such always fall back to deeper cooperation with Russia, to mitigate the damage from the sanctions (Korosteleva, 2012, p.33-34). Kryvio and Wilson (2015, p.1) and Korosteleva (2016) further note that the sanctions of the European Union only push Belarus more and more towards Russia, while leaving little to no room for Belarus to move towards the European Union.

### **3.1 Realist theories**

Foreign policy of Belarus is a subject that has been researched extensively, whether it is looking at the Belarusian ties with Russia or the attempts of Belarsus to stay as much as possible independent. The general narrative in regards to the Belarusian foreign policy almost always includes the idea, that Belarus is trying in some way or another to gain as much benefits as possible, while committing as little as possible (Allison , Stephen White & Margot Light, 2005)(Jarábik, 2009).

At the beginning of this century Belarusian foreign policy was mostly seen as Russian oriented and any action that did not align with this were just observational errors.

The main argument was then that Belarus was actually very pleased with the situation as it was and had no incentive for change (Rontoyanni, 2005). As time passes on and the world wide economic crisis hits, Belarus slowly gets forced to change its course. At the same time Belarus seems not to eager, nor in the best position to suddenly change course from Russia focused to European Union focused (Jarábik, 2009). Later on the idea that Belarus foreign policy is only Russia focused becomes wider contested and theories starts to rise that Belarus is actually looking for ways to gain more independence from Russia or at least improve its rather dependent position (Shraibman, 2019)(Preiherman, 2017) (Niznikau, 2019)(Suzdaltsev, 2019)(Suzdaltsev, 2020). Reason for this change in academic focus is, that Russia and Belarus have had several smaller and larger disagreements in the past, some of which prompted Russia to impose sanctions or political countermeasures against Belarus (Niznikau, 2019) As such the academic focus split into two main groups, one group began to focus on how Belarus tries to move away from Russia and how the relationship between Russia and Belarus has slowly been growing colder over the last ~8 years (Suzdaltsev, 2019)(Suzdaltsev, 2020).

The other group started looking deeper into the relationship between Belarus and Russia and how Belarus has been adhering to the idea “gain as much benefits as possible, while committing as little as possible”(Allison , Stephen White & Margot Light, 2005)(Jarábik, 2009). One prime example of this “policy” is the way Belarus has been acting towards the Union State of Belarus and Russia. According to Žulys (2015), there have been political tensions between Russia and Belarus regarding the Union State since the being of the project. The main issues being that Belarus has been using the Union State to gain lots of benefits, often provided by Russia, while committing almost nothing (Deyermond, 2004)(Žulys, 2015). Furthermore the only area of cooperation, which is beneficial for both Russia and Belarus is the defense sector, but even without the Union State Belarus and Russia had been very successfully cooperating in this sector (Deyermond, 2004). This has also made it very hard for Belarus to focus less on Russia in order to obtain other foreign policy goals: maintaining its sovereignty and security. This illustrates also a major hurdle when looking into the room Belarus has to operate and how impactful its foreign policy is. The actions of Belarus' foreign policy cannot be picked apart but do need to be seen in the bigger picture (Deyermond, 2004)(Suzdaltsev, 2019) (Polglase-Korostelev, 2020).

One possible way to look into the foreign policy of Belarus is to take the realist approach. Realism focuses on the fact, that the main objective of a state is to survive and guarantee its own safety. In order to do this, states attempt to obtain as much power as possible, as this will provide them a means to survive (Norwich University Online, 2017). As power is obtained by states, smaller and bigger states start to come into existence. Following the realist approach, the smaller nations will in order to preserve themselves and survive also try to obtain as much power as possible. To obtain power as smaller nations, they will often, according to realism theory, join forces as alliances will allow small states to exert the same level of power as large states (Encyclopedia Britannica, Balance of Power). Another possibility for small states to obtain power is to balance their actions between two powers, which can either be single states or power blocs. Suzdaltsev (2019) and Polglase-Korostelev (2020) both suggest that this is at least one way Belarus' foreign policy works, as Belarus uses Russia and the European Union (EU) to balance out each other.

In addition there is a fierce debate under contemporary International Relations scholars about the concepts of “hard balancing” and “soft balancing” (He and Feng, 2008) (He, 2008)(Dursun-Özkanca, 2019)(Paul, 2015). The theory of hard balancing was a very prevalent theory during the Cold War era, arguing that in order to reduce the risks/ treats that could endanger the survival of a state, a state should invest in defense measures by either increasing its own military capabilities or by forming military alliances (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019). Soft balancing on the other hand argues, that states reduce the relative power of other states through diplomacy, institutions or sometimes economic actions (Paul, 2015)(He, 2008)(He and Feng, 2008). Economic actions in soft balancing are the hardest choice and are mainly to allow for move space for other policy options, as soft balancing is almost exclusively used by nations when they are too economically dependent on the major powers to hard balance them (He and Feng, 2008)(He, 2008) (Paul, 2015). The debate regarding hard and soft balancing is mainly concerned with the following problems: since the end of the Cold War hard balancing as foreign policy seems to have been in decline, but scholars have no answer as of yet for what has come after the hard balancing of the Cold War era (He and Feng, 2008), hard balancing had clear signs of success, which could be measured, but scholars still argue as how to prove that soft balancing brings forth tangible results (Paul, 2015). Lastly all previous authors write about hard and soft balancing from the assumption of a bloc versus a major power (World

against the USA or a region bloc in Asia against China). Yet looking at the focus of this paper, Belarus, one could wonder how a minor power in a alliance with a major power would act (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019)?

Hansbury (2017) answers this question by arguing that balancing as well as the realist approach as a whole does not sufficiently explain the Belarusian foreign policy. The main arguments Hansbury (2017) raises are that balancing would imply, that a minor power submits to a major power in its region, however Belarus has been clearly defiant both towards Russia as well as the EU. There are a number of theories, which all provide to some extent an answer to the problem raised by Hansbury.

Firstly there is the External Treat hypothesis: states will cooperate against external treats (Kupchan, 2009). In light of Belarus this hypothesis is both very enlightening as well as causing more questions than answers. When looking solely at the Belarusian Annual Reviews of Foreign Policy, it seems that Belarus and Russia are the best partners and there is no tension between the countries what so ever. At the same time Belarus and Russia often have disagreements, which from time to time even lead to political countermeasures such as in 2020 when Lukashenka accused Putin of wanting to merge Belarus with Russia (Radio Free Europe, 2020). Countermeasures from Russia are often stopping the oil deliveries to Belarus or cutting into the subsidies Belarus receives on Russian oil (Reuters, 2020)

Secondly there is the Alliance Security Dilemma, which argues that cohesion between allies is mainly due to the cooperation the major power is able to exact from its minor power allies (Kupchan, 2009). Furthermore the Alliance Security Dilemma argues, that interests of members of an alliance are always colliding. This causes the need to find both a solution to the problems and at the same time the need to satisfy all parties at the same time (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019). It also argues, that the minor power in the alliance faces the dilemma as to how much it wants to commit. As Allison, Stephen White & Margot Light (2005) and Jarábik (2009) show, Belarus wants to gain, but does not want to commit. This is due to the fact, according to the Alliance Security Dilemma, that Belarus might fear to become entrapped by its ally and suffers from actions taken by its ally, which could pose a treat to the survival of Belarus (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019). At the same time if the situation for the minor power improves, the minor power can be more likely to commit more in the alliance, even if this means facing increasing chances of becoming entrapped

by the major power (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019).

Thirdly the Domestic Politics hypothesis, which argues, that the actions of members in an alliance are mainly determined by domestic political and economic factors (Kupchan, 2009). Looking at the influence of domestic factors on the foreign policy of a state is, however, not a clear cut case it seems. Kupchan (2009) notes in his reference to only democratic states, while Mesquita (2002) discusses in detail the progress of studies in international relations, noting that domestic politics have played a very important role in shaping foreign policy. He also brings up the following, which is very relevant when focusing on Belarus and other non-democratic states in general:

“Make no mistake about it, examining international relations as a form of domestic politics leads to radically different ideas and propositions than those that arise when we think of leaders as surrogates or fiduciaries for the well-being of the state and all of its citizens. That which makes a state strong and its citizens secure need not, and often does not, make a leader more secure in office.” (Mesquita, 2002, p.7)

In addition to political motivations, there are also all kinds of economic motivations (Schirm, 2020). In order to analyze the (economic/political) preferences of states, Schirm (2020) notes that the following factors need to be researched: interests, ideas and institutions. At the same time nations do not have a fixed definition of the security or wealth they want to pursue and as such they will not automatically achieve a pre-determined path to maximization of security or wealth. It is more likely that states will use a mix of preferences in order to achieve what they desire. These desires can and will likely be influenced by domestic power groups (Schirm, 2020). As such states, when cooperating with other states, focus much less on the fears for the other state and relative much more on the domestic consequences of their cooperation (Schirm, 2020). Lastly Schirm (2020) concludes, that all three factors of analysis: interests, ideas and institutions, matter, but not in equal amounts in every situation. At the same time these factors might work not as well in non-democracies. The main reason is that domestic powers can have potentially much less influence on interests, ideas and institutions (Schirm, 2020). At the same time if the domestic power group can be identified and researched, the theory as provided by Schirm does allow for possible further insight in their preferences. One possible way to dive deeper into the reasons behind domestic action are the following (micro-)economic theories: the stakeholder theory and social capital theory (Ivy, 2013). The stakeholder theory argues that by being aware of the other, with whom one might

cooperate or compete, one can influence or even steer the others actions. The influencing will be done in the form of an if-then scenario, where the main dilemma revolves around the question what matters most (Ivy, 2013). The Social Capital theory argues, that agents with high levels of social capital, can use this social capital to gain resources such as but not limited to: information, political influence and access to capital (Ivy, 2013). Agents obtain their social capital through their social network and the respective status of the network itself. Furthermore the social networks often have shared views, norms and values and goals. As such, when a member of the social network is threatened by another social network, depending on his social capital, his/her social network tends to defend against the other social networks (Ivy, 2013).

Lastly there is the Collective Action hypothesis or Hegemonic Stability theory (Kupchan, 2009). This hypothesis argues, that major powers in an alliance “buy” cooperation from minor powers by providing them with desired collective goods in the field of security. The possible risk in this scenario is that the minor powers will attempt free rider behavior, contributing less to the overall security collective than their share. The only reason, according to Kupchan (2009), for major powers to allow free rider behavior, is the fact that the strategic benefits are higher than the costs of minor powers free riding on the major power. There is, however, also a risk for the free riding minor power. If the major power decides to decrease its output of the collective goods, the minor power needs to fill the gap (Kupchan, 2009).

Another widely researched theory is the small state theory. The small state theory attempts to define and look at the smallest and least powerful states in the world and how these in theory weak states manage themselves in a turbulent and ever changing world (Baldachinno and Wivel, 2020). Researchers at first believed that small states due to their actual size could not compete with great powers, who had more citizens, could generate more GDP/had a larger economy and could thus create stronger and larger armies (Baldachinno and Wivel, 2020). This paradigm has changed severely over time, as most researchers acknowledge now that the term “small state” in itself is troublesome, yet at the same time it mainly forms also give room for fruitful research (Schultheisz, 2009) (Preiherman, 2017)(Björkdahl, 2007)(Baldachinno, 2008). The problems with the definitions of small state are, that most definitions encounter at one moment or another encounter a problem in definition, which causes the definition not able to be generalized.

Baldachinno and Wivel (2020) note three general attempts of defining small states: 'Non-Great' Powers, Material Assessment and Political Constructs.

The issue with 'Non-Great' Powers is that the cut-off points becomes very difficult to determine. What is a Great Power and what is then and Non-Great Power? And are all states, which are not a Great Power a small state?

Material Assessment argues that small states can be defined by their material capabilities, either absolute or relative. Similar to the problem with cut-off points by Great powers, where should the cut-off point be with capabilities, such as GDP or population? Moreover Baldachinno and Wivel (2020) note, that some capabilities have become much more important over the past two decades. Large population was in the past very important, but has severely lost importance, while economic power and technological knowledge have become much more important.

Political Constructs is a non-realist approach to the small state, as it argues that small states are politically made entities, formed by the needs, desires and world views of both its inhabitants as well as other states (Baldachinno and Wivel, 2020). The problem, however, with this theory is that it underestimates the influence of power asymmetries many states encounter, as well as possible problems with domestic power struggles.

On the other hand there is also some consensus on the theory of small states. First and foremost researchers agree that small states do exist. Secondly researchers agree that (almost) all small states share the trait, that they are able to adept to their surroundings instead of seeking to take charge and rule like the local or regional powers Schultheisz, 2009)(Preiherman, 2017)(Björkdahl, 2007)(Baldachinno, 2008)(Baldachinno and Wivel, 2020).

### **3.2 Foreign Policy Tools**

In order to be able to adept to their surroundings (small) states deploy a number of policy tools, which allow them to mitigate risks, push favorable policies or force the hand of major powers in their favor.

One policy tool nations can deploy is the act of balancing as described above. Balancing can be done at several different levels and Kuik (2016) argues that the degree of balancing is (partly) dependent on the level of power rejection of a state. Another policy tool, which can be seen during soft balancing is the idea of policy pushing (Björkdahl, 2007). Policy pushing is the ability of a member of an alliance or group of cooperating members, where a minor power member manages to advance a policy they favor, while

the major powers are left out of the entire policy process, either intentional or not. The main condition for a minor power to achieve policy pushing seems to be to focus on a single important norm (Björdahl, 2007).

At the same time when a state is more open to accept the power of another state the option for bandwagoning comes into play. Bandwagoning entails, that a state under threat of aggression from another state, instead of resisting (balancing), relinquishes power to the aggressor state and starts to cooperate, in order to at least obtain some benefits from the aggression of the threatening state (Mearsheimer, 2001, p139). Balancing defined in a more positive light as a self fulfilling prophecy of success creating more success (Preiherman, 2017)(Schmitt-Beck, 2015). If nations perceive a power to be successful, they may want to join in on the success of that nation in order to gain benefits themselves (Schmitt-Beck, 2015). One possible field is security cooperation, where a major power can provide also security for a minor power in exchange for cooperation (Robertson-Major, 2019). Another option is appeasement. Appeasement attempts to stop the threatening state's behavior by conceding power to the aggressor, hoping that this act will stop aggression against the state under threat (Mearsheimer, 2001, p139).

Gunasekara (2015) argues, that there are several factors which make it more likely for bandwagoning to happen. Firstly, the weaker a state is on its own, the more likely the state will bandwagon with a strong state, because the stronger state can take whatever it wants at any given time. Secondly bandwagoning is more likely if there are limited options in the area for minor power states to form alliances. This can either be due to the fact other states in the region are major powers or due to the fact that the minor power state has no knowledge in regards to what other states in the region can offer them in an alliance and what the position of the other states is regarding the option to cooperate or form an alliance. Lastly bandwagoning seems to follow the exchange of mutual benefits, but the smaller partner in the exchange seems to be gaining more positive effects from the exchange than the major power partner (Gunasekara, 2015).

Another policy mix, which has been gaining more attention is the theory of hedging strategies or strategic hedging (Wang, 2015)(Wang, 2022)(Kuik, 2016)(Niznikau, 2019). Strategic Hedging is a policy mix with as goal to maximize gains and minimize potential long-term risks by creating a fallback position (Wang, 2015)(Kuik, 2016). The benefits from this policy mix are, that uncertainties in the future do not demand more commitments

in the present, because the policy allows for the creation of a safe position to retreat to when things do go bad (Niznikau, 2019). Moreover hedging allows for more maneuverability, as major power nations can be pitched against one another. At the same time Kuik (2016) notes that for this policy to work three conditions must be met. When following this policy, the nation cannot align itself with a power, with which it is competing. The nation must adopt self opposing and counteracting measures and lastly use these self opposing and counteracting measure to safeguard the gains made, while also creating as much as a fallback position as possible (Kuik, 2016). The theory of (strategic) hedging is, however, not without debate. Wang (2015) notes, that although (strategic) hedging has been gaining more and more attention as a concept in international relations studies, the term is still not well defined. This notion is supported when comparing the definitions Kuik (2016) and Niznikau (2019) use in regards to (strategic) hedging. At the same time all definition only differ in some small aspects from one another and do agree on the general insights as discussed above.

## 4. Analysis of the Far Arc

### 4.1 Latin America

Latin America has in the past been one of the regions Belarus was rather interested in. Having old allies from the Soviet era still around in the region helped Belarus to find some friends among nations it had yet to make much contact with. Belarus and Ecuador have a history of cooperation, but, as seen with Venezuela, economic downfall and political unrest combined with the reevaluation of the Belarusian foreign policy goals have caused Ecuador to fade from the Belarusian focus (Belarusian Yearbook, 2016, 2017, 2019) (Тихомиров, 2021).

Diplomatically Belarus does still attempt to keep in touch with nations of Latin-America. Due to the COVID-19 situation, some stagnation took place in general, but in the recent years, Belarus has been reinvesting in its contacts with Latin-American countries (Тихомиров, 2021).

This has not led, however, to a significant change in the way Belarus and the Latin-American nation interact with one another (Belarusian Yearbook, 2019, 2020, 2021). Relations with Latin-American countries are continuously in decline, even though from time to time there seem to be a small improvements. Furthermore most of the relationship between Belarus and the Latin-American countries seems to revolve around trade, while there is almost no focus on any political subject, unless interests seem to align (Belarusian Yearbook 2019, 2020, 2021).

#### 4.1.1 Venezuela

Venezuela has been one of the oldest partners and allies of Belarus, especially in the Latin-American region. Relations between Belarus and Venezuela began in 1997 and have since then always been strong. In 2006 Venezuela opened its embassy in Minsk and a year later Belarus opened its embassy in Caracas (Embajada de la República de Belarús en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, visited 23-05-2022). The relationship between Belarus and Venezuela is maybe best shown by the personal relationship of Alexandr Lukashenka and Hugo Chávez, the late leader of Venezuela. These two leaders clearly found more than an ally in one another (President of the Republic of Belarus, 2017A, 2017B, 2022). Under the leadership of these two leaders Belarus and Venezuela

started a process of intense cooperation, which led to several joint ventures (Ministerio del Poder Popular para Relaciones Exteriores, 2021).

With passing of Hugo Chávez and the events that unfolded in Venezuela one might think that diplomatic relations with Belarus came under pressure as well, but the opposite is rather true. Venezuela has in the last five years been looking more and more active at Belarus in order to reinvigorate their economy (Ministerio del Poder Popular para Relaciones Exteriores, 2021)(César Torres, 2021abc). At the same Belarus has not forgotten their old partner and ally(Ministry of foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2018a). In several official statements by president Lukashenka it becomes clear that Belarus intends not only to keep relations as they were, but even looks to intensify the (diplomatic) cooperation with Venezuela (Official Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 2017A, 2017B, 2022).

On the other hand third party sources note an opposite compared to the official statements. The Belarusian Yearbooks (2016-2021) show that the relationship between Belarus and Venezuela followed a downward trend. The reasons for this decline in relations were on the one hand the change of Belarusian focus and it reevaluated foreign policy and on the other hand the events in Venezuela (Belarusian Yearbook, 2018). After the events surrounding the succession of late president Chávez, Venezuela found itself cut off from the Southern Common Market (*Mercado Común del Sur* (MERCOSUR)) as well as under pressure from sanctions by America (Ministerio del Poder Popular para Relaciones Exteriores, 2021), both of which have damaged the Venezuelan economy severely. This caused the joint-ventures of Belarus and Venezuela in Venezuela to become economic liabilities instead of opportunities.

At the same time, it seems that Belarus in the past years has started to reinvest in its partners in Latin-America. Last year (2021) Belarus and Venezuela have created and installed the VIII High-level Commission. The goal of the commission is to strengthen bilateral relations and trade agreements (teleSUR, 2021)(MercoPress, 2021). Moreover Venezuela and Belarus have decided to start direct flights from Caracas to Minsk (Interfax, 2022). Venezuela has also by words of its Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Belarus shown to be very interested in (re)starting delivering fruits and other agricultural products to Belarus. These sales are meant to take place through the Belarusian Universal Commodity Exchange (BUCE), which has access to a very large range of retailers (Belta, 2022a)

#### *4.1.2 Brazil*

Other notable contacts in the region for Belarus are Brazil and Argentina. Diplomatic relations with Brazil seem to follow the opposite direction as most of the relations in the region when looking at the official sources. Where Belarus is letting go of other partners in the Latin American region, it seems to be intensifying its relationship with Brazil. According to the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in Brazil (accessed 16-05-2022) Belarus and Brazil have been looking more and more for cooperation in the field of economics, which comes mainly due to the fact that Brazil is one of the biggest importers of potash fertilizers, which it buys from Belarus. Furthermore Brazil makes notes of more and more cooperation with Belarus from around 2010 onwards. Before 2010 both Belarus and Brazil make little to no notice of diplomatic or economic interaction with one another (Ministério das Relações Exteriores II, 2014)(Embassy of Belarus in Brazil, visited 2022).

It took up to 2018 before Brazil sent a ministerial level visit to Belarus while both countries have been interacting on a diplomatic level with one another for more than a decade at that point in time, seeing the 2003 meeting of Belarusian and Brazilian officials as first diplomatic action (Embassy of Belarus in Brazil, accessed 16-05-2022).

The Belarusian ambassador to Brazil Sergei Lukashevich noted in an interview that the sanctions against Belarus, due to the events surrounding the presidential elections in Belarus of 2017, are also used to harm other countries which are dependent on the potash fertilizers sold to them by Belarus (Belta, 2022c). This section is rather intriguing as the ambassador suggests here to the Far Arc nations, that they are possibility harmed by the sanctions which are imposed on Belarus, due to events happening in Belarus. As such this can be seen as an attempt of Belarus to put pressure on the nations that imposed the sanctions through third parties. At the same time this can also been seen as an attempt to gain more support from the right wing politician in Brazil, who in general do not like Belarus (Тихомиров, 2021). President Bolsenaro of Brazil has several times shown his displeasure in regards to America, the West and the norms and values they bring with them (Katy Watson, 2022). As such Belarus might be able to gain an ally in Brazil if it is able to convince Brazil that Belarus is also trying to 'resist' the West.

Regardless of Brazil's response president Lukashenka clearly does have interests in cooperating more with Brazil and set his sights on the country in the hope to stabilize his country after all the sanctions that have been put on it (Belta, 2021a). Similar to the development of the relations with Venezuela, Belarus seems to be reinvesting in the

relationship with Brazil as well, focusing for the most part on continuing with the development of trade with the Latin-American countries (Belta, 2022b)(Belta, 2022c) (Belta, 2022d)

Though Brazil seems to be clearly in favor of cooperating more with Belarus and deepening the economic ties, it is clear that not everything goes without notice. The ministry of foreign affairs of Brazil makes clear notice of the events surrounding the presidential elections in Belarus and is very concerned about the violence used against “peaceful demonstrations” (Ministério das Relações Exteriores I, 2020).

#### 4.1.3 *Argentina*

Belarus and Argentina relations are less straightforward as with some other countries in Latin-America. Looking at the information provided by the embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Republic of Argentina, it becomes clear that Argentina and Belarus have several fields in which they cooperate including trade, economics, some sort of political dialog, though no further information is available to determine what kind of political dialog there is, and culture. There exists a large diaspora of Belarusians in Argentina and Belarus tries to keep in touch with this diaspora (embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Republic of Argentina, “Compatriotas”, visited 27-06-2022).

In the political sphere Belarus and Argentina have done nothing of major notice. Argentina as well as Brazil are opposing the sanctions of the USA and EU against Russia, stressing that they hit the wrong targets and endangering food security and trade (Belta, 2022e). This statement suggests that Argentina and Belarus might have some similar world views. The national library of Belarus does show a list of old agreements and memorandums regarding trade, diplomatic matters, science, humanitarian items and economics as a whole, yet the most recent document which can be found here dates from 2017, regarding Belarussian symbols in Argentina (Национальная библиотека Беларуси, 2020). Besides intention to talk and discuss matters which are important to Belarus, it seems that Belarus and Argentina do not make any major steps towards closer cooperation, signing of agreements or improving bilateral relations as a whole. According to the embassy of Belarus in Argentina (accessed 16-05-2022) Belarus and Argentina did continue talks and meetings after 2017, yet most of the described meetings were with a year apart and no agreements seem to have been reached which caused actions by either one of the countries.

In the economical sphere Belarus and Argentina have been cooperating more fruitfully. Total trade volume between Belarus and Argentina according to the embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the Republic of Argentina were around the USD 130 million in 2017 and 2018. In 2019 total trade dropped significantly but has since then been recovering and in 2021 the embassy notes a total trade volume back to the levels of 2017. For Belarus this trade has been not as beneficial, as the total trade volume consists in 2017, 2018 and 2021 consisted for only around 5-15% of Belarusian exports, the rest were Argentinian imports. As such Belarus also has a huge trade deficit with Argentina. At the same time Argentina is an opportunity for Belarus as Argentina is part of MERCOSUR. If Belarus could gain access to the markets of MERCOSUR, it could be able to sell products in all Latin-America, without too much trouble regarding import barriers and other protective measures (Belta, 2017a)(Belta, 2017b).

The relationship between Belarus and Argentina seems, however, to be stagnating (Belarusian Yearbook, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021). Belarus has been paying less and less attention to Latin-America in the past few years and only this year Belarus seems to have regained interests in Latin-America. There seems, however, to be not much interest in Argentina from the Belarusian side and Argentina is not paying much attention to Belarus either. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus shows that there are still meetings of the ambassador of Belarus with Argentinian officials, but the last notable meeting was in 2018, which was a consultation between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2018b). The Argentinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs does not provide much more information than three articles of meetings with Belarusian Officials in 2017 and 2018 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Worship Argentina, visited 27-06-2022).

#### 4.1.4 MERCOSUR

Lastly looking at the economic interaction between Belarus and Latin-America, one last organization needs to be discussed as well: the Southern Common Market better known as MERCOSUR (*Mercado Común del Sur*). *MERCOSUR* is a customs union comparable with the European Union or the Eurasian Economic Union. *MERCOSUR* has as goals to improve trade among the member states, eliminate barriers and restrictions as well as creating a common external policy regarding economic matters (*MERCOSUR*, 2019). As such there are economic opportunities for Belarus as well as hurdles, which are potentially

greater than with single countries. Belarus exported in 2018 roughly 500 million US dollars worth of goods to all the *MERCOSUR* countries. This was around 13,6% of the total exports from the Eurasian Economic Union into the region (SECEM / Datos Oficiales de los Estados Parte del MERCOS). At the same time Deputy Chairman of the House of Representatives Valery Mitskevich gave a speech at the 36<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Latin-American Parliament. In his speech he noted the contacts with the Latin-American countries and some countries showed their willingness and solidarity with the position of Belarus (Belta, 2022f). As such Belarus has both sympathy in the region as well as potential room to expand its economic activities. As *MERCOSUR* is a customs union, it is easier for Belarus to trade with several members of the Union theoretically, as all members should have the same tariffs and rules in place.

*MERCOSUR* is on the other hand also a hurdle for potential expansion of Belarusian interests in the region, as it makes it much more difficult to single out a nation and use differing tactics versus different nations. Moreover as part of a union single nations, especially the small ones, can resist economic pressure from other nations much easier. Moreover Belarus also risks that the actions it deploys domestically will turn *MERCOSUR* against Belarus. In 2018 as chair of *MERCOSUR* the Brazilian ministry of foreign affairs notes that “Mercosur is on the side of the Venezuelan people in asserting that there is no longer room in our region for alternatives to democracy.” (*Ministério das Relações Exteriores de Brasil*, 2018). This remark could point to a problem from Belarus, as it has been putting a lot of pressure on democratic forces in the country.

## I 4.2 Middle East

Belarus has four major partners in the Middle East: Syria, Iran, Egypt and Turkey. As discussed in the Methodology section, will Turkey not be analyzed, as the relation with Belarus is too difficult and beyond the scope of this paper. Moreover does the geographical location of Turkey cause debate whether or not it should be actually seen as part of the Far Arc. Besides Turkey Belarus has been mainly switching from one partner to the other in the Middle East with no sign of really committing to one partner or the other (Belarusian Yearbook, 2016-2021)

### I 4.2.1 Iran

Belarus and Iran have a long history of diplomatic relations with each other. Belarus

opened its embassy in Iran in 1998 already and Iran opened its embassy in Minsk in 2001. Both countries also list numerous meetings of high level officials including meetings between Alexendr Lukashenka and the president of Iran (1998,2004,2006,2007) as well as visits of ministers and delegations of companies (Embassy of Belarus in the Islamic Republic of Iran, visited 24-05-2022). Notable on the other hand is the slow pace at which Belarus and Iran seem to operate. Belarus and Iran have held five rounds of consultations between their respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs, of which rounds #3, #4 and #5 were held respectively in January 2013, February 2015 and July 2019 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2015a) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2019).

As far as the cooperation between Belarus and Iran goes, most of it seems to focus on trade and economic cooperation as well as cooperation within international institutions and bodies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2021a). Looking through the data of the OEC of the past decades reveals, that Belarus and Iran have had periods of relative large trade turnovers, for example in 2012 Belarus exported for 108 million dollars of goods to Iran, while in 2016 the export turnover had declined to 43,4 million dollars worth of goods. There is also a wide variety of goods Belarus exports over the years to Iran from chemical products (of which the majority is beauty related) to trucks and from machinery to printing items and wood products in the last few years. The economic cooperation also seems to lead to frustrations from time to time. In two Belta articles from 2021 and 2022 (Belta, 2021b, 2022g) president Lukashenka vents some frustrations about the fact that several construction projects are not being completed or no progress is made. These projects are not limited to projects financed by Iran, but one project, which is cause of frustrations, is to be completed by an Iranian company.

Even though the trade volume between Belarus and Iran fell into decline from 2015 onward, it does not seem that either side thinks about shifting away from one another. Belta (2016a) reports already in 2016, that Belarus and Iran look to boost trade and intensify economic cooperations, while the OEC data shows, that trade with Iran after this statement only declined further after a little grow in the year after the statement. On the other side according to Belta (2022h) and the Islamic Republic New Agency (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2022a) Belarus and Iran had recently a meeting between the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Belarus to Iran and the Iranian minister of Foreign Affairs regarding potential of increasing economic interaction. Furthermore the

Islamic Republic News Agency (2022b) also makes note of Iran offering Belarus more opportunities to transport cargo through Iranian ports.

Also in the sphere of politics is there no sign yet that Belarus and Iran are likely to break away from each other in the near future. In 2018 Iranian president Rouhani sent an official letter of congratulations on 25 years of friendly Minsk-Tehran political relations (Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Also Belarusian minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei met with his Iranian colleague Hossein Amir Abdollahian during the 76<sup>th</sup> meeting of the UN General Assembly in 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic Belarus, 2021a).

#### 4.2.2 Syria

Relations with Syria have been subject to changing intensity over the past decade. Syria and Belarus have had in the past a thriving relationship and showed signs that economic cooperation and trade were growing in a steady manner. Data from the OEC shows that Belarus had a very strong trade partner with Syria, showing high values of export volumes. Trade, however, has declined severely from the Belarusian side since 2011, while Syria has been able to retain its trade levels even during the Arab Spring and the events regarding IS. Marin et. Al. (2018) show on the other hand, that Belarus has been moving away from Syria as partner since the Arab Spring. Before that they note that Belarus was one of the major suppliers of Soviet era arms to the region and had since 2010 official contracts with the Syrian Army Supplies Bureau. Tsikhamirau (2022, pp. 13) points as one of the reasons for the declining interest of Belarus in Syria external factors such as military conflict and sanctions. This could be similar to the movements of Belarus in Latin-America, where Belarus stepped away from countries with economic downfall, domestic unrest or which had international sanctions imposed on them (Belarusian Yearbook, 2016-2021). At the same time the Belarusian Yearbook (2019) suggests that Belarus is attempting to balance partners in the Middle East against one another.

On the level of political relations, Belarus and Syria have an history of high level visits. Most visits, however, took place before 2011, after which meetings were mostly between the ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries in the margins of international meetings such as the UN General Assembly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2012). The most recent official visit of an high level envoy, the deputy prime minister - minister for foreign affairs and expatriates of the Syrian Arab Republic, was in

2019 (Embassy of Belarus in the Syrian Arab Republic, visited 25-05-2022).

On the other hand Syria and Belarus have signed an fifteen agreements and several treaties and protocols. Most of the agreements are regarding matters of trade, taxation and visas, while some others cover healthcare, tourism and cooperation in fighting crime (Embassy of Belarus in the Syrian Arab Republic, visited 25-05-2022).

Syria and Belarus seem to be looking with renewed interest at each other from 2016/2017 onwards. Not only are there renewed interests in boosting the economy of Syria and intensifying cooperation, it seems that Syria and Belarus have found in one another a partner against the West (The Syrian Observer, 2016, 2020a). Moreover it becomes clear that Syria and Belarus have been looking at each other more and more for deeper economic cooperation as well as increasing cooperation “to address the unfair coercive measures imposed by Western countries.” (The Syrian Observer, 2021b) (The Syrian Observer, 2021a, 2020b, 2017) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2021b).

#### 4.2.3 Egypt

Lastly the relations between Egypt and Belarus have been since the independence of Belarus strong, sustainable and long standing. In February 2017 Belarus and Egypt celebrated 25 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Egypt and Belarus have signed a wide range of Memorandums, Agreements and Roadmaps concerning a wide range of topics from legal matters such as fighting international crime (State Information Service, 2016) as well as joint ventures and economic cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2018). Looking at the source from the Egyptian State Information Service (SIS), the focus of the available documents and releases is mainly with economic subjects and trade in the period 2000-2017 (State Information Service, visited 2-06-2022), while the interview with the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Belarus to the Arab Republic of Egypt, Sergei Rachkov also names humanitarian cooperation, especially education and culture as well as tourism (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2017b) All in all Egypt seems to be a strong partner to Belarus with a high level of cooperation between the two countries up to 2017.

From 2017 onward Belarus and Egypt seem to have intensified cooperation. The amount of available files and documents from the State Information Service of Egypt in

the period 2017-2022 is more ten a tenfold than in the period 2000-2017. Notable subjects which are covered are economic cooperation, often in the form of a specific sector such as industrial cooperation (SIS, 2017a), but also investments in “fields of petroleum, natural gas and mineral resources” (SIS, 2017b). Besides economic cooperation Belarus and Egypt seem to be keen on expanding and intensifying their military cooperation. Both in 2020 and 2021 have the ministers of State for Military Production put forward their interests for closer cooperation with Belarus in the field of security and defense. Especially sharing technological knowhow and expertise seems for Egypt a major incentive to cooperate closer with Belarus (SIS, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). Another reason is the fact that since 2013 Egypt has been cooperating closer with Russia and buying newer military equipment from Russia. Due to the fact that Russian and Belarusian military production is very intertwined, Belarusian military equipment works well with Russian equipment and could allow Egypt to modernize its army (Military Watch Magazine, 2021).

Not only is Egypt looking to intensify cooperation with Belarus, at the same time Belarus is clearly putting effort and time in the relationship with Egypt. From 2017 onward the Belarusian ministry of foreign Affairs shows a long list of meetings between either the ambassador of Belarus with high ranking officials in Egypt, such as ministers (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 2019). Belarus is also aiding Egypt as it is negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the EAEU (SIS, 2017c).

## 4.3 Asia

Relations with the nations of Asia are for Belarus an important part of their foreign policy. China, India, Vietnam as well as Indonesia, Pakistan and Afghanistan are all partners of Belarus to a certain extent. Pakistan and Afghanistan will not be looked at deep into as China, India, Vietnam and Indonesia. The main reason to name these two countries is the fact that the Belarusian Yearbook notes that Belarus has been interested in both countries. The 2020 Belarusian Yearbook (pp.104-105) suggests that the Belarusian interests in Pakistan and Afghanistan might have something to do with using those relations as balance against the relations with India. Moreover Belarus is very interested in being part of China's One Belt One Road initiative, which is also a big project in Pakistan. As such Belarus might want to obtain some benefits from cooperating with Pakistan to show China its dedication to the project.

Search results from the ministry of foreign affairs of Pakistan shows, however, that Belarus and Pakistan do not have had much interaction with one another in the past 6 years from 2016 onward. As such Pakistan will not be analyzed as the other countries. Available information for Afghanistan was even less than for Pakistan. Moreover with the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, relations with the world have become difficult.

### 4.3.1 India

Relations between India and Belarus on the other side have a long history. According to the Ministry of External Affairs of India (MEA) (2017) India has been among the first nations to recognize the independence of Belarus. India has had a diplomatic mission in Belarus since 1992 and has ever since kept good relations with Belarus. Over the course of time India has paid numerous high ranking visit to Belarus including: The Vice President of India (2005) and the President of India in (2015). At the same time Lukashenka visited India in 1997, 20007 and 2017 as well as numerous visit at ministerial level. Belarus and India have over the course of time set up a broad array of commissions for trade, foreign consultation, science and technology cooperation and defense cooperation. All in all the relationship between Belarus and India seems healthy and even leaves room for further improvements and exploration. Looking at the description given by both the Indian and Belarusian embassies in the respective countries, both texts are in large parts similar if

not identical in the information they provide, which has an overall positive tone (Embassy of India, Minsk) (Embassy of Belarus, New Delhi).

Belarus and India have recently celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic relationship. Not only did this moment happen with a lot of diplomatic show of force, letters of congratulations and the best wishes for more cooperation, India also announced that the Consul General of Belarus will open soon in Mumbai (Belta, 2022l). According to the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) (2021), Belarus and India keep progressing in their relationship. The article continues to note that especially economically both countries have lots of opportunities to increase cooperation and broaden the fields of cooperations with one another. Economically India and Belarus have a relative small total trade volume of around 570 million dollars the past three years compared to the total trade volumes of India and Belarus (Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in India), respective 656 billion dollars and 60,2 billion dollars in 2020 (Observatory for Economic complexity (OEC)). There is on the other hand lots of space for India and Belarus expand in the trade sector. Belarus could for example invest more time and effort in getting to know the local power structures and ways of trading, which could lead to more interaction on local level (ORF, 2021). Yet at the same time Belarus is clearly making an effort to increase its economic ties with India. The diplomatic mission of Belarus in India is looking into the possibility of a direct flight from India to Belarus (Belta, 2022i). Meanwhile as suggested by the ORF article, is Belarus attempting to forge closer bonds with local authorities and businesses instead of working top-down (Belta, 2022j). At the same time Belarus is cooperating with India not only in the field of economics but also in the field of defense and humanitarian cooperation. ORF (2021) suggests that in the field of education India and Belarus could still makes gains but notes that there are subfields where cooperation between the two countries is already working very well. Especially the field of medical education seems to be a popular place for Indian students to come to Belarus (Belta, 2022k).

On the other hand when looking at the relationship between India and Belarus, it is notable that in the last few years the intensity of cooperation and interaction has slowly but surely been stagnating (MEA, visited 26-06-2022). This notion is further confirmed by the Belarusian Yearbook (2019, 2020, 2021). The most notable interaction between Belarus and India happened in 2018 after which no notable event happened anymore. At the same time Belarus and India still have a lot of untouched opportunities. Opposite to the Belarus-China relationship, India and Belarus have found realistic goals in their

relationship, Belarus seeking a strong political and economic partner, India desiring to get access to the Eurasian markets in order to improve its international competitive position (KP Nayar, 2021). Primary and secondary sources do not give a clear picture as what the future might hold for the Belarus-India relationship as the relationship shows clear signs of stagnation, while at the same time statements of officials are more optimistic (Belta, 2019, 2021c)(Belarusian Yearbook 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

#### 4.3.2 China

Diplomatic relations between China and Belarus were established in 1992 and have since then been growing into a tradition of mutual trust and cooperation. President Lukashenka alone visited China 12 times between 1995 and 2019, as well as numerous high ranking visits and meeting of ministers and ambassadors. In the same time frame China made two presidential visits (2001 and 2015), two visits of the premier (1995 and 2007) as well as six other high ranking visits including two by the vice presidents (2000, 2010 and 2018) (Посольство Республики Беларусь в Китайской Народной Республике). Not only have Belarus and China exchanged many high ranking visits, both countries have also been intensifying their relationship over the years. Belarus implemented in 2015 the Directive of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 5 "On the development of bilateral relations between the Republic of Belarus and the People's Republic of China"(Посольство Республики Беларусь в Китайской Народной Республике), which in short showed the immediate interest of Belarus to obtain the status of strategic partner of China. A strategic partnership would allow Belarus to get access to not only one of the biggest markets in the world, but also finances, resources and knowhow, which would otherwise been have hard to obtain (Indeed, 2021). Furthermore Belarus is very interested in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and actively aims to become one of the springboards of this initiative in Europe (Посольство Республики Беларусь в Китайской Народной Республике). Since the Maidan revolution China has shifted its attention for a potential partner/hub for its Belt and Road initiative from Ukraine to Belarus. The Maidan revolution had made Ukraine an unsuitable partner for further cooperation and integration into the project. Belarus on the other hand became a very interesting option for the Chinese (Warsaw Institute, 2020). Belarus is not only located close to the Baltic countries, offering easy access to ports, but is also part of the EAEU and geographically close to the EU. Moreover Belarus was very eager to find another partner besides Russia in order to

obtain much needed funds as well as more diversification in its trade income, as the annexation of Crimea had made Minsk at the very least concerned and reluctant to deepen its ties with Russia, as well as the fact that Russia was slowly but surely cutting the subsidies it had been providing to Belarus (Warsaw Institute, 2020). In order to make full use of the Belt and Road initiative, Belarus has taken a broad range of steps to ensure both the country self as well as foreign investors would benefit from coming to Belarus.

First and foremost Belarus has been slowly opening up their economy and liberalizing their rules, giving both local and international companies room to settle and expand operations in Belarus (HKTDC Research, 2018). Furthermore special economic zones were created to attract more investors and companies. Belarus further invested in its strong suits: machinery manufacturing, chemical engineering, petrochemicals, light industry (e.g. textiles, knitting, sewing, footwear, and household electrical appliances) as well as food processing and the IT sector of Belarus was allowed to further expand growing “at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 35% from US\$48mn to US\$957mn.” (HKTDC Research, 2018).

Belarus and China seem to be the best friends and have a close diplomatic relationship with one another from the looks of the official sources, but slowly tensions between Belarus and China have begun to rise. While China and Belarus in the official discourse display their friendship and cooperation, there is at the same time debate among scholars, to what extend Belarus risks negative effects from its 'unprecedented levels' of cooperation with China (Astapenia and Balkunets, 2016)(Murphy, 2019)(Yelisseyeu, 2013) (Marin, 2018).

Economically Belarus might have struck gold with the cooperation with the Chinese and the active participation in the Belt and Road initiative, but on the political side Belarus and China still seem to be not as close as Belarus would like. Jakóbowski and Kłysiński (2021, p.9) as well as the Warsaw Institute (2020) note that China has not fully supported Lukashenka during the events of the 2020 elections. Although China at first backed Lukashenka openly and even made suggestions that the West was again putting pressure on Belarus (Global Times, 2020), later on China focused more on the “will of the people” and their non-intervention policy than on supporting Lukashenka as they had done in the first few days (Warsaw Institute, 2020).

On the one hand academic works show that Belarus and China have a strong

trade relationship, cooperate in many fields, such as military/defense, China's Belt and Road initiative as well as on local levels (Astapenia and Balkunets, 2016)(Belarusian Yearbook, 2017,2018,2019,2020,2021). Belarus has also often been granted Chinese assistance, either in the forms of loans or direct investments/financing or in the form of goods.

This is at the same time also one of the risks for Belarus. Loans from China often come with conditions, which are very favorable for China, but put the receiving country in a difficult place. For example the money, which China provides, can only be used to buy at Chinese companies (Astapenia and Balkunets, 2016). This combined with the fact that Belarus has a huge trade deficit with China, around USD 2.2 billion in 2020(OEC, visited 2022), are reason for concern as Belarus might get stuck in a debt trap (Astapenia and Balkunets, 2016). A debt trap entails, that a state has such a large amount of debt from another state, that the creditor could use the debt to acquire concessions when negotiating agreements. In case of China it is often noted, that China uses this option to acquire areas of interest or more profitable elements if the relationship with a nation goes bad or if profits from cooperation run dry (Astapenia and Balkunets, 2016).

Moreover Yelisseyeu (2013) puts forward, that the relationship between China and Belarus is actually not so special as Belarus makes it look like. The most notable elements is that Belarus and China speak differently about their relationship. While Belarus is referring to (its desire for) a strategic partnership, China is not referring to it that way.

Furthermore Belarus is looking for an economic escape route, which China will not offer. China has become certainly a major partner of Belarus, but the goals of Belarus and China are not the same (Yelisseyeu, 2013)(Marin, 2018). This is illustrated this by the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Belarus and China, the Great Stone Industrial Park in Belarus and the promised investments of China in the Belarusian infrastructure (Marin, 2018). Whereas Belarus desire economic independence, investments and a wide range of partners, China looks for economic interesting opportunities and chances to further their Belt and Road initiative (Marin, 2018)(Yelisseyeu, 2013).

### 4.3.3 Indonesia

The relationship between Indonesia and Belarus seems to be one of economic highs (mainly for Belarus) and political “lows”. Firstly Belarus and Indonesia have had strong

and intense diplomatic interaction since 2009, having over the years many meetings on high level both in the margins of other meetings as well as direct visits (Embassy of Belarus in the Republic of Indonesia, visited 3-06-2022). The primary topics of the early meeting were: trade, economic cooperation as well as tourism, technology and science and intergovernmental cooperation. Notable is that Belarus opened in 2011 its embassy in Indonesia and in 2015 a Belarusian consulate was opened in Surabaya, East Java. However, Indonesia has yet to open any mission in Belarus and up to this point in time has had its ambassador in Russia also accredited for Belarus.

Economic and military cooperation seem to be the main two driving forces behind the relationship between Belarus and Indonesia. For Indonesia Belarus could be the springboard to enter the (East-)European and Russian market, while Indonesia could work the same for Belarus to gain more access to the South-East-Asian market (Sheany, 2017) (Belta, 2018a). Indonesia and Belarus also stress their desire for military cooperation. This subject, however, seems to have lost importance over the years as 2016 is the last major event where the Indonesian minister of Defense, Ryamizard Ryakudu, visited Belarus. The minister spoke with Lukashenka about the possibilities to enhance cooperation regarding military industry, met with several high ranking military officers and visited several military production locations (Belta, 2016b)(Embassy of Belarus in the Republic of Indonesia, 2016).

From 2017/2018 onward the progress in the relationship between Indonesia and Belarus seems to have stagnated. Visits do still take place and bilateral commissions still hold meetings, but the speed, energy and intensity that was shown up to 2016 is no longer present. The Embassy of Belarus in Indonesia shows, that the amount of meetings and visits declined significantly, though this could also be partly due to COVID-19. Still the meetings and visits that did happen were either ministers of industry, business delegations or parliamentary friendship groups. The main focus seems, however, to be on trade. Vladimir Ulakhovich, the head of the Belarusian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BelCCI), said in 2018 that the trade volume between Indonesia and Belarus could grow to 1 billion dollars over the next five years (Belta, 2018b), although his goal is, far from being realized and Indonesia still has a huge trade deficit vis-a-vis Belarus (OEC).

#### 4.3.4 Vietnam

Lastly Vietnam and Belarus have a very long and good diplomatic relations. Already in

1992 Vietnam and Belarus established relations at ambassadorial levels. In 2003 the embassy of Vietnam opened in Minsk and in 2005 its residing ambassador arrived (MFA Vietnam, 2019). Belarus opened its embassy in Vietnam in 1997 (Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Vietnam and Belarus have made numerous high level visits including; visits of president Lukashenka to Vietnam (1997, 2008, 2015), visits of the presidents of Vietnam to Belarus in 1998 and 2010, as well as high level ministerial visits (Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in Socialist Republic of Vietnam). During one of the visits, prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung noted how well the relations between Belarus and Vietnam had been. Both sides also expressed their willingness to further increase their cooperation both bilateral and within the field of international organization such as the UN and the non-Aligned Movement (MFA Vietnam, 2013, 2022).

Trade between Vietnam and Belarus consists mainly of potash fertilizers, (dump)trucks and meat and dairy products from Belarus. From Vietnam Belarus mainly imports computer equipment, communication device, food products and rubber (Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Trade between Vietnam and Belarus has grown significantly since 2000, but has also changed significantly. The trade balance has up to 2012 been heavily in favor of Belarus. Yet after 2012 the value of Belarusian exports began to decline while at the same time Vietnamese exports began to increase in value. Currently the trade balance between the two countries is still somewhat in favor of Belarus, but does no longer show the extreme trade deficits Vietnam had in the early days of trade with Belarus (OEC, Belarus and Vietnam, visited 29-06-2022). Another notable fact about the Belarusian trade is, that Belarus since it has been losing trade value, has been diversifying its trade with Vietnam more and more. In the early 2000's Belarus traded with Vietnam only a hand full of export items, but currently that has increased to a small dozen. Also the share potash fertilizer in the total trade with Vietnam has in the last years been declining, although it is still more than 50% of the Belarusian trade volume with Vietnam (OEC, Belarus and Vietnam, visited 29-06-2022).

On political level trade has also been a blooming subject. Belarus and Vietnam have had 12 business forums in the period 2009-2018, 6 National exposition of Belarus have taken place in Vietnam in 11 years, the last one in 2022. Moreover in march 2022 the 15<sup>th</sup> Belarusian-Vietnamese commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation took place (Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in Socialist Republic of

Vietnam). Another element of Vietnamese and Belarusian cooperation seems to be based around joint-ventures. Belarus and Vietnam have setup over time a series of joint-ventures including truck production, the prospect of tire production and looking into fields such as mining (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2011, 2020)(Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Vietnam is also the only country of the south-east-Asian region to have a FTA with the EAEU, effectively making trade with Belarus easier, as tariffs of over 90% of the goods, which Vietnam trades with EAEU members, will disappear (Government News Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2016). Besides subjects like the FTA and joint-ventures, Vietnam and Belarus work together in the fields of science, education, defense and health care (MFA Vietnam H1, H2).

Vietnam is currently also one of the few countries, besides China and Egypt (,which is negotiating a FTA) (“An Egypt - EAEU Free Trade Agreement Steps Closer.”, 2021), to have a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union outside of the former Soviet region. Yet relations with Vietnam are not yet optimal. The main issue with the Belarusian-Vietnamese cooperation is, that neither side has really taken initiative (Van Hong, 2017). When looking at the opportunities for Belarus and Vietnam to further cooperation both politically and economically, research notes that both sides just go with what is already going on, while at the same time not initiating much more (Belarusian Yearbook 2017,2018, 2019). What makes this situation even worse is the fact, that on the Vietnamese side there is quite the willingness to cooperate more(Van Hong, 2017). Furthermore research suggest that the relationship between Belarus and Vietnam is only stagnating further as the interest of Belarus in developing nations seems to decrease more and more (Belarusian Yearbook 2020, 2021). In case of Vietnam this would be a severe loss for the foreign policy goals of Belarus. Not only has Vietnam been a strong trading partner, research shows that Belarus and Vietnam still have many options, which they could use to expand trading even further (Pavlovskaya, Shavruk, Ð?, 2020).

## 5. Conclusion

All in all how has the relationship between Belarus and the states of the Far Arc changed since 2017? The relations between Belarus and the Far Arc have changed in a negative trend overall in the past 5 years. Most notable is, that Belarus up to 2020/2021 let most of the relations, which it built in the previous years, stagnate and focused mainly on a few

states. 2022 show on the other hand renewed interests from both the Belarusian side as well as from countries in the Far Arc to reinvigorate the relationships.

Egypt and China received most of the attention and the relations between Belarus and relations with these two countries have not suffered from stagnation in the researched period. The relations between Belarus and Egypt feature a wide variety of cooperation, economically, politically and military. Contrary to Latin-America, relations with Egypt have only been getting intenser over the last 5 years as Egypt has proven itself to be a reliable partner in the region. The main thing to note is the military cooperation between Belarus and Egypt.

The relations with China have been growing in the last 5 years, though it has not gone without its bumps in the road. Belarus has been focusing more and more on China, hoping to gain access to large amounts of investments and the Chinese market as well as getting a strong political ally. This seems, however, more hope than reality as China clearly has other goals in regards to Belarus. While the total trade volume between Belarus and China is impressive, it is mainly China exporting items to Belarus. As such Belarus has a huge trade deficit, which in turn weakens the position of Belarus towards China, as China can easily use these debts as pressure tool in negotiations. At the same time China has shown after the 2020 presidential elections in Belarus, that it does support Belarus, especially against the West, though it is debatable as to how far China actually will go to back Belarus, as China quickly changed its support from directly backing president Lukashenka to focusing on their own non-intervention policy.

Venezuela, Brazil and Vietnam were sidelined to some extend, but recent news has shown that Belarus might be reinvesting time and effort in relations with these countries, while there have been no signs that Belarus and Argentina are about to restart their relation.

The relations with Venezuela are different from those with Argentina and Brazil, because Belarus has been more supportive of Venezuela and has attempted a little harder to keep relations up. Pinpointing exactly why Belarus has done this is beyond the scope of this paper, but some suggestions can be made. Venezuela has been a very old ally of Belarus, as such Belarus and Venezuela have had a lot of interaction, signed a lot of agreements and multiple joint projects going on. The Domestic Policy hypothesis could explain why it would be very costly for Belarus to sever the ties with Venezuela completely

as president Lukashenka and late Hugo Chávez were very good friends and statements made by Lukashenka after the death of Chávez give the impression that Belarus still sees Venezuela as an old friend and reliable partner.

That being said Belarus-Venezuelan relations did take a beating in the last 5 years. Most likely Belarus decided to take its hands off Venezuela for some years, because it feared that the unrests in Venezuela could have consequences for Belarus both domestically as well as internationally. Schirm (2020) has shown that countries are most afraid of the domestic consequences of cooperation with other countries. As Belarus has had in 2017 mass protests against the regime (McVeigh, 2017), the Belarusian regime might have been cautious not to let the unrests and protests of Venezuela influence its own population. At the same time *MERCOSUR* sidelined Venezuela from the customs union in response to the events unfolding in the country. This could also be a sign to Belarus, that intense cooperation with Venezuela might not in its best interest, if it does not want to anger the entire *MERCOSUR*. Relations, however, seem to be thawing in the last year. Venezuela has been showing interests in selling items through Belarus and a high-commission between Venezuela and Belarus was installed to further help with bilateral cooperation

The relationship with Brazil and Argentina to a lesser extend can best be seen as a form of strategic hedging by Belarus as well as soft balancing. Belarus attempts to soften the playing field it found itself in, instead of searching for 'hard' counters to the problems. By attempting to gain (more) access to the Latin-American market, Belarus could obtain more opportunities to diversify its trade, as well as being less reliant on Russia. Moreover Belarus could seek through *MERCOSUR* to expand its trade even further as well as getting in touch with countries, which are geographically harder for Belarus to reach. This way Belarus could spread its chances as well as having room to fall back to if things were to go wrong or relations were to go sour.

This process has, however, been going slow and has yet to prove very effective. While Brazil and Argentina have shown to be interested in working with Belarus, the main focus has been on trade and economic cooperation, while there has not been much political cooperation. Moreover Belarus cannot simply restart its relationship with the Latin-American countries. While some partners in the region have made statements in favor of Belarus, such as the Argentinian and Brazilian statement, that the sanction against Russia and Belarus are unjust, the countries of Latin-America have also shown

that they are aiming at the path of democracy and do no longer support countries that stray too far from it, at least in their own region.

The relations with Brazil seem at the moments of writing to be regaining interest from both sides. This would be beneficial for Belarus as Brazil is a major buyer of potash fertilizer. Argentina on the other hand shows little to no signs of restarting the relationship with Belarus and thus is stagnating further.

Vietnam is a very good partner of Belarus and has in the past shown its worth to Belarus, in the past 5 years the relationship has become some what stagnant and progress has not been seen in a long while. Most of the progress, which has been seen in the last couple of years has been due to projects, which had already started and are simply continuing (Van Hong, 2017). At the same time Belarus has shown signs of wanting to reinvigorate the relations with Vietnam. Although Belarus-Vietnamese relations have a period of stagnation, Vietnam has been a great way for Belarus to gain power through institutions and economic actions. Vietnam is still one of the few nations with a FTA with the Eurasian Economic Union outside of the former-Soviet region. Belarus was one of the parties, which helped Vietnam in the negotiations for this FTA. Moreover Belarus and Vietnam have a wide range of joint projects and joint-ventures and are looking to expand on these.

Besides the (more) positive trends, there is also a group of countries who saw their relationship with Belarus stagnate and have not given any signs of interest to reboot the relations in the near future.

Although Argentina has show clear interest in working with Belarus in the past, the relationship between Argentina and Belarus seems to have stagnated since 2018 and no sign has been given by either side that things will be picked up again soon.

A similar trend is seen when looking at the relationship with Indonesia. Belarus and Indonesia had in the past a strong relationship, with quite some perspectives for both countries in the fields of trade and military cooperation. Indonesia was in the past also rather interested in military cooperation with Belarus, but as relations began to stagnate, the interest also faded away. This fact has likely hurt Belarusian foreign policy to some extend, but not a lot. Indonesia was not a major partner like Vietnam, India or China are. Therefore letting the relations with Indonesia stagnate and deteriorate is not a major problem from the goals of the Belarusian foreign policy. Still Belarus had invested quite

some energy in Indonesia having not only an embassy but also an honorary consul in East Java. As such it is hard to shake the feeling, that Belarus did lose some power and influence in the region, which it might have liked to keep in the long run.

Relations between India and Belarus have also suffered from stagnation. Up to 2017 Belarus and India have shown to be on very good terms with one another, regularly paying high level visits to each other, cooperating in the fields of economy, science, trade, technology as well as military and humanitarian cooperation. This enabled Belarus to gain some economic independence and political maneuverability. The relation, however, has been stagnating since 2018. Although Belarus is for India an old partner, it cannot provide India with the trade or the connections it desires to further its economic goals. Belarus at the same time has been looking more and more at China, one of the rivals of India, as well as paying more attention to Pakistan and Afghanistan. These actions of can have the same goals as how Belarus is jumping from one ally to the other in the Middle East, but in the end Belarus and India are not paying each other as much attention as in the past. This could for Belarus be a major problem as India is outside the former-Soviet region one of its biggest trading partners. This could potentially hurt Belarus in the long run if trade starts to stagnate as well.

Relations with Syria and Iran have up to 2021 stagnated significantly, but recent news points to the possibility that here too a reboot of relations might be near. It must, however, be noted that Belarus has been on and off interested in keeping up relations with Iran and has in the past shown dissatisfaction with the relations with Iran on several occasions. Moreover Belarus has in the past stepped away several time from countries, which were subject to (international) sanctions or experienced severe domestic problems either economically or politically. As such Belarus might not commit to reinvigorate relations with Iran.

Belarus and Syria have a long history of interaction. Interaction stopped for a very large part, however, around 2011 as Syria was first hit by the Arab Spring and then continued into a civil war, followed by the struggle against IS. Similar to what Belarus did with some Latin-American countries and Iran, it took a few steps back as soon as civil unrest and economic downfall hit. At the same time Syria keeps its trade up with Belarus. From 2016/2017 onward relation slowly but surely improved and more recently Belarus and Syria have been showing more and more willingness to cooperate even more. Before

the years of stagnating relations Belarus was one of the main arms sellers to Syria, but nowadays Belarus mostly sells agricultural products and humanitarian items.

All in all Belarusian relations with the Far Arc have further shifted from a broad spectrum of partners and allies to focus on a small amount of partners, mainly Egypt and China at the time of writing. The focus of Belarus seems to be mainly on economic cooperation first and when this turns out to be profitable, Belarus turns to more intense cooperation in the forms of technological, military and humanitarian cooperation. This could be connected to the fact that Belarus has always been reluctant to commit itself to partners or project, but does want to exact benefits as much as possible. China is the only exception to this, but China has at the same time a completely other relationship with Belarus than all the other countries in the Far Arc.

At the same time the strategies Belarus deploys in the Far Arc seems to have followed a consistent trend. Except for China and Egypt to a slightly lesser extend, Belarus has followed a strategy of hedging, spreading the risks as much as possible, gaining as much benefits as possible and always having a fallback position in case things go wrong. Only Belarus added one aspect to this mix, which seems at this time unique to Belarus, its policy of gaining as much as possible while committing as little as possible. Belarus has shown not to be afraid of letting relations with other countries stagnate even for years, after which Belarus returns and just continues expanding the relations it had. This behavior could be explained as a form of risk spreading by Belarus or as a form of non-commitment. At the same time the example of Venezuela shows, that Belarus is not following a completely risk averse policy. Moreover strategic hedging might also explain why the foreign policy of Belarus seems from time to time contradictory, as this is one of the aspects of strategic hedging.

Furthermore the relationship with China features both elements from hedging strategies as well as some bandwagoning. On the one hand has Belarus in the last 5 years focused more and more on China, accepting Chinese aid and loans, knowing the negative conditions attached to them. As such Belarus has relinquished some of its freedom and power to China, especially now that it has build up such a significant debt. On the other hand China has provided Belarus with a significant amount of financial support as well as a little political aid. It is hard to say if the relationship between China and Belarus will further benefit Belarus in the future, but as for now it does provide Belarus with more

options and a possibility to expand in another direction than towards either Russia or Europe. The big question remains, however, will Belarus be willing to commit?

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