

Belarus: Between Non-Alignment, Neutrality, and Strategic Autonomy Options

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After Belarus obtained independence in 1990, the evolution of the country's foreign policy identity has passed through several stages depending on the geopolitical environment around the country; in particular, the state of relations between the West and Russia. By the end of the 1990s, Belarus already appeared to be in a geopolitical deadlock. Its relations with the West deteriorated dramatically. Minsk also lost the battle for its strategic vision of the architecture and leadership role in the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Against this background, in 1998 Belarus took the decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in order to assess other foreign policy options. What the NAM's role should be in the evolution of Belarus's foreign policy identity, in comparison with alternative foreign policy options, forms the main research question of this article. Although the NAM played a significant role in helping to diversify the foreign policy of Minsk with third countries, it did not manage to completely resolve the strategic task of balancing the pressure and influence applied by the West and Russia on Belarus. The symbolic significance of membership of the NAM relates to the fact that it contributes to Belarus's strategic intention to become a neutral state, as recorded in national strategic concepts and doctrines. In practical terms, Europe's current security environment – determined by the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the Russia-Ukraine conflict since 2014, and the subsequent political and military confrontation between Russia and the West – has become a testing ground for Belarus's foreign policy identity that can be characterized as de facto neutrality or non-alignment, even though Belarus takes part in political-military alliances together with Russia. However, these circumstances do not prevent Belarus from exercising independent foreign and military policies, as these are based on the phenomenon of the strategic autonomy of Belarus vis-à-vis Russia.

Keywords: Belarus, Russia, non-alignment, neutrality, strategic autonomy, Non-Aligned Movement



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At the Geopolitical Crossroads: Between the West and Russia

The adoption by the Supreme council of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic on 27 July 1990 of the ‘Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Republic Belarus’, and giving it the status of a constitutional law on 25 August 1991, marked the beginning of a qualitatively new stage in the country’s development. Realizing its natural right to self-determination as a nation, the Republic of Belarus began to pursue an independent foreign policy, the final goals of which included making the country’s territory a nuclear-free zone and the republic itself a neutral state.¹ The Constitution of Belarus of 1994 and its new editions of 1996 and 2004 also proclaimed these strategic foreign policy goals as main priorities.²

However, when Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko came to power in 1994, Belarus proclaimed political-military and economic integration with the Russian Federation as a new strategic foreign policy priority. This integration did not occur immediately, however. Rather, Belarus’s geopolitical pivot to Russia occurred only after changes in Belarusian domestic politics and the reaction of Western states to them.

Initially, Belarus was quite open to co-operating with the West. In the early 1990s, Minsk surrendered its Soviet-legacy nuclear arsenal to Russia and, in December 1994, Belarus signed the ‘Budapest Memorandum’ in exchange for security assurances and guarantees from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Russia not to use economic and political sanctions. In March 1995, President Lukashenko visited Brussels, where he signed a Partnership Cooperation Agreement, which he claimed was the first important step on Belarus’s path to joining the European Union.³ The agreement foresaw the formation of a free trade area

1 National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, *Declaration of the Supreme Council of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic on the State Sovereignty of the Republic Belarus, Article 10*, 27 July 1990, available at: <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=V09000193> (Accessed June 27, 2020).

2 National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, *Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, Section 1, Article 18*, 15 March 1994, available at: <https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/normativnye-dokumenty/konstitutsiya-respubliki-belarus/> (Accessed June 27, 2020).

3 Fedorov, A., “Belarus – EU. One step forward, all others – stumbling into a place,” *Naviny*, 3 December 2015, available at: https://naviny.by/rubrics/eu/2015/12/03/ic_articles_627_190398 (Access date: June 27, 2020).

in 1998 if Belarus met the political, economic, and democratic criteria. Then an Association Agreement between the EU and Belarus would follow, which would provide a basis for potential future membership.

However, by the end of 1994, a serious economic crisis caused Lukashenko's approval rating to fall sharply. The opposition accused him and his close circle of corruption. As domestic political problems accumulated, Belarus began pursuing integration with Russia to gain the latter's support.⁴ In February 1995, the two countries signed the Treaty of Friendship, Neighbourhood and Cooperation. This document marked the beginning of integration between the two countries. Belarus received energy resources at preferential prices and access to the Russian market.

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At the same time, Lukashenko announced his first referendum on integration with Russia, official status for the Russian language, and swapping the country's then white-red-white state flag and *Pahonya* national emblem to slightly altered symbols from the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR). Lukashenko easily won the referendum in May 1995, having stirred up strong pro-Soviet nostalgia within Belarusian society (just four years prior, 83% of Belarusians voted to preserve the USSR). One year later, a new Treaty on the Community of Belarus and Russia was signed. In 1996, Lukashenko initiated another referendum that proposed transforming Belarus from a parliamentary presidential republic into a super-presidential state with full concentration of powers in the hands of the president.

The West did not recognize the results of the 1996 referendum owing to its incompatibility with democratic standards. The EU immediately froze the ratification procedure for the Belarus–EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. Then, in 1997, the EU and USA imposed restrictions against Belarus for the first time, prohibiting high-level official contacts and cancelling technical assistance apart from for the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. These restrictions launched almost 20 years of Belarus's isolation

4 Shraibman, A., "I will not lead my country following the civilized world". How Lukashenko has been changing foreign policy for 25 years," *TUT*, 12 July 2019, available at: <https://news.tut.by/economics/643435.html> (Access date: June 27, 2020).

from the West. They also prompted a turning point in Belarus's relations with Russia.

Therefore, from the mid-1990s, Minsk signed a number of economic, political, and military treaties with Moscow, culminating in the agreement establishing the Union State of Belarus and Russia in 1999. The essence of this strategic deal was that Belarus, in contrast to other post-Soviet states, renounced its Euro-Atlantic aspirations to integration with the EU and NATO and agreed to take part in Russia-led integration processes. Afraid of NATO's eastward expansion and distracted by its Chechen wars, Moscow, in return, guaranteed preferential energy supplies and privileged access to financial resources and of Belarusian goods to the Russian market.

In 1997, then Vice Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais and the Russian tycoon and Deputy Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, Boris Berezovsky, did their best to block a draft joint constitution that hypothetically could allow Lukashenko to become the leader of the Union State. Anatoly Chubais suggested a model of integration of two countries based on the principles of federalization, while Lukashenko insisted on the equality of two countries. Ironically, in response to Lukashenko's ambitions to become a leader of a new integrated union, they started to promote Vladimir Putin as the successor for then-President Boris Yeltsin. At the beginning of December 1999, Lukashenko and Yeltsin signed the Union State Treaty, but several weeks later Yeltsin announced Vladimir Putin as his successor. The Treaty document included an ambitious agenda of further integration of the two countries and contained clauses on a single constitution, parliament, joint defence and foreign policy, currency, customs, taxes, symbols, and much more. In many ways, it was at the time and remains today a symbolic declaration owing, in part, to contradictions in its perception by Moscow and Minsk, but, more importantly to Russia's geopolitical ambitions to incorporate Belarus into Russia under the guise of a deeper integration within the Union State.⁵

Already by the end of the 1990s, Belarus appeared to be in a geopolitical deadlock. On the one hand, relations with the West

⁵ Sivitsky, A., "Belarus-Russia: From a Strategic Deal to an Integration Ultimatum," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, December 2019, available at: <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/rfp3-sivitsky.pdf> (Access date: June 27, 2020).

had deteriorated dramatically. On the other hand, Minsk lost the battle for its strategic vision of the architecture of the Union State of Belarus and Russia. This was especially evident in 2002 when Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested that Belarus join Russia as a federal district, also proposing that the Union State be put on a legal basis under the Russian constitution.⁶

Belarus and the Non-Aligned Movement

Against this background, in 1998 Belarus took a decision to join the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in order to test another foreign policy option. Minsk regarded the NAM as an international organization that was aspiring to occupy a niche as a political gathering that sought to oppose the West's unilateral approaches and actions on the global stage. From the Belarusian side it was important that the NAM built its work on the ten Bandung principles, including respect for the sovereignty, equality, and territorial integrity of all states; rejection of the possibility of an unconstitutional change of government, as well as external attempts to change the regime of government; the preservation of the inalienable right for each state freely, without interference from outside, to determine its political, social, economic, and cultural system; rejection of aggression and direct or indirect use of force; and non-application of any unilateral economic, political, or military measures.⁷

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Harsh criticism of Alexander Lukashenko's policies by the West, as well as the first gas and oil wars, accompanied by political tensions between Belarus and Russia in the early 2000s, pushed Minsk to seek options to balance this pressure. The NAM could provide such an opportunity.

In September 2006, Alexander Lukashenko delivered a speech at the 14th Summit of the NAM in Havana, Cuba, in which he called on the Movement to become an independent global centre

⁶ Kremlin.ru, *Answers to journalists' questions at the end of the Russian-Belarusian negotiations*, 14 August 2002, available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21684>, (Access date: June 27, 2020)

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, *Non-Aligned Movement*, available at: <http://mfa.gov.by/en/multilateral/organization/list/bc1f7d8446a445ed.html> (Accessed June 27, 2020).

of political force. According to him, the unipolar world order of those days was demonstrating its failure and non-viability. Thus, the NAM should work more actively to create a new, fairer world order. To achieve this goal, he said, a clear programme of action was needed for the gradual, but irreversible, formation of a multipolar world. President Lukashenko especially emphasized the need for reviving the principle of solidarity in the NAM – the most important tool for upholding the interests of all, especially small and vulnerable states. According to President Lukashenko, the movement had to decisively stand up for the political protection of its members that had been subjected to external pressure or aggression. The Belarusian leader also drew attention to the need for increasing the active economic co-operation of the NAM member states, maximizing the use of preferences for fellow members, and proclaiming that this would form a powerful economic component of the movement.

Speaking about attempts of the West to put pressure upon Belarus and interfere in its domestic affairs, President Lukashenko assumed that they were motivated by the country's independent policy aimed at protecting the country's sovereignty and interests, and its important geopolitical position at the centre of Europe, which interested both the USA and the EU.

Although he connected the Western pressure on Belarus with the country's course regarding co-operation with Russia, Alexander Lukashenko also noted that Belarus was creating a so-called 'external arc' of its foreign policy, from Cuba through the countries of Latin America, Africa, the Persian Gulf, Iran, China, Vietnam, and Malaysia.⁸

However, the potential for Belarus's cooperation with the NAM member states within the framework of the movement was not fully implemented. The Non-Aligned Movement was more a platform for discussing the most common global problems rather than an instrument for resolving specific tasks on a multilateral basis. Belarus had to switch to other regional organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or bilateral formats

⁸ President of the Republic of Belarus, *Non-Aligned Movement Should Become an Independent World Political Power Center*, 16 September 2002, available at: http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/dvizhenie-neprisoedinenija-dolzno-stat-samostojatelny-mirovym-tsentrom-politicheskoy-sily-2510/ (Accessed June 27, 2020).

of co-operation with some of the other NAM member states within the concept of the ‘external foreign policy arc’; these included China, Venezuela, Iran, and others.

Only in 2019 did Belarus recommence its interest in co-operation with the NAM. In October 2019, at the 18th Summit of the Movement in Baku, the Belarusian side suggested holding a conference on a new world order in 2021. The NAM member states must first of all clearly articulate their collective vision of a new world order, built on the principles of peace, justice, and prosperity for all. Belarus, in this context, offered a number of ideas and urged the chairman of the Movement to consider holding a conference in 2021 that would lead to the adoption and subsequent implementation of a long-term strategic document. According to the Belarusian vision, this conference will be of great symbolic significance because, in September 2021, the NAM celebrates its 60th anniversary.⁹ This initiative should be considered in the light of another one that Minsk has been promoting since 2016 – a new grand peacekeeping initiative, the so-called Helsinki 2.0 Process.

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Towards neutrality: Conceptual basis and geopolitical factors

Europe’s present security environment – determined by the 2008 Russo–Georgian war, the Russian–Ukrainian conflict of 2014, and the subsequent political and military standoff between Russia and the West – has become a testing ground for Belarus’s foreign policy identity. The *modus operandi* applied by Belarus in this geopolitical environment is that usually associated with the behaviour of neutral states. Moreover, the Belarusian side has been claiming neutrality as the ‘new normal’ of its foreign policy.¹⁰

In September 2015, President Lukashenko, speaking at a conference dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the acquisition of permanent neutrality by Turkmenistan, compared the multi-vector foreign policy of Belarus with the neutrality of that country.

⁹ Belta.by, *Belarus offers the Non-Aligned Movement to hold a conference on the new world order*, 26 October 2019, available at: <https://www.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-predlagaet-dvizheniju-neprisoedinenija-provesti-konferentsiju-ov-novom-miroporjadke-367146-2019/> (Accessed June 27, 2020).

¹⁰ Chupris, O. and Smirnova, S. “The Neutrality of the Republic of Belarus as

Belarus, like Turkmenistan, supports the unconditional priority of political and diplomatic methods in resolving any international conflicts, including those that have erupted in the Eastern European region. Belarus, like Turkmenistan, in a framework of positive neutrality, has a constructive position regarding maintaining peace, security, and stability, and developing relationships of friendship and co-operation with all countries. Belarus, in its foreign policy, proceeds from the principles of

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Indeed, from the very beginning of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, Belarus abstained from engaging in the crisis despite its formal status as Russia’s strategic military and political ally. In addition, the Belarusian side immediately provided neutral negotiating venues in Minsk for the Customs Union–Ukraine–European Union summit in August 2014, then for the

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Trilateral Contact Group, and finally for the Normandy Four’s (Ukraine, Russia, Germany, and France) summit in February 2015, thereby facilitating the adoption of the Minsk I and Minsk II ceasefire accords.

Since late 2016, the Belarusian leadership has been actively promoting a new grand peacekeeping initiative, similar to the Helsinki Process of the 1970s that resulted in the adoption of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, for fostering pan-European dialogue on measures to strengthen trust, security, and co-operation. According to Belarusian officials, such a broad dialogue could be aimed at overcoming the existing contradictions in relations between the countries in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions, including the United States, the EU, Russia, and China. Although

Legal Provision,” *Moscow Journal of International Law*, No. 4, 2017, pp.107-115.

11 President of the Republic of Belarus, *Speech at the International Conference “Neutrality Policies: International Cooperation for Peace, Security and Development”*, 12 December 2015, available at: http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/uchastie-v-mezhdunarodnoj-konferentsii-politika-nejtraliteta-mezhdunarodnoe-sotrudnichestvo-vo-imja-mira-12705/ (Accessed June 27, 2020).

Minsk's ambitious initiative still lacks substance and is irrelevant to current geopolitical tendencies or ongoing informal discussions within the framework of the OSCE Structured Dialogue, it clearly demonstrates Belarus's intention to avoid involvement in Russia's confrontation with the West.¹²

Today, Belarus is widely associated with being a neutral platform for diplomatic negotiations, and the country has far-reaching ambitions to become a new Switzerland or Finland in Europe's East. Nevertheless, it remains problematic to call Belarus a 'neutral state', especially because of its formal membership of military and political alliances with Russia, such as within the frameworks of the Union State and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Minsk keeps open the options of establishing new military coalitions or asking for military assistance from countries other than Russia and CSTO or CIS member states, including countries that have signed bilateral strategic partnership agreements with Belarus (for instance, China).¹³

Instead, Belarus can be defined as a donor of regional stability and security because this concept accurately represents a composite element of Belarus's foreign policy identity. Its roots date back to the National Security Concept of 2010, but it continues to play a decisive role in determining Belarus's *modus operandi* within the current geopolitical environment.

According to the 2010 National Security Concept, Belarus considers itself a responsible and predictable partner as well as a contributor to international and regional security. The country is identified as a successful, independent, and sovereign European state that does not belong to any of the world's power centres, adopts a peaceful foreign policy, and intends to set up conditions for acquiring neutral status. Furthermore, the document notes that Belarus seeks to develop a 'belt of good neighbourliness' along its external border in all dimensions: military, political,

12 Sivitski, A., "Belarus – From crisis to new initiatives," in *Perceptions of the OSCE in Europe and the USA*, Alexandra Dienes and Reinhard Krumm (eds), Vienna: FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe, 2018, pp. 19-28.

13 National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, *Military Doctrine of the Republic of Belarus, Chapter 5, Article 15*, 20 July 2016, available at: <https://www.pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H11600412&p1=1> (Accessed July 1, 2020).

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cultural, informational, social, and economic.¹⁴

Thus, Belarus's contributions to regional stability and security do not end with initiatives aimed at facilitating diplomatic negotiations on the Russia–Ukraine conflict or Russian–Western tensions. The most important contribution relates to its so-called security guarantees, which aim at preventing foreign countries from establishing military bases on Belarusian territory or using it to commit acts of aggression against third states. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko formulated these guarantees in Kyiv, immediately after the start of the Russia–Ukraine war in 2014. In accordance with them, Minsk will not permit the Russian Armed Forces to use Belarusian territory to attack Ukraine from the northern direction, but in ‘extreme cases’ the Belarusian side will warn Kyiv 24 hours in advance if Russia tries to do this illegally.¹⁵ Later, similar security guarantees were reaffirmed to all neighbouring countries, including Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

In September 2015, Moscow unilaterally announced plans to deploy a Russian military airbase, directly subordinate to Moscow, on Belarusian territory without Minsk's prior consent.¹⁶ Moscow's decision in 2015 was completely provocative and unacceptable to Minsk. President Lukashenko expressed his refusal to host the base in a tough manner, emphasizing that there were no relevant geopolitical or military-technical motivations for such a step. Thereby, Belarus confirmed its commitment to regional security guarantees in a practical way. The most evident reason for the refusal of the Russian base was that it would have

14 National Legal Internet Portal of the Republic of Belarus, *National security concept of the Republic of Belarus, Chapter 1, Article 6; Chapter 8, Article 49*, 9 November 2010, available at: <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=P31000575> (Accessed July 1, 2020).

15 Gordonua.com, *Turchynov: When the seizures of our military units began, I tried to fly to the Crimea by helicopter to organize the defense of the airfield. Avakov kept me (Interview)*, 11 April 2018, available at: <https://gordonua.com/publications/turchynov-kogda-nachalis-zahvaty-nashih-chastej-ja-pytalsjana-vertotele-vyletet-v-krym-chtoby-organizovat-oboronu-aerodroma-menja-uderzhal-avakov-239748.html> (Accessed June 28, 2020).

16 State system of legal information of the Russian Federation, *Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus about the Russian air base on the territory of the Republic of Belarus*, 7 September 2015, available at: <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102378121&intelsearch>

compromised Minsk's status as a peacemaker and intermediary in negotiations. In addition, it would have provided Russia with direct and uncontrolled access to Belarusian territory, thereby threatening neighbouring countries, primarily Ukraine. However, the Belarusian leadership also took lessons from the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, observing how Russia had used its pre-deployed Black Sea Fleet military bases to attack Ukraine and undermine its sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Moscow's plans clearly indicated a strategic intention to establish a permanent military presence on and maintain access to Belarusian territory, thus transforming Belarus into its military outpost at the centre of Europe. However, although Minsk and Moscow are formally strategic military allies according to defensive pacts within the Union State and the CSTO, Russia still does not have military bases in Belarus (there are two non-combat military-technical facilities leased by Russia). Furthermore, during peacetime, Russia is not allowed to use Belarusian territory without an official invitation and permission from Minsk. Without such official authorization, any Russian unilateral military activity in Belarus could be considered an act of aggression.¹⁸

On the other hand, if Belarus had agreed to deploy a Russian military airbase in 2015, the Russian military build-up would not have stopped there. It would most likely have resembled the Syrian model, whereby the deployment of a Russian Air Force Group was soon followed by the appearance of other military units, including air-defence, special operations, and ground forces. In both cases (Syria and Belarus), Russia proposed signing a very general framework agreement that would allow it to deploy additional forces under the umbrella of the extraterritorial

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17 Delo.ua, *Occupation of Crimea: events digest*, 14 April 2014, available at: <https://delo.ua/economyandpoliticsinukraine/konflikt-v-krymu-lichnyj-sostav-aviacionnoj-brigady-v-novofedoro-229338/> (Accessed July 1, 2020).

18 Interfax.ru, *Arrangement of the border zone on the border of the Russian Federation and Belarus is possible only after demarcation, without it the situation is fraught with conflict – Lukashenko*, 2 February 2017, available at: https://interfax.by/news/policy/vnutrennyaya_politika/1219742/ (Accessed July 1, 2020).

airbase.¹⁹ Moscow was able to actually follow through on these plans in Syria; but not, so far, in Belarus.

Thus, intentions to behave in a neutral way have deep roots in Belarus's strategic culture.

Strategic Autonomy vis-à-vis Russia

Although a strategic military and political ally of Russia, Belarus preserves enough checks and balances to block any unilateral decision by Moscow within their joint political and military alliances. That is how Belarus has managed to abstain from Russia's conflicts with Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), its operation in Syria (2015), and the geopolitical standoff with the West.

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Treaties and agreements signed by Minsk and Moscow provide a basis for a so-called strategic deal: Belarus accepted an obligation to join the various ongoing integration processes with Russia and agreed to renounce its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, in contrast with several other neighbouring post-Soviet states that had already decided to join NATO and the European Union. In light of NATO and the EU's eastward enlargement, Belarus suddenly began to play a significant role for Russia's national security in the western strategic direction, particularly with respect to the Kaliningrad exclave. In turn, Russia agreed to provide trade, economic, and military-technical support in exchange for a certain level of geopolitical loyalty from Belarus. Security and military integration became one of the cornerstones of this bilateral strategic deal.²⁰

However, despite this deep level of integration, Belarus has managed to preserve a considerable degree of strategic autonomy within its political-military alliance with Russia. The Belarusian

19 Electronic Fund of Legal and Normative Technical Documentation Konsortium Kodeks, *Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the deployment of an aviation group of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic*, 14 October 2016, available at: <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/420329053> (Accessed July 1, 2020).

20 Sivitsky, A., "Belarus — Russia: from a strategic deal to an asymmetric dependence," *Center for Strategic and Foreign Policy Studies*, 28 May 2019, available at: <https://forstrategy.org/en/posts/20190528> (Accessed June 29, 2020).

government succeeded in ensuring that the institutional architecture of the joint military components were all designed in a way that gives Minsk the option to exercise veto power over any of Moscow's decisions inconsistent with Belarus's national interests. This is one of the main reasons why Belarus never became involved in any recent Russian military adventures, including the war with Georgia (2008), the ongoing conflict with Ukraine, or the operations in Syria and Libya.

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For instance, all political and military decisions within the Union State framework are taken and approved by the Supreme State Council, the main collective decision-making body. This consists of the presidents, prime ministers, and heads of the lower and upper chambers of the parliaments of both states; all decisions are taken on the basis of consensus. The Supreme State Council is responsible for co-ordinating joint plans for the development and use of Russia and Belarus's armed forces and military infrastructure.

According to the 1998 Joint Defence Concept of Belarus and Russia and the 2001 Military Doctrine of the Union State, joint military components and action plans are activated only by a consensus decision of the Belarusian and Russian leaderships within the Supreme State Council in wartime.²¹ The same rules apply during a period of growing military threat ('threatened period').²²

Currently the Union State consists of two joint military components: the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) and the Unified Regional Air-Defence System (URADS). Both are usually trained during *Zapad* ('West') joint strategic exercises as well as during *Schit Soyuza* ('Union Shield') joint operational exercises. *Zapad* exercises take place every four years (most recently held in 2009, 2013, and 2017) on the territory of Belarus and partially Russia; whereas *Schit Soyuza* drills, carried out on the territory of Russia, are held two years after each *Zapad* exercise (2011, 2015, and 2019).

²¹ Conventions.ru, *Joint Defense Concept of Belarus and Russia, Article 18, 21*, 22 January 1998, available at: http://conventions.ru/view_base.php?id=16792 (Accessed June 30, 2020).

²² State system of legal information of the Russian Federation, *Military Doctrine of the Union State, Chapter 1, Article 1.12, 1.13*, 26 December 2001, available at: <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/456089527> (Accessed July 1, 2020).

The Regional Group of Forces comprises all ground and special operations units of the Belarusian Armed Forces as well as the 1st Guards Tank Army (military unit 73621, Moscow region, Bakovka) of the Russian Western Military District.²³ The RGF does not exist in peacetime. During a threatened period, however, the force's Joint Command is formed on the basis of the Ministry of Defence (General Staff of the Armed Forces) of Belarus. In practical terms, this means that the position of RGF Commander is permanent (non-rotational) and is always occupied by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus; under his command and control is the Belarusian Army and the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army. In turn, he is subordinate and reports directly to the Supreme State Council of the Union State.

The URADS includes all air forces and air-defence forces of the Belarusian Army as well as the 6th Air Forces and Air-Defence Forces Army, located on the territory of the Western Military District of the Russian Federation (military unit 09436, St Petersburg).²⁴

In contrast to the RGF, which is organized and deployed only during a threatened period, the URADS exists and functions on an ongoing basis in peacetime. The position of the URADS commander is rotational but must still be approved by a consensus decision of the presidents of Belarus and Russia. During a period of growing military threat (threatened period) or in wartime, the URADS becomes a composite part of the Regional Group of Forces (RGF). From a practical point of view, this means that the URADS commander subordinates to the RGF commander, represented by the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Belarus.

To date, no Russian troops are stationed on the territory of Belarus, either on a permanent or rotational basis; nor is there any

23 The 1st Guards Tank Army was established in 2014 and substituted the 20th Combined Arms Army (military unit 89425, Voronezh) after the latter was deployed on the border with Ukraine to assist Russia-backed separatists in the military conflict in Donbas.

24 Sivitsky, A., "New Union State Military Doctrine Will Not Change Status Quo in Belarusian-Russian Military Alliance," *Eurasia Daily Monitor, The Jamestown Foundation*, 11 December 2018, available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/new-union-state-military-doctrine-will-not-change-status-quo-in-belarusian-russian-military-alliance/> (Accessed June 29, 2020).

pre-deployed Russian military equipment in storage in Belarus. It can be brought into the Union State only in a threatened period and in wartime, but still requires the Supreme State Council to first ratify this decision on the basis of consensus.²⁵

Thus, there is in no way a military ‘Schengen zone’ between Belarus and Russia: Moscow is not legally permitted to use Belarusian territory for military purposes without Minsk’s authorization.

Today, the only form of Russian military presence inside Belarus consists of two Soviet-era military-technical facilities, owned by the Belarusian government but rented out to Russia: the 43rd Communications Centre of the Russian Navy (Vileika), with 350 officers and midshipmen, and the Gantsevichi early-warning radar station of the Volga-type UHF range (Kletsk district), with 600 military personnel. They do not possess combat capabilities and are not considered military bases according to agreements signed in 1995 and set to expire in 2021.

To date, no Russian troops are stationed on the territory of Belarus, either on a permanent or rotational basis; nor is there any pre-deployed Russian military equipment in storage in Belarus.

Since at least 2015, however, Russia has been demonstrating that it is no longer satisfied with the *status quo* regarding the Union State. In particular, by preserving its considerable veto power within this supranational format, Belarus actually constrains the Kremlin’s strategic intentions. The constraints come from not allowing Russian military bases on its soil and abstaining from involvement in Russia’s conflict with Ukraine and confrontation with the West.

Nevertheless, Russia continues its attempts to push the issue of a military base in Belarus. In September 2015, the commander of the troops of Russia’s Western Military District, Anatoly Sidorov, proposed including the joint Regional Group of Forces within the structure of the group of forces in the Western strategic direction.²⁶ In other words, he proposed, in effect,

²⁵ National Center for Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus, Agreement on joint technical support of the Regional Group of Troops (Forces) of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation, Article 7, 12 December 2017, available at: <http://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=A01600091&p1=1&p5=0> (Accessed Jul 1, 2020).

²⁶ Ria.ru, *ZVO: The Union Shield exercises showed the need for contacts between Russian Federation and Belarus*, 21 October 2015, available at: https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20151021/1305697600.html (Accessed June 29, 2020).

reassigning the Armed Forces of Belarus, which are part of the RGF, to the command of the Russian Western Military District (Joint Strategic Command ‘West’). It is worth pointing out that, in 2016, Russia implemented this model in its relations with Armenia. The Russian-Armenian Joint Group of Forces (JGF) is included in and assigned to the Southern Military District (Southern Joint Strategic Command) and the commander of the Southern Military District can exercise command and control over the JGF in a threatened period.²⁷

At the end of 2015, Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu proposed completing the formation of a joint military organization of the Union State by 2018.²⁸ Specifically, he suggested an in-depth integration of the military and security apparatuses of Belarus and Russia, with a joint decision-making centre in the Kremlin. Such a model has already been implemented with regard to Russia’s military relations with the separatist (and Moscow-backed) Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in 2014²⁹ and 2015,³⁰ respectively.

Collectively, the above-mentioned Russian proposals to Belarus demonstrate that Moscow no longer considers Minsk an equal partner from a formally institutional point of view and intends to reshape their military-political alliance by undermining Belarus’s strategic autonomy. From this perspective, Moscow’s so-called ‘integration ultimatum’ to Lukashenka’s government, explicitly declared at the end of 2018, actually dates back to at least 2015. It clearly shows Russia’s geopolitical intention to subordinate Belarus – politically, militarily, and economically – within the Union State framework. Integration models already tested by Moscow in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and to some degree Armenia,

27 The Russian Government, *Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Armenia on a Joint Group of Troops (Forces)*, Article 6; Appendix 1, Paragraph 1, 3, 3 November 2016, available at: <http://static.government.ru/media/acts/files/0001201611080006.pdf> (Accessed June 30, 2020).

28 Bsblog.info, *Moscow is interested in, Minsk is not*, 26 October 2015, available at: <https://bsblog.info/moskva-zainteresovana-minsk-net/> (Accessed June 30, 2020).

29 President of Russia, *Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Abkhazia on Alliance and Strategic Partnership*, Article 6, 7, 8, 24 November 2014, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4783> (Accessed June 30, 2020).

30 President of Russia, *Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on Alliance and Integration*, Article 1, 2, 3, 4, 15 March 2015, available at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4819> (Accessed July 1, 2020).

give some idea of Russia's final goals regarding Belarus.

However, in response to these Russian efforts, Minsk is seeking to reassert and enhance its commitments to regional and international security, thereby preserving and expanding Belarus's strategic autonomy within the alliance with Russia, especially in light of the latter's coercion towards deeper integration.³¹ However, in a short-term perspective, there is no chance for Minsk to withdraw from the Russia-led integration institutions owing to the potential harsh reaction from Moscow. Thus, the only available option is to strengthen the country's strategic autonomy *vis-à-vis* Russia.

Conclusions: A de facto Neutrality

The Belarus government's failure to play a leading role in the new integration alliance with Russia, the Union State, and its isolation by the West, impelled Belarus to seek an alternative foreign policy option through joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) at the end of the 1990s. Although the NAM played a significant role in helping to diversify the foreign policy of Minsk, it did not help to completely solve the strategic task of balancing the pressure and influence applied by the West and Russia on Belarus. Membership in the NAM has a primarily symbolic significance in contributing to Belarus's intention to become a neutral state.

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In practical terms, Belarus has been widely associated with a neutral platform for diplomatic negotiations over the Russia–Ukraine conflict of 2014, rather than progressing this through formal membership of the NAM. Moreover, the country's major contribution to regional security and stability is related to the so-called security guarantees that Minsk formulated towards all neighbouring states in the immediate wake of the Russia–Ukraine conflict and the subsequent Russia–West geopolitical standoff. The security guarantees assert that Belarus will not

³¹ Sivitsky, A., "Belarus's Contribution to Security and Stability in Central and Eastern Europe: Regional Safeguards, Strategic Autonomy and National Defense Modernization," *The Jamestown Foundation*, 2 March 2020, Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/belaruss-contribution-to-security-and-stability-in-central-and-eastern-europe-regional-safeguards-strategic-autonomy-and-national-defense-modernization/> (Accessed July 1, 2020).

voluntarily allow its territory to be used by third countries to commit military aggression against neighbours and other foreign states. Regardless of its strategic political and military alliance with Russia, Belarus has managed to abstain from engaging in the conflict with Ukraine or Moscow's confrontation with the West. Moreover, Minsk has so far withstood Moscow's growing geopolitical pressure aimed at compromising these security guarantees by deploying Russian military bases and transforming Belarus into a source of security challenges and threats to other countries. Thus, the *modus operandi* of Belarus resembles the model of behaviour of a neutral state.

The intention to become a neutral state is contained in conceptual documents of Belarus relating to security and foreign policies and is a component part of its strategic culture. However, it is still problematic to consider Belarus a neutral country in a traditional sense owing to its formal membership in political-military alliances with Russia and the CSTO. However, Minsk's considerable level of strategic autonomy *vis-à-vis* Russia enables Belarus to carry out independent foreign and military policies even against the background of a significant level of geopolitical pressure from Russia's. From these perspectives, Belarus can be considered as a *de facto* neutral or non-aligned country.