

NORTH-EAST ASIA DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION FORUM

POLICY BRIEF

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REGIONAL RESPONSES TO COVID-19: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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I. Introduction

This paper investigates the problems and prospects of regional organizations in the fight against global challenging situation, caused by COVID-19. It shows that the international community has ignored the lessons of the fight against Ebola and has not built a successful model of interaction and distribution of responsibilities between national, regional and international organizations in the fight against pandemics. Special attention is paid to the emergence of fundamentally new actors in the architecture of international humanitarian assistance, related to highly specialized issues in the fight against COVID-19. In addition, the problem of the "intersection of niches", where pandemic issues are not directly related neither to the issues of regional integration nor to traditional security threats, is being considered. This leads to a rethinking of the very concept of human security and the adaptation of the functionality of regional organizations to new conditions. These issues are illustrated by the example of regional responses to the pandemic from the Russian Federation – within the framework of organizations where it plays a leading role, including CIS, EAEU and CSTO, as well as in the wider area of Asian regionalism, including in the context of the SCO and ASEAN. Conclusions are drawn

on the prospects for strengthening regional cooperation in the fight against COVID-19 for the countries of North-East Asia.

2. Challenges of international responses: missed lessons of Ebola

Between 2014 and 2016, initially in Guinea, and then in a number of other West African countries, the Ebola epidemic broke out – a kind of mini-version of the coronavirus pandemic that humanity faced in 2020. Actions taken at the national level (ministries of health), at the regional level (Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU)) and at the global level, were clearly insufficient. It is noteworthy that from September 19, 2014 to July 31, 2015 the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER), the first-ever UN emergency health mission, was launched in the region.

However, there was a lack of proper coordination and division of responsibilities between the national, regional and global levels [Wenham 2016]. This is clearly evidenced by the title of the article published in a special issue "The International Politics of Ebola" of the Third World Quarterly (2016, Volume 37, Issue 3) [Roemer-Mahler, Rushton 2016] – “WHO’s to blame?

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The World Health Organization and the 2014 West Africa Ebola outbreak” [Kamradt-Scott 2016].

Worse yet, humanity has not learned the lessons from the crisis, which was clearly evident in the international response to the COVID-19 pandemic three years later. Undoubtedly, the state was the main actor in the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic, tightening or weakening the regimes of isolation, borders control and air travel, mobilizing resources for a speedy recovery of citizens. At the same time, country behavior patterns on the international arena and awareness of global responsibility (especially among great powers) have seriously differed. A number of North-East Asian countries (e.g., the Russian Federation and the PRC) have become leading donors, sending not only medicines, medical equipment, brigades of doctors and military doctors to neighboring countries, but also to the other regions. At the same time, a number of countries that are actually in a difficult epidemiological situation rushed, "elbowing others", to buy drugs and tests on the international market, often leaving "overboard" less protected actors of world politics.

At the regional level, a number of international organizations and regional integration groups only shared information on the fight against the pandemic, while others moved on to “medical or mask diplomacy”, sending humanitarian aid to their neighbors. As a rule, it is the closest neighbors who are the first to provide this kind of assistance ("Neighborhood first responder")¹.

3. ‘Agentization’ problem and new actors of humanitarian assistance

With the development of scientific and technological progress, professional diplomats face the problem of "agent-ization" – an increase in the level of specialization of those issues that are the subject of international discussions. As a rule, they no longer fall within the competence of even individual ministries but relate to the responsibilities of various specialized agencies (hence the "agentization"), including central

banks, financial market regulators, antimonopoly services, food and drug safety agencies, telecommunications market regulators. All of them regulate access and the rules of the game in national markets and are involved to some degree or another in international negotiations (especially within the framework of developing common international standards) [Degterev 2010: 44-45].

Employees of these agencies in their professional vocabulary use specialized terminology, that for the most part not familiar to traditional diplomats. This leads to the transformation of the traditional role of foreign ministries and aid agencies from direct participation in negotiations to a mediation mission.

A similar situation occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas professional cooperation in the fight against it is required among the very narrowly defined institutions, which are even autonomous from the ministries of health in large countries. Given the need to respond quickly and establish interagency coordination in light of the rapidly deteriorating international epidemiological situation, it was a question of a direct dialogue between the relevant actors, in some cases *Track-2 diplomacy*² or *multitrack diplomacy* (as a flexible and quite close coordination of efforts of different level official and non-official institutions and communities).

There are several areas of such specialized interaction and several categories of relevant actors. First, this is epidemiological monitoring and exchange of relevant information through specialized public agencies (in the Russian Federation – Rospotrebnadzor³), in small countries – through separate departments of the ministries of health. *Secondly*, these are operational logistics operations, as a rule, through the ministries of emergency situations or ministries of national defence. *Thirdly*, this is cooperation in the medical field itself – the exchange of information on treatment protocols, cross-border supply of test systems, medicines, equipment, masks, which is usually done by national ministries of health. A *separate issue* is the development of vaccines (R&D), which is in the competence of biological laboratories, of both public and private nature.

¹ Chacradeo S. Neighbourhood first responder: India’s humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Brookings Institution, August 18, 2020. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/neighbourhood-first-responder-indias-humanitarian-assistance-and-disaster-relief/> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

² Track II diplomacy in the time of COVID-19. Asia New Zealand Foundation, 11 May 2020. URL: <https://www.asianz.org.nz/track-2/track-ii-in-the-time-of-covid-19/> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

³ Rospotrebnadzor: The Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing.

It is noteworthy that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the sets of key humanitarian actors have changed significantly. For example, Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF)⁴, which is usually engaged in strategic interstate investment projects, took the first positions in the Russian Federation. At present, the fight against the spread of COVID-19 has become one of the most important areas of the fund's intervention⁵. On the one hand, the fund provides substantial humanitarian assistance to foreign countries in the supply of test systems and medicines. On the other hand, it contributes to the rapid localization of mass production of coronavirus vaccines.

Indeed, even though despite a number of countries have already developed such vaccines (including two of them in the Russian Federation - Sputnik V and EpiVacCorona), the issue of rapid mass industrial production of these vaccines for total (over 50% of the total population) vaccination is still on the agenda. This requires the localization of completely new, high-tech industries, and as close as possible to potential vaccine consumers (to minimize transport costs and to take into account special requirements for the temperature storage regime). In fact, it means creating new pharmaceutical plants in the shortest possible time, which requires colossal financial investments. Only the states, as well as powerful multinational corporations (MNCs), have such resources. That is, in fact, the state is again becoming a key actor of world politics in line with the Westphalian international system.

At the same time, large Russian MNCs, including Rusal by O. Deripaska, also played an important role in the prompt purchase of lots of test systems in foreign markets. Often, large business is more flexible in carrying out operations in foreign markets and their assistance to the population in the context of COVID-19 is a clear demonstration of a corporate social responsibility.

The example of the Russian Federation shows that the Ministry of Defense also played an important role. Perhaps in the Russian Federation this is due to a number of subjective factors, including the fact that

the current Minister of Defense Sergey K. Shoigu served as the Minister of Emergency Situations from 1994 to 2012 (almost 20 years!). He understands the importance of a prompt response to such threats when every minute counts. Having occupied the position of national defense minister, he got the opportunity to use the even more extensive resources and technical capabilities of the Russian army for these good purposes. In this regard, the most indicative was the operation of the Russian Armed Forces in Italy (a NATO country), when in March-May 2020 several brigades of Russian military doctors helped their Italian colleagues in the most difficult period to fight the pandemic⁶. At that time, Italy was the world epicenter for the spread of COVID-19.

The Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor), which is responsible for monitoring the epidemiological situation and has leading scientific laboratories, has become an important specialized actor in humanitarian assistance as well. Finally, in the Russian Federation, as in many other countries, many NGOs were involved, supplying aid consignments, even if not the largest but rather quickly, to a variety of countries.

4. COVID-19: challenge to regional integration or to security?

The need to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic has become a challenge for regional organizations, also due to their vague competence in this area, when the security issue essentially falls into the "intersection of niches" between the issues of regional integration and ensuring regional security.

Indeed, the typical set of challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic for regional integration includes cross-border disease transmission (border protection/ visa-free regime), severance of humanitarian ties (family visits, cultural, scientific, and educational exchanges), and reduction of cross-border trade, economic and investment transactions. In addition, the problem of

⁴ RDIF is Russia's sovereign wealth fund with reserved capital of \$10 billion under management. It was created in 2011 under the leadership of the President and Prime Minister of Russian Federation to co-invest alongside top global investors.

⁵ RDIF brings together the best Russian and international technologies in the fight against COVID-19. Russian Direct

Investment Fund. URL: https://rdif.ru/Eng_COVID-19/ (accessed on 29.11.2020)

⁶ Russia helps Italy to fight coronavirus without any strings attached — Kremlin. TASS, 23 March 2020. URL: <https://tass.com/politics/1133967> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

protecting the rights of migrants is significantly aggravated. In the conditions of a pandemic and objective worsening of the socio-economic situation, national authorities try first of all to protect their own citizens, while citizens of other states often find themselves in a more vulnerable position.

Regional integration groupings (European Union, EAEU⁷, ASEAN⁸, MERCOSUR⁹, etc.) each respond in their own way to the pandemic's challenges, dealing primarily with the elimination of the negative socio-economic consequences of this phenomenon.

If the analysis of the pandemic is done from the standpoint of the securitization theory proposed by the Copenhagen School of International Security [Buzan 1983], then the question arises about the type and/or object of security. This is important because it makes it possible to attribute the responsibility for neutralizing these kinds of challenges to specific regional (security) organizations.

This is hardly a question of military security, although such organizations as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are also involved in supporting the pandemic response using the capabilities of military logistics (the transfer of large volumes of humanitarian aid) and military medical teams, as well as military medicine (the operational direction of medical teams ready to work in emergency situations).

Similarly, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) mechanisms are hardly mandated to deal with the pandemic issue. Although, for example, the OSCE monitors violations of human rights and democratic freedoms associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, publishing relevant monitoring reports¹⁰. Presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections have been postponed or even eliminated altogether in a number of countries around the world, and citizens' rights in the context of their movements have been significantly restricted, including the introduction of digital pass systems.

In this context, we are talking about reshaping the security framework and re-actualizing the concept of human security, adding to it elements of human security from the threat of pandemics [Nurhasanah et al. 2020]. Only after the theoretical rethinking and operationalization of the new concept, it will be possible to talk about a specific change in the functionality of regional organizations dealing with both regional integration and security issues.

5. Bilateral, regional and plurilateral responses to COVID-19: a case of Russia

At the regional level, a kind of 'division of labour' was observed in organizations with the leading role of the Russian Federation. For example, traditionally the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) served as a leading negotiating platform, and it is where countries of the post-Soviet space coordinated their actions to combat the pandemic. Thus, on 25th March 2020, a Working group on monitoring the situation with regard to pandemic COVID-19 was established, which included a number of officials and responsible employees of the CIS Executive Committee both at the headquarters of the Commonwealth in Minsk and in the Office of the Executive committee in Moscow. Guminsky V.A., first Deputy Chairman of the Executive Committee of the CIS, was appointed as the head of a Working group. The key area of the group's work is information coordination in the fight against COVID-19, which is being carried out in several directions at once¹¹. Annual meetings of the Coordinating Council on Problems of Sanitary Protection of Territories of CIS Member States from Import and Spread of Especially Dangerous Infectious Diseases have been held since March 2020.

An important role was played by the meeting of the Council of CIS Heads of Government held on May 29, 2020, during which the "Decision on joint efforts of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States to combat the spread of coronavirus infection COVID-19" was adopted¹². The meeting noted the importance of the work carried out by the CIS

⁷ Eurasian Economic Union

⁸ Association of South-East Asian Nations

⁹ MECOSUR: The Southern Common Market

¹⁰ OSCE Human Dimension Commitments and State Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic. ODIHR OSCE, 17 July 2020. URL: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/human-rights->

states-of-emergency-covid19 (accessed on 29.11.2020)

¹¹ Fighting Coronavirus in the Commonwealth (In Russian). CIS. URL: <https://cis.minsk.by/coronavirus> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

¹² Decision on joint efforts of the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States to combat the

authorities to exchange operational information on the state of the incidence of COVID-19 among the population, the results of monitoring the circulation of the pathogen, as well as new scientific data on the virus, methods of its detection, the medications used and the means of prevention. The importance of early development of a medium-term plan of joint actions of the CIS member states to counter the spread of infectious diseases in their territories was noted, as well as readiness to continue work to further deepen economic and humanitarian cooperation between the countries, despite the existing challenges.

The CIS Executive Committee provides information coordination in the fight against COVID-19 in several areas at once. For example, a list of unified information on national legal framework has been created to combat COVID-19 in the CIS countries. For each country, the texts of dozens of government decrees and orders, presidential decrees, specialized interdepartmental commissions to combat COVID-19 are provided. Since March 26, the weekly information bulletin "On measures to combat coronavirus in the CIS countries" is published. Issue 35 of this newsletter was published for the period 20-26 November 2020¹³.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which assumes a deeper degree of integration of the member states than the CIS, acted as the main platform for discussion of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. Thus, during an extraordinary working meeting of the EAEU on 14 April 2020 in the format of a video conference, the leaders of the "Eurasian Five"¹⁴ signed a joint statement. The document speaks about preventing breaking cooperation ties, the importance of preserving international trade and investment activities, the need to maintain international cooperation, and ending trade wars and unilateral

spread of coronavirus infection COVID-19, May 29, 2020.

(In Russian). URL:

<http://www.cis.minsk.by/reestr/ru/index.html#reestr/view/text?doc=6228> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

¹³ About measures to combat coronavirus in the CIS countries. Information Bulletin No. 35 (November 20-26, 2020). Done by Information and Analytical Department of the CIS Executive Committee. URL:

<https://cis.minsk.by/img/news/17139/5fc0f87e41f00.pdf> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

¹⁴ Currently Eurasian Economic Commission consists of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russian Federation. URL:

<http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/Pages/about.aspx>

financial and economic sanctions¹⁵. At the level of heads of states, a number of measures was approved to create conditions for the recovery and further development of the economies of the EAEU countries. Within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Commission, decisions in the field of customs and tariff regulation, which are within its competence, are made on a permanent basis, ensuring the functioning of the common market for goods that are critical in the conditions of the pandemic. In the EAEU space, there are prerequisites for launching cooperation in the field of health care and development of a mechanism for joint response to epidemiological challenges in a single mobile labour market. It is high time to actively develop remote cooperation between medical institutions in Russia and the EAEU partner countries.

Finally, within the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), crisis response mechanisms have been debugged for a long time. In this connection, the capabilities of the established CSTO Crisis Response Center are now being actively used. Cooperation within the Organization is now focused on finding effective joint responses to emerging challenges to biomedical security challenges. A good example of practical cooperation was a videoconference on April 16, 2020 of the heads of the military medical services of the CSTO member states, where Russian experts shared the latest developments in the prevention and treatment of infection COVID-19 infection, based on the experience gained during the special assistance missions in Italy and Serbia¹⁶. On November 23, 2020, the Secretary General of CSTO Zaslavskiy, while participating in the UN General Secretary's dialogue with heads of regional organizations on "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on peace and security", reminded about the necessity to follow the initiative launched by the UN Secretary-General on 23 March

¹⁵ Joint Statement of Supreme Eurasian Economic Council Members on COVID-19 pandemic. Eurasian Economic Commission, April 14, 2020. URL:

<http://www.eurasiancommission.org/en/nae/news/Pages/14-04-2020-1.aspx> (accessed on 29.11.2020). Eurasian

Economic Commission is the permanent regulatory body of EAEU.

¹⁶ Representatives of the Defense Departments of the CSTO member states discussed the prevention and control of coronavirus infection COVID-19. CSTO, April 16, 2020. URL: [https://odkb-](https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/predstaviteli-oboronnykh-vedomstv-gosudarstv-chlenov-odkb-obsudili-voprosy-profilaktiki-i-borby-s-ko/)

[csto.org/news/news_odkb/predstaviteli-oboronnykh-vedomstv-gosudarstv-chlenov-odkb-obsudili-voprosy-profilaktiki-i-borby-s-ko/](https://odkb-csto.org/news/news_odkb/predstaviteli-oboronnykh-vedomstv-gosudarstv-chlenov-odkb-obsudili-voprosy-profilaktiki-i-borby-s-ko/) (accessed on 29.11.2020)

2020, which had called on for an immediate and global ceasefire in all parts of the world in connection with the threat posed by the proliferation of coronavirus¹⁷.

6. Regional cooperation in Asia

In general, we should admit that the countries of North-East Asia have performed well in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The main characteristics of the North-East Asian countries' model of response to the pandemic were as follows: a) Strong state, resilient public services are vital to combat pandemic; b) Healthcare is rather a public good than neoliberal commercial service; c) Individualistic egoism is not acceptable, the rights of certain categories of people may be temporarily restricted to ensure the public good; d) Advanced IT is required to trace containment. Thus, this very socio-economic model has shown its advantage in a crisis situation (a kind of stress-test of the socio-economic model).

At the same time, the countries of North-East Asia are characterized by a membership in various regional integration groups and a lack of collective security mechanisms. In these conditions, the main coordination of efforts of the countries of the region was carried out within the framework of such initiatives as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and ASEAN + 3, as well as on the bilateral basis.

Within the framework of the SCO, the "Shanghai spirit" of good neighborliness and mutual assistance played a special role [Yurtaev, Rogov 2017], which was demonstrated through the Statement of the SCO on the novel coronavirus epidemic on February 14, 2020; the Declaration on Joint Countering of the Threats of Epidemics in the SCO Space on June 10, 2018 as well as the Moscow Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of SCO on November 10, 2020¹⁸; the Meeting of health ministers of SCO countries on July 24, 2020; the SCO Business Council Joint Statement on COVID-19 outbreak on July 23, 2020.

¹⁷ Global Ceasefire. UN initiative, March 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.un.org/en/globalceasefire> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

¹⁸ The Moscow Declaration of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. November 10, 2020. URL: <http://eng.sectsco.org/news/20201110/690356.html>

ASEAN + 3 also serves a positive case, as demonstrated Special ASEAN+3 Summit on COVID-19 via videoconference on April 14, 2020¹⁹.

The bilateral level of uniting efforts against COVID-19 is best described on the case Sino-Russian mutual cooperation. Initially Russia helped China, and then China provided assistance to Russia. Thus, on February 5, 2020, a group of Russian specialists arrived in Beijing to assist their Chinese colleagues in fighting viral pneumonia and developing a vaccine against new coronavirus. As Foreign Minister Wang Yi put it, 'Russia was the first country to send medical experts to China'. A few days later Russia delivered 23 tons of humanitarian cargo (masks and goggles, anti-plague suits, surgical gloves) to the epicenter of COVID-19 spread – Wuhan city – to fight the epidemic. Results of their R&D activity for the fight against coronavirus of a new type, conducted by Russian scientists from the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, will be tested in China.

On 2 April 2020, the humanitarian cargo weighing 26 tons (infrared thermometers, masks, protective suits, respirators and other protective equipment) from China arrived in Moscow. A few days later China sent to Russia a group of medical experts to help fight the coronavirus. Mutual decentralized cooperation in fighting COVID-19 has also developed, i.e., between Heilongjiang Province and the Republic of Yakutia (Russia).

7. Concluding remarks

The complex regional agenda in fighting COVID-19 became quite clear. It is the issue of conjugation of ASEAN-centric multilateral security formats [Kanaev, Shumkova 2017] with the SCO initiative, as well as the CICA, to form a collective security system in Asia with a clear division of tasks, but at the same time geographic "inseparability" in the context of the development of Greater Eurasia.

(accessed on 29.11.2020)

¹⁹ Joint Statement of the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). ASEAN, April 14, 2020. URL: <https://asean.org/storage/2020/04/Final-Joint-Statement-of-the-Special-APT-Summit-on-COVID-19.pdf> (accessed on 29.11.2020)

The concept of human security with the inclusion of biomedical safety issues in the practical activities of regional organizations also requires a "reset".

At the same time, at the current stage, coordination between existing regional groups is relevant. It is important that regional solidarity between countries is translated into concrete actions, and not only at the level of information exchange.

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