Policy Paper No. 9
November 9, 2020

The Future of Belarus's Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Yauheni Preiherman

Summary

The new political landscape, in which Belarus has found itself in the wake of the presidential election of August 2020, will definitely produce a dramatic impact on the country's foreign policy pattern — at the very least, a fundamental fracture in Belarus's relations with the European Union and the United States can already be observed, whereas Russia's objectively critical foreign policy role appears to be growing ever more important.

Contents

1 What is a multi-vectored policy?
2 How is the international landscape changing?
3 The end of Belarus's multi-vector orientation?

In this new environment, a natural question arises: what can/should Belarus's foreign policy look like now? Andrey Savinykh, the chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly, has already offered an answer. In his opinion, Minsk should abandon the multi-vector concept and develop a new foreign policy doctrine instead.

This paper will not analyze Andrey Savinykh's proposals in detail, as they still sound more like a political statement rather than a substantive concept. At least, it is hard to comprehend what kind of alternative is offered and how it fundamentally differs from the systemic foreign policy orientation of the Belarusian leadership that has remained in place for over two decades. However, let us try to reflect whether Belarus's multi-vector foreign policy as a whole has a future.

To this end, the paper will answer two questions. What exactly does a multi-vector policy imply? And how relevant does it remain for Minsk in these new international conditions? Incidentally, these novel circumstances should be attributed not only and

even not so much to the consequences of the domestic political crisis in Belarus, as to the ongoing structural transformation of the entire system of international relations.

What is a multi-vectored policy?

Despite the regular use of the term "multi-vector" in policy documents, speeches delivered by officials and media discourse in the vast majority of the post-Soviet states, it is quite difficult to identify the true substance of the notion. In this respect, in academic literature there is, notably, virtually no acknowledged theoretical concept of the multi-vector approach in foreign policy. Perhaps the most serious attempt to put forth such a concept is Elena Gnedina's paper "'Multi-Vector' Foreign Policies in Europe: Balancing, Bandwagoning or Bargaining?"

Gnedina emphasizes that post-Soviet leaders who heavily rely on multi-vector rhetoric have never offered a precise definition, referring to some abstract idea of "cooperation and co-habitation with all regional powers." In her opinion, for the republics located in the European part of the former Soviet Union, this implies their desire to "alternate cooperation with Russia and the EU while remaining on the margins of their regional orders." In follow-up to this general point, Gnedina argues that:

[...] 'multi-vector' states neither balance nor bandwagon – the post-Soviet elites bargain with competing external actors over the terms of cooperation. As their power is evidently circumscribed, the post-Soviet states try to increase bargaining power by means of tactical manoeuvring while pursuing their own objectives. The latter include wealth – and power – maximisation, as well as maintaining a degree of autonomy from both external actors in order to prolong the bargaining game. [...] While on some occasions they accommodate the demands of a more powerful external actor in order to alleviate external pressure, on others they manoeuvre between competing external actors in order to negotiate more favourable deals with one or both of them.

Gnedina's approach is based on the negotiation theory, from which she derives various models of conduct of "multi-vector" states. This makes it possible to describe and analyze actions taken by states in specific bargaining situations. However, this is where theoretical insufficiency lies as well: the description of how the multi-vector approach is employed in specific isolated situations stops us from having a complete picture of a state's foreign policy. In other words, just as bargaining with a buyer in a marketplace is only one component of a vendor's business practice, negotiations/bargaining with partners over a specific issue is only an element of a state's integrated foreign policy.

Without going further into theoretical aspects, let us note that any state (not only the one that declares its multi-vector priorities) bargains with a variety of external partners on a continuing basis and at various levels.

> And each state spares no foreign policy effort to make sure that bargaining at all levels will give it the best possible outcome. This is the essence of foreign policy, and in this sense, all sovereign states are multi-vector.

However, every state has a unique foreign policy strategy, which is shaped by the circumstances, in which they operate. Even amongst the former Soviet Union republics, it is difficult to find identical foreign policy doctrines. What they have in common is only the same abstract idea of "cooperation and co-habitation with all regional powers."

At this level of abstraction, a global insoluble contradiction inevitably emerges between the fundamental interests of relatively small "multi-vector" states and regional hegemons. The former construe their multi-vector nature as the promotion of the broadest possible range of opportunities in their foreign policy and foreign economic activities. Moreover, for many, including Belarus, economic rationality is what matters the most. It is no coincidence that Aliaksandr Lukashenka referred to the "30-30-30" ratio of foreign trade diversification as the formula of sovereignty. At the same time, regional hegemons (including Russia and some of the EU states) tend to perceive the multi-vector focus of post-Soviet countries as an attempt to have a foot in both camps, which in their opinion has an exclusively geopolitical and, therefore, negative connotation.

How is the international landscape changing?

The system of international relations is in the process of transformation. This is already a historical fact. The unipolar model, based on the global hegemony of the United States, is gradually transforming into a new model with its outlines being quite obscure now. The only thing that is obvious is that strategic competition between the U.S. and China will be the main structuring factor of this model. However, it is almost impossible (at least if the current trends persist) that the system will eventually become expressly bipolar again, as was the case during the Cold War.

The new system will have at least five to six regional powers, which already have and will continue to enjoy substantial authority, influence and autonomy. Beijing and Washington will be forced to build partnerships with some of them, as they will be

unable to impose subordination relationships on them and will need them to compete with each other. That said, the interests of all these powers will be different enough, which will rule out sustainable coalitions between them.

> Proponents of the idea that the era of multi-vector policy in Belarus and other post-Soviet states is coming to an end rely on the assertion that the globalization process has given an impetus to another process, called glocalization. As a result, they argue that powerful macro-regions have started to emerge around regional powers across the globe, which will form the foundation of the new multipolar world.

Their point is that as the system of international relations transforms, macro-regions become self-sufficient, and collaboration between them markedly dwindles or even gives way to confrontation. Accordingly, a conclusion is drawn that Belarus should simply give 100% of its foreign policy focus to the Eurasian macro-region, to which it already belongs.

But are there grounds for these expectations and conclusions?

The importance of regions in international relations is indeed growing and will continue to grow. However, unlike the Cold War period, the likelihood of a new Iron Curtain or its regional counterpart anywhere in the world is negligible in the foreseeable future. The interrelationship and interdependence between states claiming leadership in the new system is too great and too deep — above all, between the United States and China. Therefore, in the words of Singaporean diplomat and scholar Bilahari Kausikan, "ambivalence is the most salient characteristic of all major power relationships." And it is ambivalence that will remain the most important characteristic of relationships between regions.

Therefore, the geopolitical struggle of the states contending for regional leadership cannot be similar to the Cold War confrontation between the U.S. and the USSR, including in terms of the creation and fostering of rigid spheres of influence. Without the Iron Curtain and rigid spheres of influence, smaller countries by definition have more room for manoeuvre, which they will inevitably use to assert their interests. It is also in the interests of superpowers to at least maintain economic and logistic ties, in which smaller countries are engaged, and at most, follow Henry Kissinger's old recipe: to bring down tensions between themselves by allowing less powerful countries to take responsibility for less important international issues.

At the same time, the fragmentation and reformatting of logistic and production chains is almost inevitable as early as in the medium term, especially against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the general uncertainty that the future holds. States around the world will be hedging risks using the economic regionalization toolkit. For example, the EU will try to replace (or complement) imports of strategically important goods from faraway regions with its own production or imports from neighbouring markets. In this sense, regionalization will not envisage the establishment of political blocs, but rather imply geographical concentration of critical industries, which cannot be fully consistent with the borders of regional integration associations. Thus, the resulting effect of economic regionalization will be directly opposite to the expectations of those who augur the end of the multi-vector age.

Regionalization of manufacturing and logistics chains will create increasing prerequisites for many countries, including Belarus, to pursue multi-vector policies. Where Belarusian manufacturers used to be uncompetitive in conditions of the global division of labour, they will now be able to benefit from new opportunities opened up by regionalization. As always, taking advantage of these economic opportunities will call for favourable political relationships with neighbours and key states in the region.

The end of Belarus's multi-vector orientation?

A recap: it is difficult to find objective reasons why Belarus would benefit from abandoning its multi-vector approach.

First, any sovereign foreign policy is by definition a multi-vector one, even if one of the vectors clearly prevails (which is the case of Belarus). The wider the room for manoeuvre a country has, the more opportunities in international relations it benefits from — this universal formula works for any state — from superpowers to small countries. The narrower the room for manoeuvre, the more likely a state will not only fail to achieve its national objectives, but also lose its international agency altogether.

> Therefore, the proposal to abandon the very idea of a multi-vector policy is nonsense for any sovereign state, especially such a state as Belarus, located in the heart of Europe, in the area where civilizational platforms overlap, trade routes cross, and interests of superpowers come in touch.

Second, there are no structural preconditions for giving up on Belarus's multi-vector approach. According to Fyodor Lukyanov, as a result of the ongoing transformation of the system of international relations, "the omnipotence of the 'big' powers does not disappear completely, but is diluted." And this, in simple terms, is the ideal substrate for

small states pursuing multi-vector strategies, enabling them to fully put into effect their own international agency. Moreover, in most cases, it is not only small states themselves that benefit, but also regional and superpowers, which make use of multi-vector endeavours by small nations to address some of their challenges, in both economics and security.

Third, the rejection of the multi-vector concept would also run counter to public opinion in Belarus. Public opinion polls have traditionally recorded the propensity of Belarusian citizens to support simultaneous cooperation with all key foreign partners, even if the political situation in the world or region makes such cooperation questionable. In recent years, nationwide political surveys have been obstructed in Belarus, but in those rare cases when studies were conducted, the results confirm the multi-vector preferences of society.

The significance of these data is not really in the role that public opinion plays in the process of making executive decisions in Belarus. The thing is that the abandonment of the multi-vector approach in the country where no single foreign policy vector enjoys the support of even a third of the population is fraught with further aggravation of the socio-political schism. Therefore, the worst thing that can happen amidst the unfolding domestic political crisis is to announce the end of Belarus's multi-vector policy.

The publication is supported by the Belarus Office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (Germany). The content of the publication represents the views of the author only.



Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations