

УДК 327.8:616-036.21]”2020”(470+510:100)

<http://doi.org/10.46869/2707-6776-2022-17-7>

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## COUNTERING COVID-19 AS A TOOL FOR HYBRID INFLUENCE OF RUSSIA AND CHINA ON REGIONAL SUBSYSTEMS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: EUROPEAN AND ASIAN DIMENSIONS

*In the XXI century the system of international relations has undergone transformations, including non-traditional determinants. This research drew attention to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on modernization of the policies of great powers, which began to use pandemic countermeasures as a tool of their influence on future post-COVID international order. The authors analyze the peculiarities of using “hard power” (economic pressure) and “soft power” (economic aid, cultural interaction), and sometimes a combination of these tools on the example of Russia and China in order to lobby their own position under the pandemic of COVID-19 in the relevant geopolitically close regions – Europe and Southeast Asia. This research analyses all above mentioned peculiarities based on chronological period – at the beginning of pandemic situation in 2020.*

*It was found that Russia most actively used the effects of the beginning of global pandemic on the European direction of foreign policy, under the impact of energy factor and the formation of the image of “peacemaker” and the role of “messiah” in the region. In the study, Italy is an example of the use of hybrid influence from Russia, the spread of fakes and the presentation of the “weakness” of the EU at the beginning of the pandemic in a rapid political response to the threat. Southeast Asia became the region of Chinese foreign policy in counteracting COVID-19, where China’s “mask diplomacy” acts as a countermeasure to overcome conflict in the South China Sea, form a system of “subordination” and realization the idea of “community of common destiny”.*

*The findings reveal that Russia and China can be characterized as states that have political regimes with special tools and mechanisms for policy implementation. Beijing and Moscow not only aim to strengthen their influence in neighboring regions, but also to oppose the United States. Analyzing political actions and mechanism that Russia and China used at the beginning of pandemic, the authors confirmed that both countries aim to use “vaccine diplomacy” as an effective tool for influencing the coronavirus international order.*

**Keywords:** Russian Federation, People’s Republic of China, Europe, Southeast Asia, COVID-19.

### Introduction

At the present stage, the phenomena that influenced on the rethinking of the concept of “security” in the context of global transformation processes associated with globalization, the emergence of global interdependence, new contradictions of political and socio-economic development have formed. Such situation is reflected the fact that the security sphere began to include not only traditional, military-strategic issues, but also “non-traditional” security threats, mainly non-military threats related to globalization and the growing interdependence of countries in the

world system. In turn, the problem of “non-traditional” threats, as evidenced by the spread of COVID-19, can destabilize all dimensions of multi-level security systems. At the same time, despite the transnational nature, “non-traditional” threats, challenges and security risks, going beyond nation-states and perceived as a global phenomenon, are most appeared at the regional level, which indicates the dynamic of the regionalization process.

Such tendencies are the subject of foreign policy initiatives of the great powers, which are trying to maintain their positions or achieve leadership. As of 2022, Russia and China are actively using the global pandemic situation to spread their regional influence. It should be noted that these countries have several aims: to destabilize the environment in the region and maintain the status quo; to establish its economic dominance and confirm the “dependence” of the countries in the region. The Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China demonstrate this influence in their regional foreign policy initiatives.

**The purpose of research.** Therefore, the authors aim to analyze the peculiarities of using “hard power” (economic pressure) and “soft power” (economic aid, cultural interaction), and sometimes a combination of these tools on the example of Russia and China in order to lobby their own position under the pandemic of COVID-19 in the relevant geopolitically close regions – Europe and Southeast Asia. It should be noted that the chronological aspect of the research is the first half of 2020 – the beginning of pandemic and global order in coronavirus era – implementation of so called “mask diplomacy” of Russia and China that made the background of the influence of great powers on new global order and preparing for using “vaccine diplomacy”.

**Recent literature review.** Analyzing the scientific background of the problem, it should be noted that a number of scientists pay attention to the study of the international system in the days of COVID-19 especially in the focus is investigation of the foreign policy of great powers. Among Ukrainian researchers, A. Honcharuk [1] analyzes China’s efforts to combat coronavirus infection in the country and all over the world. The Western researchers is represented by RAND Corporation [2], particularly, in terms of information pressure and the use of COVID-19 spreading fake information in foreign policy initiatives of Russia and China. Bobo Lo, representative of Lowy Institute Analysis, Australia [3], examines the world order of the pandemic era and the competition between China, Russia and the West. Among Russian scientists, E. Maslov [4] focuses on the Italian scenario of the beginning of the coronavirus era and the EU’s policy to overcome the pandemic. L. Gamza and E. Zakljaz’minskaja [5] emphasize on the use of COVID-19 in China’s foreign policy, including Asia-Pacific region. Southeast Asian scholars [6; 7] are examining China’s “soft power” in the region and its assistance in combating coronavirus infection in the Southeast Asian region.

It should be noted that the spread of coronavirus infection contributes to the evolutionary changes in the world order and encourages the discovery of new causes

and preconditions for using pandemic by world powers as an instrument in their foreign policy.

### **Theoretical background**

The term “foreign policy” has been defined differently by scholars, but most believe that this is a behavior of the state in relation to other states. For example, J. Modelski defines foreign policy as “a system of activities developed by communities to change the behavior of other states and to adapt their activities to the international environment.” J. Modelski, noted only those aspects of policy that aim to change the existing behavior of states as the primary goals of foreign policy. According to J. Frankel’s definition: “foreign policy consists of decisions and actions that relate to the relationship between one state and another” [8].

The external environment, in particular, external threats that form the basis of the positioning of the state at both the regional and global levels of the international system are the determinants of the foreign policy of the state [9, p. 104].

The protection of the state and its national interests, security from external threats, as well as the implementation of foreign policy strategy can be provided by two main tools – military methods and diplomacy. In turn, concepts such as “hard power” and “soft power” should be used to analyze a country’s foreign policy strategy. Consider the theoretical justification of these concepts.

“Hard power” is defined as the ability to achieve one’s goals through coercion or threats. Historically, “hard power” has been measured by criteria such as population, territory, geography, natural resources, military force, and economic power.

According to J. Nye, a country’s “soft power” bases on three resources: its culture (where it is attractive to others), its political values, and also its foreign policy (when countries are considered as authoritative and trustful). “Soft power” is based on the ability to shape the preferences of others without the use of force, coercion or violence, but through intangible features - culture, political values, institutions and policies that are considered legitimate or have authority. Legitimacy is a key to “soft power” [10].

As the Ukrainian scientist M. Kapitonenko emphasizes: “the concept of “soft power”, its implementation faces a number of problematic aspects, which are embodied not only in the spread of cultural values, but also mass culture, and there must exist a determinism of domestic and foreign policy of the state, which is traced in the “imposition” of certain standards, practices of coexistence” [11, c. 24-25].

Examining the components of soft power, J. McClory assessed the “soft power” of countries in five categories: “...1) Political values of the country; 2) Culture; 3) Diplomacy (foreign policy), 4) Education; 5) Business / Innovation (reflecting the attractiveness of the country’s economic model in terms of its openness and ability to innovate)” [12].

The concept of soft power implies complete subordination of the object, but not out of fear, but out of the belief that the subject is completely right and his attitude is either a good alternative or the only true one. It is worth noting that the use of “soft

power” in friendly states is easier than the use of its instruments in countries with other values (political, spiritual) [13, c. 67].

It should be noted that these tools for implementing the foreign policy strategy of the state are closely related to the regional level of the system of international relations. The region is a universal category for considering a new world order based on the emergence of regional systems. In addition, the regional security system is the interdependence of the national security of one state on the security of another state belonging to a particular region [14, c. 40].

Security interdependence at the regional level of international relations, as well as relations between states should be considered through the prism of the theory of constructivism in international relations. First of all, in the format “friend / enemy”. The phenomenon of identity considered without primary role of material values as the main aspect of determining the actions of the state in the international arena. States shape their interests, perceptions of the world, “social behavior”, which is manifested through “identity”, an attribute of which is the region. Therefore, regionalism arises as a common identity of a group of states with a common social, historical and political experience [15, c. 186]. It can be argued that both in Europe and in Southeast Asia there is a realization of the phenomenon of regional identity. In particular, the functioning of the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN), although they cannot be unambiguously compared. It should be noted that the EU does not include all European states as opposed to ASEAN, which is an institutional form of a geographically defined region of Southeast Asia. In this aspect, the manifestation of Russian influence in the European direction, as well as Chinese one in Southeast Asia are somewhat different.

Note that the use of pressure or influence on other states by states in order to realize national interests by means of both “soft power” and “hard power” is determined by the regional environment and the situation in it. Threats have an impact on stability / instability in the region. As of XXI century “non-traditional” threats are becoming more widespread. Chinese researcher Xiong Guangkai names such “non-traditional” threats as: “terrorism, drug smuggling, serious infectious diseases, piracy, illegal migration, as well as factors that threaten environmental security, economic, financial and information security” [16, c. 94].

According to the problem of the study, such a subgroup of “non-traditional” threats as infectious diseases, namely the COVID-19 epidemic, is becoming a destabilizing factor in the regional and global environment of the international system. Thus, such threat becomes a tool for great powers, including Russia and China, to spread their own influence on all levels of international system.

### **Geopolitical component and conceptual background of the foreign policy strategy of Russia and China at the regional level**

**Russian dimension.** Nowadays Europe and the world are facing the problem of spreading the COVID-19 pandemic, but Russia is using the process of quarantining European countries. European countries are securing national borders by closing the

political and geographical space, at the same time, Russia is trying to shake European unity from within and achieve its own foreign policy goals.

This problem also has a purely domestic political dimension in the context of falling ratings of Russian President Vladimir Putin (according to a poll by the “Levada Center”, a new rule that allows Vladimir Putin after 2024 to be elected for two more terms, approve 48% of respondents, but 47% do not approve. 46% of respondents would like to see V. Putin as a President after 2024 (against 54% in July 2019), and 40% would not like) [17]. The Russian leading elite, in this situation, needs to show Russia as “island of stability” in contrast to Europe, where countries were left alone in the face of the dangers of the spread of the COVID-19. This thesis is constantly being broadcasted by both Russian officials and the Russian media. This may explain the rather long silence, if not concealment, by the Russian leadership of the coronavirus spreading in Russia.

Russian social networks are speculating about the special genes of Russians and their strong immunity, as a result of which many, including the elite, are convinced that COVID-19 will not affect them. At the same time, an outbreak of pneumonia continues in Russia. Despite the fact that Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 25 introduced a long vacation until April 30 due to the coronavirus (including indefinitely postponed the vote on changes to the constitution and gave everyone a week of paid leave) [18] it is clear that the defining setting The Kremlin, as usual, is to use the crisis to gain diplomatic advantage in the fight against the West. It should also be noted that the responsibility for making unpopular decisions was transferred by the President of the Russian Federation to the Mayor of Moscow S. Sobyenin and Prime Minister M. Mishustin. The Prime Minister headed the Coronavirus Coordination Council, and S. Sobyenin became the head of the State Duma working group in the same direction. The president himself does not want his name to be associated with making unpopular decisions in the face of falling ratings. This was reflected in the second address of the President of the Russian Federation on April 2 in which the responsibility to a greater extent in counteraction to distribution of COVID-19 was assigned to heads of regions of the Russia [19].

In a practical sense, the pandemic created new powers for governors, however, some Russian experts believed that “decentralization or devolution in the realm of fighting Covid-19 in Russia is anything but federalization or regional empowerment. This is mostly the part of ‘the blame game’ where costs of painful measures are shifted to the regions and ‘good news’ are [sic] delivered by the president” [20, p. 37].

According to A. Makarichev’s research, the COVID pandemic coincided with the decentralization reform in Russia: “the transfer of a significant amount of government functions from the Kremlin to regions, being a major element of the crisis management framework, became an important contribution to gradual decentralization of the Russian political system, and created a stronger demand for self-rule in many of the peripheral regions” [20, p. 44]. At the same time, there was a

reaction / opposition in some autonomous regions of the Russian Federation to the Kremlin's actions.

The policy of counteracting COVID-19 by the Russian Federation and the use of new tools in its implementation took place at both internal and external levels. For example, Europe is a geopolitically important region for Russia, both in spreading political influence and in defending / "imposing" its own interests and worldviews.

**Chinese dimension.** China has quite ambitious goals for its growth which is based on theoretical and conceptual ideas. It should be emphasized on the entry of the Chinese nation and statehood in a new era of its existence the "era of Xi Jinping" – "the era of becoming a powerful state" This official rhetoric was confirmed at the sessions of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in March 2018 [21].

China under the power of Xi Jinping begun the realization of the idea of building a "community of common destiny", in particular through the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), which was included in the Constitution [22].

In fact, BRI is not subject to a precisely regulated definition. Geographically, it is being implemented in the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the land route that should connect East Asia and Europe through Central Asia. "Sea Silk Road" is designed to connect East Asia with Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and East Africa [23, p. 21].

One of the components of the Chinese "Belt and Road Initiative" is the implementation of the concept of the "Health Silk Road". Chinese policy was first publicly mentioned by Chinese President Xi Jinping during a speech in Uzbekistan in 2016. The "Health Silk Road" was launched in 2017 by China and the World Health Organization. Both have made ambitious commitments to overall health support through global collaboration on health development in research and national health systems, especially among the Silk Road countries [24].

China undoubtedly claims the role of regional leader in Southeast Asia. Therefore, official Beijing is interested in the formation of a single regional economic and political space. The main objectives of this policy such as: the creation of a closed economic community of Southeast Asian countries dominated by China in order to eliminate major regional competitors – the United States and Japan; the expansion on ASEAN countries' markets; conversion of the yuan into a regional currency, due to the growth of foreign exchange reserves and the activity of Chinese banks; establishing a system of transit traffic from the West Coast of the United States to the Persian Gulf and East Africa along the Indochina route in order to establish control over them; weakening the economic opportunities of Taiwan by taking advantage of the above-mentioned economic community in order to accelerate its potential accession to China, etc. Not the least role in this context is played the fact that many people from China live in Southeast Asia. In addition, ethnic Chinese are the most active participants in economic processes in most ASEAN countries [25, c. 78].

The United States is considered to be the main competitor of the China in the whole Asia-Pacific region and in Southeast Asia as well. China, emphasizing the maintenance of a stable and peaceful external environment, demonstrates a reluctance to add foreign policy conflicts, especially with the United States to its domestic challenges. However, this does not mean that China is not taking and will not take steps to criticize United States actions in the region. The South China Sea dispute is a good example, which is becoming a destabilizing factor in China's relations with ASEAN member states, whose position is supported by the United States, as well as the scope of China-US opposition at the regional and global levels.

### **Features of the use of fight COVID-19 by Russia and China at the regional level**

**European vector of Russian foreign policy strategy.** The decisive factor that prompted Russia to increase its hybrid influence on the system of relations in Europe was the deployment of a “fuel war” between Russia and Saudi Arabia. The development of such war in the context of the spread of the pandemic was a determining factor in the additional pressure on the Russian budget, that burdened by the system of sanctions imposed on Russia by countries in Europe and the world. The positions of the two leading countries in the oil market were explained by several ways. On the one hand, it was Saudi Arabia's desire to reduce production to compensate for declining demand due to coronavirus, and on the other hand, Russia opposed the reduction, because its budget was more resistant to low oil prices and Russia wanted to use such situation with the purpose to eliminate competitors. In addition, such positioning of the Russian Federation on this issue can be seen as a kind of revenge of the United States for its tough stance on the “Nord Stream-2” project.

It is worth pointing out the state-owned company “Saudi Aramco”, has offered Europe discounts (\$ 25 per barrel), which is a traditional market for Russian oil, as well as other regions of the world, where the positions of Russian oil companies are quite strong [26].

The United States intervened in the political and energy confrontation between Russia and Saudi Arabia, expressing its critical attitude and calling for dialogue.

Under pressure from the economic situation and the tough stance of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) members, as well as the United States, OPEC's members and its partners on April 9, reached a compromise on reducing oil production to prevent further falls of prices in world market [27]. Former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine P. Klimkin, commenting on the results of the agreements, stressed: “The new agreement on reducing oil production is the worst, in fact, triple energy defeat of Russia in 20 years. Formally, everyone has reduced production by 23%, but Saudi Arabia has deliberately increased it over the past month, along with an aggressive reduction in prices...” [28].

Although according to the press secretary of the President of the Russian Federation D. Peskov: “The concessions made by Moscow are not a loss: the world economy has won” [29].

As a result, on the one hand, due to the need to take unpopular quarantine measures, and on the other hand, due to a sharp drop in oil prices and pressure from the United States, Russia is trying to use the COVID-19 pandemic to destroy EU unity with the purpose to achieve political dividends in the form of lifting sanctions on its national economy burdened by oil crisis.

The means of implementing this foreign policy course can be explained as a continuation of Russia’s hybrid actions in the international arena. Actually, the Russian media are actively spreading theses about the EU crisis in quarantine.

The publication “Coronavirus: the time of death of the European Union” by K. Denisenko published on the website of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) is illustrative in this context. Describing the state of affairs in the EU in the conditions of the quarantine measures, the author emphasizes: “Fear of the coronavirus and general panic have made us [European Union] forget about the Schengen Code – the basis of European cooperation. One by one, supporters of European integration closed their borders under the deafening silence of the EU’s supranational institutions” [30]. Although the RIAC positions itself as a non-profit organization in the field of foreign policy and international relation, however, the founders of the organization are the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Russian Ministry of Education and Science, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Interfax news agency.

The Russian information and analytical portal RuBaltic.Ru, headquartered in Kaliningrad, which focuses primarily on the Baltic countries, noted: “Europe has become the world’s leading distributor of coronavirus. While China has largely coped with an outbreak of the new disease, and Russia and other post-Soviet countries are successfully battling the spread of the coronavirus, Europeans are increasingly seen as plagued. The coronavirus epidemic raises the question of the future of the European Union: will this project continue to exist, if it is so obviously unable to meet the challenges of the times?” [31].

The classic technique in this dimension is to “withdraw” ideas of foreign experts in the mass media and consciousness of Russian society. For instance, the information portal “Eurasia. The Expert” published an interview with the Italian Expert F. Giubilei, who is a lecturer at the University of Fortunato in Benevento. In an interview with the Russian newspaper, F. Giubilei, stressed: “In Italy, very disappointed with the behavior of the European Union, which leaves us alone in the face of an emergency with the coronavirus. What is the point of the EU, when it does not help a country like Italy, which is one of the founding countries and the third most populous country, even in difficult times?” [32].

Thus, by bringing up the issue of countering the spread of coronavirus by EU countries, Russia has used this situation to mobilize the population around a “strong leader” and, by helping Italy, seeks to achieve reducing, if not lifting, sanctions.

Russia’s “help” to Italy in the fight against the coronavirus turned out to be another propaganda campaign. Note that, the epicenter of the spread of coronavirus infection COVID-19 is the industrial Padua Valley, which unites Lombardy, Veneto and Liguria and the politicians elected from these regions consistently express an openly pro-Russian position. In particular, the “League” party, which was in power during 2018-2019, as well as the regional councils of Lombardy and Veneto have repeatedly criticized the EU sanctions regime against Russia (and had financial support from the Russian authorities). The leader of the political party “League”, former Deputy Prime Minister M. Salvini, noted about the possibility of the country’s withdrawal from the EU due to delays in providing assistance in overcoming the coronavirus epidemic [33].

However, according to one of the most influential an Italian daily newspaper “La Stampa”, 80% of Russia’s aid to Italy was unfit to fight with COVID-19. Russia has sent equipment for disinfection of territories and other similar special equipment to the country, while China, for example, has sent medical masks and ventilators, the publication noted. The Italian experts was concerned about the composition of the Russian delegation – the military, and the operation was coordinated by the Russian Ministry of Defense, not the Ministry of Health [34].

However, while an article about the doubts about the Russian aid to Italy and the real purpose of this aid was published in late March, in early April, the newspaper “La Stampa” expressed outrage at the pressure on the editorial board after the publication of these materials. The relevant statement was posted on the newspaper’s website [35].

At the same time, disseminating information in this way, Russia seeks to improve its image in the eyes of Europeans as a friendly country, and in the eyes of Russian society to articulate a position on Russia’s “peacekeeping” activities in contrast to Western countries. Another background in the informational special operation of Russia was the spread of the thesis of gratitude of the Italians of the Russian Federation in the media. In particular, the thesis of the desire of members of the independent cultural association named after L. Tolstoy from the Mulazzano city in the province of Lombardy in northern Italy to erect a monument to Russian military experts who came to the country to help control the spread of coronavirus was published firstly by Russian and later some European media [36].

Thus, the “humanitarian mission” of fourteen aircraft became perhaps the most effective international special operation conducted by the Russian Defense Ministry, taking advantage of the problems and confusion of the EU institutions in the face of a pandemic. “Der Spiegel”, a leading German newspaper, noted: “Russia and China are taking advantage of Europe’s mistakes in the context of the coronavirus crisis” [37].

It should be noted that the object of Russia's hybrid influence was not only Italy. In particular, on April 3, Polish Foreign Minister J. Chaptowicz accused Moscow of using the coronavirus crisis to spread misinformation, recalling the Kremlin's fake that Poland had blocked the flight of a Russian plane carrying aid to Italy, over its territory [38].

A report by East Stratcom, a special unit of the European External Action Service which mandate includes debunking fake news from Russia, noted that between January 22 and March 27, more than 150 cases of pro-Kremlin misinformation about COVID-19 were recorded [39].

Thus, preparing the ground for the advancement of its foreign policy guidelines, Russia went on the offensive in the field of multilateral diplomacy.

At the same time, on March 26 at the G20 summit, which took place in the format of a video conference, Russian President Vladimir Putin stressed the issue of lifting sanctions from Russia, which hinder the delivery of food and medical care to various countries. Russian President stressed: "...it is a matter of life and death, a purely humanitarian issue "without any political color or background" [40].

At the same time, the Russian side proposed a draft resolution which called for the lifting of international sanctions under the idea of a "declaration of solidarity" against COVID-19, at a video conference meeting of the UN General Assembly, on April 3, 2020. The Permanent Representative of Ukraine to the UN S. Kyslytsia reacted to the following actions of Russia: "The use of coronavirus pandemic situation is part of namely "coronavirus" plan of the Russian Federation to intensify the contradictions within the European Union, and thus destroy it, at least politically" [41].

Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine to Turkey in 2008-2016 S. Korsunsky supported the idea of S. Kyslytsia, stressed on such fact of Russia model of behavior in international arena: "The Kremlin will use the coronavirus pandemic to promote recognition of Crimea as part of Russia" [42].

The draft resolution of the Russian Federation, which under the aim of a "declaration of solidarity" in combating COVID-19, demanded the lifting of international sanctions, was blocked by Ukraine at the meeting of the UN General Assembly [43].

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine published a statement approving the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution "Global solidarity to fight COVID-19" [44] (General Assembly of the United Nations 2020) on compliance with the principles of international cooperation and the central role of the UN in the global response to the pandemic. At the same time, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine has made it clear: "Russia is defiantly ignoring the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire, continuing armed provocations and blocking international organizations' access to Ukraine's occupied territories amid the spread of COVID-19." Describing the "coronavirus" policy of the Russian Federation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine noted: "Ukraine opposes the attempts of the Russian Federation to take advantage of the difficult humanitarian situation to avoid

international legal responsibility. These manipulations only harm the important work of the UN Secretary-General and the United Nations in strengthening cooperation between states in the fight against COVID-19 and minimizing its consequences” [45].

Whereas in the first half of 2020 Russia was guided more by energy interests and tried to promote a positive image of aid to Europe, which was covered in the media, in the second half of 2020 Russia uses “vaccine diplomacy”. Note that Russia has registered a vaccine against COVID-19 “Sputnik-V”, and in November 2020 Hungary became the first EU country to decide to purchase this vaccine. The EU representative noted that Hungary’s permission to use the Russian coronavirus vaccine did not apply to the entire EU: “The EU prefers that all vaccines offered to European citizens be approved by the European Medicines Agency.” At the same time, the European Commission representative added that states decide for themselves which vaccine to recommend to their citizens [46].

Therefore, Russia has the opportunity to actively use “vaccine diplomacy” in Europe, until the COVID-19 vaccine is officially registered by other countries, including the United States and China.

#### **Southeast Asia as a recipient of Chinese aid in the fight against COVID-19**

China began providing assistance to fight COVID-19 in Southeast Asia region in early February 2020, while it was still active in overcoming the virus domestically. However, Beijing’s aid to the Southeast Asia as well as other world, has begun since March 2020, after President Xi Jinping’s visit to Wuhan on March 10 [47].

It should be noted that China’s policy in Southeast Asia is being implemented both at the ASEAN level and through the existing cooperation mechanisms: 1) the Lancang-Mekong (LMC) mechanism, which was launched in 2016 and covers China, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand; 2) the sub-regional group of China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, namely East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) [48].

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (USA, Washington), Chinese aid to the region of Southeast Asia is quite significant, which confirms the priority of the region for China (information of the such part of website as Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker) [49].

Researcher Li Liang Fuk, Coordinator of the Regional Strategic and Political Studies Program and the Vietnam Studies Program, at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore), has published a series of analytical papers on China’s implementation of COVID-19 assistance to Southeast Asian countries. China’s assistance to Southeast Asia divided into two groups according to the reports.

1. Material assistance in the form of medical materials and equipment (masks, test kits, thermometers, infusion pumps, personal protective equipment such as gloves, masks, goggles, insulating gowns, protective suits and medical boot covers).

2. Other forms of care – sharing their experience in the fight against the pandemic in such aspects as prevention and control, testing, diagnosis, treatment and even training of their medical colleagues in Southeast Asia [50, p. 2-3].

Lye Liang Fook noted that: “China, although providing significant assistance to the ASEAN member states, demonstrates some inequality of this assistance. It is necessary to say about sending of medical teams. As of the first half of 2020, such teams have been sent to Cambodia (March 23), Laos (March 29), the Philippines (April 5), Myanmar (April 8), and Malaysia (April 18). Among the five ASEAN countries mentioned above, Myanmar and Laos are distinguished by the fact that on April 24, 2020 they received additional military medical teams from China” [50, p. 2-3].

Military medical teams are rated higher than civilian medical ones and are considered to be better prepared and means higher political importance. They emphasize the additional importance that China attaches to these two mainland countries of Southeast Asia, with which it shares a border. In addition, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia announced the support China in building a “community of common destiny” [51].

Such an alignment of Chinese priorities can be justified by the implementation of the concept of “community of common destiny”, but also by the US impact on the countries of Southeast Asia and the situation in the South China Sea, which sharp China’s relations with the regional countries.

China is not limited to bilateral levels and the provision of financial and logistical assistance in cooperation with the countries of Southeast Asia. Official Beijing, while not a member of ASEAN, cooperates with this organization at the institutional level and actively engages it in the orbit of its foreign policy in the format of “soft power” in the post-coronavirus era.

Note that China-ASEAN cooperation in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic is not something new in the field of health. China has been building health cooperation with the Southeast Asian community for a long time. The institutionalized mechanism has already existed in the form of the China-ASEAN Health Cooperation Forum, organized in the framework of the China-ASEAN Dialogue Relations [52, p. 12].

On February 20, 2020, China called on ASEAN countries to show solidarity in preventing the spread of the coronavirus outbreak. It should be noted that in early 2020, Beijing was severely criticized by both world powers and Southeast Asian countries for the ineffectiveness of overcoming coronavirus infection in the country. COVID-19 has caused some problems to China in its realization of the BRI. While ASEAN, as an institutional mechanism, supported China’s position, not all member states of the community at the bilateral level immediately did the same actions to China. In particular, Cambodia and Laos continued the practice of “open doors” and allied relations with China. However, in early 2020, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand imposed a ban on the movement of citizens and tourist travel to China and the entry of Chinese citizens into their territory [53].

However, such unilaterally measures did not affect the collective institutional mechanism of China’s cooperation with ASEAN. The ASEAN Summit on

Coronavirus Disease (April 14, 2020) agreed to create a reserve of necessary medicines for rapid response to emergencies, as well as not to close their markets, continue trade and investment with China [54]. China and Singapore in early June 2020 agreed on working of high-speed lanes to facilitate important business travel between the two countries during the global pandemic [55].

It can be argued that China's actions in the format of "mask diplomacy" have results and became more effective. However, China does not stop at modernizing the mechanisms and tools for implementing its foreign policy in the post-coronavirus era.

Xi Jinping's speech at the World Health Organization meeting on May 18, 2020 is a good example. Chinese leader promised that: "China would make the coronavirus vaccine a "global public good" that would be available, especially to developing countries, after its development and testing in China" [56].

In this aspect, the so-called "vaccine diplomacy" is gaining weight. China and some of its leading pharmaceutical manufacturers have begun talking about providing the region with access to the Chinese vaccine against COVID-19. In particular, on August 24, 2020, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang promised the lower Mekong countries (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar) the priority access to vaccines produced by Chinese companies. Cooperation between the Chinese state campaign "Sinovac" and the Indonesian company "PT Bio Farma" on the development and of the vaccine, which is currently being tested in the country, has already begun. Such activity of China is explained not only by the strategic nature of the Southeast Asia region, but also by the actions of the United States as a competitor in it. For instance, Duke University and the American pharmaceutical company Arcturus have announced a partnership with Singapore to develop another vaccine (known as Lunar-Cov19). Note that on April 22, 2020, the US State Department launched the "US-ASEAN Future Health Initiative" [57].

So, states are increasingly beginning to use "vaccine diplomacy" as a tool to influence international relations, the foundations of which were laid in early 2020 in the so-called mask diplomacy

The results of opinion polls also motivate the expansion of China's influence in the region under the aim of combating coronavirus infection. According to the Russian Scientist O. Korolev, the results of a poll conducted in 2020 by one of the leading think tanks in Southeast Asia – ISEAS (Singapore) are interesting. It was mentioned that: "85.4% of respondents said they were concerned about China's political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia. Finally, when were asked about choose between the United States and China – 53.6% of respondents preferred Washington" [58]. Such results clearly demonstrate the growing level of distrust of ASEAN countries over Beijing, and the issue of security (South China Sea dispute) in this case plays an important, if not decisive, role.

Such data from opinion polls for the first half of 2020 have already marked changes in China's reaction. At the online meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers in September 2020, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said: "We have shared our

experience, helped each other and put the epidemic in our countries under control”. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed China’s readiness to renegotiate Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea [59].

Chinese actions are not accidental under the dynamics of the regional environment. In 2020, the Trump administration accused China of using the pandemic to advance its demands, and in April called on Beijing to stop its “provocative actions.” It is worth noting that the United States has taken a clearer position on the legal basis for China’s claims in the South China Sea. On July 13, 2020, US Secretary of State M. Pompeo issued an important statement in support of the 2016 Arbitration Court ruling. M. Pompeo announced: “The world will not allow Beijing to treat the South China Sea as its maritime empire. America supports our allies and partners in Southeast Asia” [60].

On August 26, 2020, the US Department of Commerce blacklisted 24 Chinese state-owned companies involved in the construction of seven artificial Chinese islands in the Spratly Islands. Note that, since December 2019, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines have submitted verbal notes to the UN rejecting China’s position on the “nine lines” and China’s claims to “historic rights” in the South China Sea are incompatible with the UN Convention on International Maritime Law 1982 (UNCLOS). ASEAN’s stronger position on countering China in the South China Sea in 2020 is due to the intensification of US policy in this area. In particular, on June 1, 2020, the United States sent a letter to the UN rejecting China’s claims for shipping in the South China Sea as inconsistent with UNCLOS [61, p. 4-5].

As a result, in a telephone conversation between Xi Jinping and Vietnamese President Nguyen Phu Trong on September 2020, the talks on the settlement of the South China Sea issue and a new round of talks were emphasized [62].

However, despite the pandemic and China’s efforts to help them counter COVID-19, ASEAN countries have become more assertive. In particular, on October 16, 2020, the President of the Philippines R. Duterte approved the request of the Energy Agency to lift the ban on oil and gas production in the South China Sea. In recent years, the Duterte administration has been negotiating with China on possible joint explorations involving Filipino and Chinese energy companies. However, no agreement was reached, largely due to territorial issues [63].

In addition, the aggravation of relations between China and the United States in the South China Sea in 2020 will have an impact on the situation in the region of Southeast Asia in 2021, which will most likely be determined at the regulatory level after the presidential election in the United States.

Therefore, the foundations of China’s policy in Southeast Asia to counter COVID-19 can already be seen as a background for more active involvement. According to Ngeow Chow-Bing, Director of the Institute for Chinese Studies (University of Malaya, Malaysia), sub-regionally, after COVID-19, China is likely to reorganize the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism (LMC) in such way: “...China will include health care in the cooperation agenda. In addition, another sub-regional group

is Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines / East ASEAN-Growth Zone (BIMP-EAGA), where China is a development partner will be modernizing too". In turn, according to the scientist, China's investment in pharmaceutical and medical production facilities in Southeast Asia will take an important role as an instrument of Chinese policy in the region [64, p. 17-19].

### **Conclusions and parallels in the implementation of the hybrid influence of Russia and China**

Thus, Russian practical implementation of the coronavirus pandemic for its narrow foreign policy purposes confirm the preservation of the imperial component in Russia's foreign policy strategy as decisive. It should be noted that the country-leader of the democratic world seeks to unite its allies on the basis of common values: observance of human and civil rights and freedoms, free market economy, compliance with the law of actions of both government and citizens, political pluralism, freedom of religion, etc. In contrast, the Russian Federation in its "unifying" efforts combine economic aid (and clearly not for the benefit of its own citizens) with a force scenario, which could be either a hybrid war or a threat of using force. As a result, Russia professes an appropriate model of behavior in the international arena as "placating" its actions by aggressive information propaganda. Moscow is striving by all means to camouflage its true goals and positioning itself as a "peacemaker" and a "benefactor" or guarantor of peace agreements. There is a strong interconnection of the foreign policy course with the domestic political narratives of the Putin regime.

It is worth pointing out that the use of COVID-19 in China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia seems to be quite effective given Beijing's ambitious plans to achieve world leadership, which can be regulated by the following characteristics. Firstly, consistent implementation of the concept of "community of common destiny" in the Southeast Asia region and theoretical justification for achieving political goals through the prism of the "Belt and Road Initiative" by China. In particular, the implementation of the "Silk Road of Health". Secondly, involvement of the Southeast Asia region as an object of "mask diplomacy" in the format of bilateral cooperation – providing financial and logistical assistance to the countries of the region, which is implemented by both the Chinese government and non-governmental organizations. In addition, there is a privileged approach to the distribution of such assistance on bilateral base – countries of Lancang-Mekong sub-region and the countries of the growth zone. China-ASEAN cooperation at the institutional level allows Beijing to lobby its own national interests in the economic sphere and build dialogue with organization. Thirdly, the conflict in the South China Sea can be described as a "hard power" of China, but economic cooperation with ASEAN, the socio-humanitarian sphere of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the countries of Southeast Asia as a "soft power".

As a result of the study, certain parallels can be drawn in the use of the global pandemic as a tool of foreign policy of Russia and China in the regional dimension (Russia-Europe and China-Southeast Asia).

Note that Russia and China use quite different tactics in the implementation of foreign policy strategy in regions that are close to their geopolitical location, but the purpose of such assistance is common. Both Russia and China can be characterized as states that have political regimes with special worldviews, tools and mechanisms for policy implementation. Both states have leaders who are quite charismatic and pursue a purposeful policy internally and externally as well. The existing political regimes in the states can be defined as hybrid.

Both Russia and China use pandemic influence to lobby their own national interests – to reduce tensions or “distract” from conflict situations. In particular, the issue of energy transportation (development of “Nord Stream-2”) is acute for Russia in the relations with Europe. This issue becomes urgent in the context of the sanctions regime against Russia by European states and the EU as a result of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. China also has contradictions with the Southeast Asian countries in the format of the South China Sea dispute.

In the second half of 2020, both Russia and China begin to use “vaccine diplomacy”, which is a tool for spreading their influence and affirming a positive image. Such interaction can be investigated as the spread of its influence on a bilateral and multilateral basis. It is necessary to say, Europe and Southeast Asia have reached a high level of regionalization. In Europe – the functioning of the European Union, and in Southeast Asia - the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It should be noted that neither Russia nor China are member states of these integration groups. However, China has close cooperation with ASEAN in the ASEAN + 3 format. The Russian Federation cooperates to some extent with the EU, but the dynamics of such cooperation has slowed down due to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

Prospects to make a deal and agreements on the sale of domestically produced vaccines in the respective regions can be seen as the use of “soft power” and the possibility of raising image by Russia and China.

Note that the use of hybrid influence (“hard power” and “soft power”) on neighboring regions by both Russia and China may be justified as a means of “detering” US action in these regions, which are strategically important for Washington and in which the United States has allies, and, in turn, is an additional destabilizing factor in the regional system of international relations.

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**Шевчук О.В., Тихоненко І.В. Протидія COVID-19 як інструмент гібридного впливу Росії та Китаю на регіональні підсистеми міжнародних відносин: європейський та азійський виміри.**

У XXI ст. система міжнародних відносин зазнала трансформацій, зокрема і зі сторони нетрадиційних детермінуючих чинників. Це дослідження акцентує увагу на впливі пандемії COVID-19 на модернізацію політики великих держав, які почали використовувати контрзаходи пандемії як інструмент свого впливу на майбутній пост-коронавірусний міжнародний порядок.

Автори аналізують особливості використання «твердої сили» (економічний тиск) і «м'якої сили» (економічна допомога, культурна взаємодія), а іноді і гібриду цих інструментів на прикладі Росії та Китаю з метою лобіювання власної позиції в умовах пандемія COVID-19 у відповідних геополітично близьких регіонах – Європі та Південно-Східній Азії. У цьому дослідженні аналізуються всі вищезазначені особливості у певний хронологічно визначений період – початок світової пандемії COVID-19, зокрема, 2020 рік.

Виявлено, що Росія найбільш активно використовувала вплив початку глобальної пандемії на європейський напрям зовнішньої політики апелюючи до енергетичного фактору та формування іміджу «миротворця» та ролі «месії» в регіоні. У дослідженні Італія є прикладом використання гібридного впливу з боку Росії, поширення фейків і представлення «слабкості» ЄС на початку пандемії у швидкому політичному реагуванні на загрозу. Південно-Східна Азія стала регіоном китайської зовнішньої політики у протидії COVID-19, де китайська «маскова дипломатія» виступає як контрзахід для подолання конфлікту в Південно-Китайському морі, формування системи «підпорядкування» та реалізації ідеї «спільноти єдиної долі».

У результаті дослідження виявлено, що Росію та Китай можна охарактеризувати як держави, які мають політичні режими зі специфічними інструментами та механізмами реалізації політики. Офіційні Пекін і Москва мають на меті не лише посилити свій вплив у сусідніх регіонах, а й протистояти США. Аналізуючи політичні дії та механізми, які використовували Росія та Китай на початку пандемії, автори підтвердили, що обидві країни прагнуть використовувати «дипломатію вакцин» як ефективний інструмент впливу на міжнародний порядок у пост-коронавірусну добу.

**Ключові слова:** Російська Федерація, Китайська Народна Республіка, Європа, Південно-Східна Азія, COVID-19.