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## Projecting ‘Hybrid Warfare’: Western Discursive Representation of Chinese Foreign Policy

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**Abstract.** China is the single largest state-based international actor that is a major threat to the continued hegemony of the United States’ unipolar order. As such, a campaign of obstructive foreign policy is being waged against China through the obstructive marketing of China as a sinister threat and unreliable actor against the ‘rules-based order.’ By attempting to undermine China’s soft power potential, it is hoped that China’s global rise can be constrained and contained. Drawing on an integrative type of literature review, this article examines attempts at ‘knowledge production’ through geopolitically subjective interpretations and representations by the U.S. and its allies of the modern type of geopolitically-influenced international conflicts — hybrid warfare. In the English language imagination, hybrid warfare is a politically charged and loaded term that assumes ill intent by the user upon the intended victim. According to the research estimates by foreign experts, the current foreign policy of international activities by China displays a hybrid character. The country is publicly accused of carrying out operations in the economic, cybernetic, geographical, geopolitical, psychological, information and ideological spaces. Currently, the notion of “Chinese hybrid warfare” is starting to become an increasingly popular mass communicated trope. However, the aggravation of Sino-American relations against the backdrop of the South China Sea, the Taiwan issue and the Russian special military operation gives us an opportunity to predict that China will increasingly be projected as an increasingly dangerous source of hybrid threat in the Western-centric discourse to contain its global rise and by default to try to preserve US global hegemony through a negative information campaign.

**Key words:** People’s Republic of China, PRC, unrestricted warfare, international relations, hybrid threats, information warfare, containment, United States

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**Authors’ contributions.** The authors made an equal contribution to the design, research and preparation of the final article’s text.

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## Проектирование «гибридной войны»: западная дискурсивная репрезентация китайской внешней политики

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**Аннотация.** Китай — крупнейший государственный субъект международных отношений, который представляет серьезную угрозу продолжающейся однополярной гегемонии США. В этой связи против Китая ведется кампания обструктивной внешней политики посредством позиционирования Китая как злойшей угрозы и ненадежного субъекта, выступающего против «порядка, основанного на правилах». В надежде ограничить и сдержать глобальный подъем Китая Запад стремится подорвать потенциал «мягкой силы» Китая. Опираясь на интегративный вид обзора литературы, авторы рассматривают попытки «производства знаний» с использованием субъективных интерпретаций и представлений США и их союзников о современном типе геополитически обусловленных международных конфликтов — гибридной войне. В представлении западной общественности гибридная война — это политически заряженный и нагруженный термин, который предполагает злой умысел у зачинщика такого конфликта в отношении предполагаемой жертвы. По оценкам зарубежных экспертов, современная внешняя политика Китая носит гибридный характер. Страну публично обвиняют в проведении операций в экономическом, кибернетическом, географическом, геополитическом, психологическом, информационном и идеологическом пространствах. В настоящее время понятие «китайской гибридной войны» начинает становиться все более популярным в средствах массовой информации. Однако обострение китайско-американских отношений на фоне конфликта в Южно-Китайском море и тайваньской проблемы дает нам возможность прогнозировать, что Китай будет все чаще позиционироваться как опасный источник гибридной угрозы в западнцентристском дискурсе, чтобы по умолчанию попытаться сохранить гегемонию США и сдержать глобальный рост КНР посредством негативной информационной кампании.

**Ключевые слова:** Китайская Народная Республика, КНР, неограниченная война, международные отношения, гибридные угрозы, информационная война, сдерживание, США

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### Introduction

Contemporary geopolitics in the age of a hegemonic transformation is not only about interpreting events and trends in the physical realm of international relations (through theories such as realism, constructivism, liberalism, etc.), but also about interpreting and representing international relations in the physical realm through the information realm in order to shape perceptions and, consequently,

reactions to these manufactured perceptions (Flint, 2016; Simons, 2022). Currently, there is a widespread opinion in the West that the Russian Federation is waging large-scale hybrid warfare against democratic countries.<sup>1</sup> More

<sup>1</sup> See: Clark M. Russian Hybrid Warfare // The Institute for the Study of War. September 2020. URL: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Hybrid%20Warfare%20ISW%20Report%202020.pdf> (accessed: 01.03.2021); Peter L. Is Russia Going to War with Ukraine and Other Questions // BBC. April 13,

recently, it has been suggested that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is also using hybrid means to reinforce its status as a world power (Simons, 2022).

This article examines the efforts of Western-centric knowledge producers to shape the orthodoxy of knowledge<sup>2</sup> in international relations through the geopolitically convenient and highly subjective interpretations and representations of the projected threat of China (to the continued US unipolar order). Those who produce knowledge, such as researchers and other experts, perform an important function as they produce material that can be used in the mass communication to various audiences to persuade and influence them by engineering the content that is communicated to the public (Simons, 2014).

The knowledge does not need to be true, but it must be credible and believable for the cognitive manipulation to be successful. This article explores several different recurring category areas that have featured in the Western-centric threat discourse narrative. These include conducting hybrid warfare in the economic, cybernetic, geographical, geopolitical, psychological, informational and ideological spaces. These are the means of a Western obstructive foreign policy agenda<sup>3</sup>

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2021. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210908084651/https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56720589> (accessed: 01.09.2021). See also: (Lanoszka, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Simons G. *International Relations in the Age of US Decline: Orthodoxy of Knowledge and Obstructive Foreign Policy // Russia in Global Affairs*. August 2, 2021. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/us-orthodoxy-of-knowledge/> (accessed: 20.04.2022).

<sup>3</sup> See: Simons G. *International Relations in the Age of US Decline: Orthodoxy of Knowledge and Obstructive Foreign Policy // Russia in Global Affairs*. August 2, 2021. URL: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/us-orthodoxy-of-knowledge/> (accessed: 20.04.2022); Simons G. *Modern Diplomacy in an Unstable Global Order: Emotions, Obstruction and Coercion // Valdai Club*. February 7, 2022. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/modern-diplomacy-in-an-unstable-global-order/> (accessed: 29.06.2022).

waged through the information realm (importantly, information and knowledge act as a fifth dimension for warfare, in addition to land, water, air and space) to affect the cognitive realm by altering the perceived constructed and projected realities for the different global stakeholders to the extent that it affects developments and processes in the physical realm. Therefore, the term and concept of 'hybrid warfare' carries a negative and sinister connotation in the minds of Western audiences after years of cognitive grooming by Western governments of their publics to engineer their perception, and consequently, stemming from this, their consent to increasingly aggressive and reckless Western foreign policies.

The article outlines some Western-centric arguments from a literature review of Chinese hybrid warfare used in the six identified categories of operational environments. The conclusion offers some observations regarding the motives, possibilities and results of this form of obstructive foreign policy, which aims to deny the opponent the opportunity to achieve its foreign policy goals and objectives. The purpose of asserting China's involvement in hybrid warfare is to discredit its international prestige and reputation, thereby reducing its attractiveness for collaboration. This, in turn, serves to prolong US hegemony and preserve the unipolar world order.

### **Hybrid Warfare: Definitions and Characteristics**

The language of geopolitics, in terms of its rhetoric and the selective use of labels and definitions, is important in fostering consensus among various publics on the interpretations and representations of the constructed reality. This indicates that interest groups can use ideas and concepts, such as hybrid warfare, as a political issue to accumulate political capital and legitimacy for government policy.

There are different definitions of hybrid warfare. Frank Hoffman (2009), who is credited with coining the concept, predicted a convergence in future warfare in which challengers would engage in multi-modal warfare, combining the organisation and means of state conflict with characteristics of irregular warfare. It is worth noting that even before F. Hoffman, Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui published a book, in which they highlighted the characteristics of unrestricted warfare (Qiao & Wang, 1999). However, in general, the primary tenets of the Chinese (unrestricted warfare) and American (hybrid warfare) concepts are analogous.

A more recent definition reveals a very vague understanding and definition: "Hybrid warfare and its supporting tactics can include broad, complex, adaptive, opportunistic and often integrated combinations of conventional and unconventional methods. These activities could be overt or covert, involving military, paramilitary, organised criminal networks and civilian actors across all elements of power."<sup>4</sup>

A lack of conceptual clarity is evident in the definition of hybrid warfare provided by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). M. Caliskan (2019, p. 40) states that "the opportunity cost of misconceptualisation is too high, as it creates confusion rather than clarity and obscures the strategic thought." Though, the lack of clarity does bring potential political benefits. O. Fridman (2017) posits that the lack of clarity creates a situation in which it is difficult for one party to accuse the other of wrongdoing, while reflecting criticism in its direction and simultaneously trying to gain public support at the national and international levels. This is consistent

with the views of R. Johnson (2018), who suggests that in the information age media power, influence, access and the disorientation it produces often dominate interpretive frameworks. Consequently, anxiety is created by the 'threat' of hybrid techniques that exploit the Western media appetites for inauthentic and sensational narratives, or that subvert the perceived established norms of war. The net result is to create a sense of disorientation among the audiences and an urgent desire for quick remedies. Hybrid warfare is therefore not only a concept of covert military operations in academic and political terms, but also an assertion and an accusation.

## Methodology

This article examines the literature that interprets a deceptive Western-centric discourse on the projection of Chinese hybrid warfare as a security threat to the West. Although the materials under review offer differing interpretations of the PRC's actions, they do reveal significant conceptual and practical aspects of how those narratives were conceived and implemented by policymakers and practitioners.

To capture the above-mentioned variables of interest for this paper, a literature review was conducted. Literature reviews can provide a broader and more comprehensive overview of the topic at hand to provide clarity of the subject matter problems (Pati & Lorusso, 2018; Conz & Magnami, 2020). There are several different types of literature reviews — systematic, semi-systematic and integrative (Snyder, 2019, pp. 334–336). The integrative (critical) literature review has been selected for this article. Its aim is to "assess, critique, and synthesize the literature on a research topic in a way that enables new theoretical frameworks and perspectives to emerge" (Snyder, 2019, p. 335). A literature review should be dialogical in nature and not simply a simple repetition of other peoples' writings and thoughts. Therefore,

<sup>4</sup> White Paper Next Steps in NATO's Transformation: To the Warsaw Summit and Beyond // The Atlantic Council. 2015. URL: [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/NATO\\_NTS\\_2015\\_White\\_Paper\\_Final.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/NATO_NTS_2015_White_Paper_Final.pdf) (accessed: 29.06.2022).

the literature selected needs to be relevant to the research task at hand, where the research is framed in the context of earlier works (Silverman, 2020, pp. 50–51).

The sample of works to be assessed was collected via a general internet search using the terms “China” and “hybrid warfare.” From the pool of academic and analytical works found, the following were selected based on authorship (belonging to the U.S. or its allies), mention of Chinese hybrid warfare and presentation of China as a threat. A sample of over 50 works was collected and collated. The sample only included works published after 2011, which was marked by President Obama’s ‘Pivot to Asia.’ This publicly marked an open discursive posture of positioning China as a threat to be contained and constrained. It is of particular interest and relevance to consider the following contextual factors: informational power, cognitive influence, perceptions/projections of risk and threat as key elements of US-led Western-centric discourse on representing a Chinese security threat.

Several common themes emerged from the literature review: the cybernetic front (digital hybrid threat), the economic front (economic hybrid threat), the psychological front (psychological hybrid threat), the geopolitical front (geopolitical hybrid threat) and the geographic front (geographic hybrid threat). These are various categorisations of perceptions and representations of the Chinese hybrid warfare threat by the Western authors.

### Literature Review:

#### Typologies of the Threat and Response

Each of the categories and typologies (cybernetic space, economic space, psychological space, geopolitical space, information and ideological space, and the geographical space) is introduced in turn, with a brief and condensed summary of the main narratives of the literature that was reviewed.

### Cybernetic Space

The digital environment is simultaneously a potential source of strength and influence as well as weakness and vulnerability and is also becoming increasingly contested by powers through Computer Network Operations (CNO), is divided into Computer Network Attack (CNA) and Computer Network Defence (CND).

The PLA has a Strategic Support Force Network Systems Department (NSD) whose responsibilities include information, psychological and cyber operations, technical intelligence, and electronic warfare. According to the US Department of Defence, the main purpose of the NSD is to fight the U.S.<sup>5</sup> This thesis is explained through the prism of hybrid warfare, which is a covert means of undermining national security, requiring a tough policy to counter the stated risks and threats.

China employs a comprehensive approach to cyber warfare.<sup>6</sup> The Chinese approach to cyber warfare is consistent with two fundamental strategic principles: the doctrine of people’s war, according to which the general population must be mobilised and the ideological factor plays a significant role, and military-civil fusion (the involvement of civilians and companies in the military sphere). One illustrative example of the practical implementation of these principles is the formation of cyber warrior squads composed of civilians.<sup>7</sup>

Artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology are also seen as tools of warfare

<sup>5</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress // Office of the Secretary of Defence. 2020. P. 61. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>6</sup> Miracola S. Chinese Hybrid Warfare // Italian Institute for International Political Studies. December 21, 2019. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/chinese-hybrid-warfare-21853> (accessed: 03.11.2021).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

in the PRC military, which is becoming the subject of research by Western specialists (Kania, 2019). It is predicted that the application of such technologies will lead to the integration of brain and machine, which will take military operations to a new level.<sup>8</sup> The American analyst T.L. Thomas also believes that AI is having an increasingly significant impact on China's approach to warfare, as military operations will be a battle of algorithms for the foreseeable future,<sup>9</sup> and "advances in cognitive technology will lead to the emergence of a cognitive warfare field."<sup>10</sup>

Experts are concerned about Chinese technology companies. For example, the National Intelligence Law of the PRC obliges private companies to cooperate with Chinese intelligence agencies and stimulates them, so Indian researchers have urged their country's authorities to limit the participation of such companies in work on 5G infrastructure (Nandan & Chauhan, 2021, p. 132). The researchers mention the Chinese company *Zhenhua Data Information Technology*, which collected personal information on millions of people, including high-ranking Indian citizens (Nandan & Chauhan, 2021, pp. 131, 133).

### ***Economic Space***

An economy can be conceptualised as a potential source of national power and influence for actors in world politics. When actors engage in competition and clash in international

<sup>8</sup> Xian qi xin de jun shi ge ming? Liu da guan jian ci jie du zhi neng hua zuo zhan // Jie fang jun xin wen chuan bo zhong xin [Setting Off a New Military Revolution? Decoding the Six Keywords of Intelligent Warfare // China Military Network]. March 1, 2018. (In Chinese). URL: [https://web.archive.org/web/20180301133434/http://www.81.cn/theory/2018-03/01/content\\_7956455.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20180301133434/http://www.81.cn/theory/2018-03/01/content_7956455.htm) (accessed: 03.09.2021).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas T. L. The Chinese Way of War: How Has It Changed // The MITRE Corporation. 2020 (June). P. 2, 29, 31–38. URL: [https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/\\_key/docpreview-s/00-00-16-68-30/20200611-China-Way-of-War-2800\\_Timothy-Thomas\\_2900\\_.pdf](https://community.apan.org/cfs-file/_key/docpreview-s/00-00-16-68-30/20200611-China-Way-of-War-2800_Timothy-Thomas_2900_.pdf) (accessed: 25.09.2021).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. P. 33.

relations, geo-economics is used as a means to support geopolitical strategy.

In the context of the US doctrinal documents, China is perceived as the main source of hybrid aggression: Beijing is accused of combining diplomatic and economic tools to counter the United States without resorting to direct armed confrontation and the destruction of alliances.<sup>11</sup>

The Brookings Institution experts believe that China has developed a comprehensive strategy to expand and strengthen its global economic influence.<sup>12</sup> An example of such activity is the investment activity of the PRC in port infrastructure of the Indo-Pacific region (Cooper & Shearer, 2017, p. 309) (Gwadar, Pakistan;<sup>13</sup> Chittagong, Bangladesh;<sup>14</sup> Hambantota, Sri Lanka,<sup>15</sup> etc.), as well as the allocation of funds to the banking sector of regions of interest to China<sup>16</sup> (e.g., 2 billion

<sup>11</sup> The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028 // U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. December 6, 2018. URL: <https://info.publicintelligence.net/USArmy-MultidomainOps2028.pdf> (accessed: 25.09.2021).

<sup>12</sup> Marc A., Jones B. The New Geopolitics of Fragility: Russia, China, and the Mounting Challenge for Peacebuilding // The Brookings Institution. October 2021. P. 15. URL: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FP\\_20211015\\_new\\_geopolitics\\_fragility\\_marc\\_jones\\_v2.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FP_20211015_new_geopolitics_fragility_marc_jones_v2.pdf) (accessed: 25.09.2021).

<sup>13</sup> Pakistan Hands Over Control of Gwadar Port on Arabian Sea Coast to Chinese Company // TASS. November 12, 2015. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/2428503> (accessed: 11.09.2021).

<sup>14</sup> Bhattacharjee J. China — Bangladesh Strategic Linkages // Observer Research Foundation. May 11, 2021. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-bangladesh-strategic-linkages/> (accessed: 11.09.2021).

<sup>15</sup> Kupriyanov A. V. China Took a Long-Term Lease on the Deep-Water Port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka // IMEMO RAS. December 20, 2017. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.imemo.ru/news/events/text/kitay-vzyl-v-dolgosrochnuyu-arendu-glubokovodniy-port-hambantotana-shri-lanke?ret=640> (accessed: 11.09.2021).

<sup>16</sup> Chen Y., Calabrese L., Willitts-King B. How China's New White Paper Defines a Decade of Development Cooperation // Overseas Development Institute. January 20, 2021. URL: <https://odi.org/en/insights/how-chinas-new-white-paper-defines-a-decade-of-development-cooperation/> (accessed: 20.08.2021).

USD was provided to the Africa Growing Together Fund<sup>17</sup>).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also perceived by Western scholars as a source of hybrid aggression: countries participating in the Chinese initiative will not only become dependent on China, but will also become locations from which Chinese hybrid warfare operations will be conducted.<sup>18</sup> According to the US experts, due to the fact that the Western elite put the pursuit of profit and business interests above the national security and interests of their own country, the West was unable to prevent the emergence of the Chinese threat in the region in time.<sup>19</sup> Economic competition is expected to become more important than military competition.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Psychological Space***

This space concerns the impact of communication activities in and through the information sphere on the processes and outcomes in the cognitive sphere of individuals and groups. The objectives of operations on this

<sup>17</sup> Remarks Delivered by AfDB President Akinwumi Adesina at Signing Ceremony of Sharm El-Sheikh Airport Development Project Loan Facility with the Government of Egypt // African Development Bank. October 12, 2015. URL: <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/remarks-delivered-by-afdb-president-akinwumi-adesina-at-signing-ceremony-of-sharm-el-sheikh-airport-development-project-loan-facility-with-the-government-of-egypt-14808> (accessed: 23.09.2021).

<sup>18</sup> Babbage R. *Stealing a March: Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific: Issues and Options for Allied Defence Planners*. Volume II: Case Studies // Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. July 24, 2019. P. 32. URL: <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/stealing-a-march-chinese-hybrid-warfare-in-the-indo-pacific-issues-and-options-for-allied-defense-planners/publication/2> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* P. 49.

<sup>20</sup> Cordesman A. H., Hwang G. *Chronology of Possible Chinese Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations* // Centre for Strategic and International Studies. July 2, 2020. P. 4. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chronology-possible-chinese-gray-area-and-hybrid-warfare-operations> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

front are to establish control over the enemy and suppress his will to resist. This is achieved by introducing the enemy's decision-making mechanism, creating chaos, and supporting anti-government sentiment. Psychological influence accelerates the spread of rumours and fake information, which can encourage citizens to seek out the "criminals" designated in advance by the operation organiser and create an atmosphere of fear (Nandan & Chauhan, 2021, p. 131). According to the Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army, conducting psychological operations is one of the three key components of the country's modern military strategy.<sup>21</sup>

The PLA has a General Political Department (GPD), which includes several bureaus responsible for psychological operations.<sup>22</sup> Base 311, located in Fuzhou, is known to operate under the control of the GPD.<sup>23</sup> It broadcasts to Taiwan through the 'Voice of the Strait' radio station and social media. Special organisations that promote Chinese culture abroad should also be mentioned: China Association for Promotion of Chinese Culture (CAPCC); China Association for Friendly International Contacts (CAIFC); China — U.S. Exchange Foundation (CUSEF), and so on.<sup>24</sup> Military

<sup>21</sup> Kania E. *The PLA's Latest Strategic Thinking on the Three Warfares* // The Jamestown Foundation China Brief. Vol. 16, no. 13. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/the-plas-latest-strategic-thinking-on-the-three-warfares/> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>22</sup> Stokes M., Hsiao R. *The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics* // Project 2049 Institute. October 14, 2013. P. 22. URL: <https://project2049.net/2013/10/14/the-peoples-liberation-army-general-political-department-political-warfare-with-chinese-characteristics/> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>23</sup> Kania E.B. *The Role of PLA Base 311 in Political Warfare Against Taiwan* (part 3) // Global Taiwan Institute. February 15, 2017. URL: <https://globaltaiwan.org/2017/02/the-role-of-pla-base-311-in-political-warfare-against-taiwan-part-3/> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>24</sup> Raska M. *Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics* // RSIS Commentary. 2015 (December 2).

experts from the United States also mention the PLA's Strategic Support Force, which is involved in psychological warfare, as well as in information warfare, information and cyber-attacks, technical intelligence, and electronic warfare.<sup>25</sup>

In general, foreign experts assign a significant role to the psychological space. It has been suggested that a "powerful psychological element" in the event of an aggravation of relations with Japan could turn the situation in China's favour.<sup>26</sup> According to some experts, a special strategy is being used against India, an important element of which is psychological operations (Qureshi, 2020; Nandan & Chauhan, 2021, p. 130). And if the Taiwan issue escalates, the aforementioned Base 311 will be even more actively utilised to plan and conduct political and psychological operations.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Geopolitical Space***

In this typology, the emphasis of the narrative is on the projected idea of 'subversive' Chinese geopolitics as part of its geostrategy to continue to grow at the expense of the US and the Western-centric global order.

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No. 262. URL: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/CO15262.pdf> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>25</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress // Office of the Secretary of Defence. 2020. P. 61. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>26</sup> Babbage R. Stealing a March: Chinese Hybrid Warfare in the Indo-Pacific: Issues and Options for Allied Defence Planners. Volume II: Case Studies // Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. July 24, 2019. P. 33. URL: <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/stealing-a-march-chinese-hybrid-warfare-in-the-indo-pacific-issues-and-options-for-allied-defense-planners/publication/2> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>27</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress // Office of the Secretary of Defence. 2020. P. 118. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

American experts note that the ruling Communist Party has the goal of "making China the world's most powerful country by 2050,"<sup>28</sup> ensuring leadership in world affairs,<sup>29</sup> turning the state into a maritime power,<sup>30</sup> which will lead to the reduction of the world influence of the United States (Doshi, 2021, p. 302). As such, it is a direct threat to the US global hegemony.

Experts at the Brookings Institution have identified several areas of China's foreign policy course, where the country's activities threaten the current order: assistance to Third World countries (infrastructure, investment, direct aid to the population) and a system of financing projects in other countries that is not transparent to the world community and international financial institutions.<sup>31</sup>

China is also accused of waging a "legal war" aimed at justifying and legalising policy outcomes before the world community (Jash, 2019, pp. 102–103).

The US-led strategy of containing China seems to be based on the obstruction of China's rise by wedging Chinese international partners and in building regional alliance blocks that intend to restrict China's sources of potential growth and influence. This requires significant work on the information and

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<sup>28</sup> Lucas E. A China Strategy // Center for European Policy Analysis. December 7, 2020. P. 2. URL: <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-china-strategy/> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>29</sup> Mattis P. The Party Congress Test: A Minimum Standard for Analysing Beijing's Intentions // War on the Rocks. January 8, 2019. URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/the-party-congress-test-a-minimum-standard-for-analyzing-beijings-intentions/> (accessed: 03.10.2021).

<sup>30</sup> McDevitt M. Becoming a Great "Maritime Power": A Chinese Dream // Centre for Naval Analyses. June 1, 2016. URL: [https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA\\_Files/pdf/irm-2016-u-013646.pdf](https://www.cna.org/archive/CNA_Files/pdf/irm-2016-u-013646.pdf) (accessed: 03.10.2021).

<sup>31</sup> Marc A., Jones B. The New Geopolitics of Fragility: Russia, China, and the Mounting Challenge for Peacebuilding // The Brookings Institution. October 2021. URL: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FP\\_20211015\\_new\\_geopolitics\\_fragility\\_marc\\_jones\\_v2.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FP_20211015_new_geopolitics_fragility_marc_jones_v2.pdf) (accessed: 25.09.2021).

ideological front by all sides to secure their global position of standing.

### ***Information and Ideological Space***

This category of narrative concerns information as serving a conduit to spread a Chinese ideological viewpoint, which is represented as a threat to the success of the US's globally communicated ideology and therefore the viability of its continued global hegemony.

Working with public opinion through the media is one of the three key provisions proclaimed in the Political Work Guidelines of the People's Liberation Army (Nandan & Chauhan, 2021, p. 131). The PLA GPD is engaged in the implementation of information operations, promoting the topics which are favourable to China's image abroad: political stability, ethnic harmony, and economic prosperity.<sup>32</sup> The *Xinhua News Agency* and China Central Television are important tools for implementing such operations (Nandan & Chauhan, 2021, p. 131). To enhance their effectiveness, China is engaged in information gathering, which raises many concerns in the West.<sup>33</sup>

A. Cordesman considers a large-scale Chinese disinformation campaign related to the appearance of the coronavirus as an actual example. It started in March 2020.<sup>34</sup> So, Cordesman mentioned a Chinese diplomat who posted on *Twitter* (was renamed as *X*) a version

that the virus could have been imported into the territory of China by the US military. The government of Taiwan stated that the Chinese were using the bots to spread fakes about COVID-19 on social networks (Cooper & Shearer, 2017).

It is expected that information operations will become one of the most important instruments in resolving the Taiwan issue<sup>35</sup> at a time when Western media and political leaders are trying to inflame the situation through the information anti-China realm (Simons, 2022).

### ***Geographical Space***

This typology category concerns the 'defensive' US (geo)political response to the so-called "Chinese threat," which is in effect a call to legitimise potentially risky policy action to meet the geopolitical challenge to its hegemony. It thus differs from the earlier category of the geopolitical front as that concerned the represented Chinese threat, rather than the US response in terms of attempting to contain the China's rise.

In the report of the Ministry of Defence to the US Congress for 2020, defence department specialists identified regions which are interesting for China and in which it conducts influence operations, which in fact cover the entire Asia-Pacific region.<sup>36</sup>

One of the key geostrategic goals of the United States is to ensure stability and support

<sup>32</sup> Raska M. Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics // RSIS Commentary. 2015 (December 2). No. 262. URL: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/CO15262.pdf> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>33</sup> Lucas E. A China Strategy // Center for European Policy Analysis. December 7, 2020. P. 6. URL: <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-china-strategy/> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>34</sup> Cordesman A. H., Hwang G. Chronology of Possible Chinese Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations // Centre for Strategic and International Studies. July 2, 2020. P. 4. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chronology-possible-chinese-gray-area-and-hybrid-warfare-operations> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>35</sup> See: Ying Y. L. China's Hybrid Warfare and Taiwan // The Diplomat. January 13, 2018. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-hybrid-warfare-and-taiwan/> (accessed: 27.08.2021); Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress // Office of the Secretary of Defence. 2020. P. 113–114. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>36</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress // Office of the Secretary of Defence. 2020. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

Taiwan, which is being subjected to alleged Chinese aggression.<sup>37</sup> The United States officially declares it necessary for them to help the Republic of China, motivating it with the desire for stability in the Taiwan Strait and in the region.<sup>38</sup> Taiwan is perceived as “the most likely trigger for a potentially catastrophic U.S. — China war,”<sup>39</sup> since reunification with Taiwan is one of the basic conditions for achieving the ‘Chinese dream’ of national revival.<sup>40</sup> Taiwan is one of the key reasons for disagreements between the United States and China: regular demonstrations of American and Chinese military resolve take place off the coast of the island.<sup>41</sup> For the period 2020–2025, Taiwan’s unification with mainland China was predicted to take place by military force.<sup>42</sup> Experts accuse the Chinese government of using military and non-military methods to strengthen

its own power,<sup>43</sup> to pressure the island<sup>44</sup> and delegitimise Taiwan’s status,<sup>45</sup> and to pursue a strategy of “three wars” (psychological, informational and legal).<sup>46</sup>

The expansion of Chinese influence in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea creates a springboard for the subsequent use of force in other regions.<sup>47</sup> China’s policy in the East China Sea and South China Sea is described as non-violent expansion using military and non-military tools, aimed at changing the regional and international order and increasing its zone of influence (Heath, 2016, pp. 26–27).

China exerts diplomatic pressure and threatens military force, defending claims to the islands, as well as control over the sea and airspace in the region.<sup>48</sup> China’s seizure of shoals, islands and reefs in the South China Sea<sup>49</sup> and the construction of bulk islands and infrastructure there<sup>50</sup> are perceived as a threat to

<sup>37</sup> Segal S., Reynolds M., Roberts B. Degrees of Separation: A Targeted Approach to US — China Decoupling. Interim Report // Centre for Strategic and International Studies. October 21, 2021. P. 12–13. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/degrees-separation-targeted-approach-us-china-decoupling-interim-report> (accessed: 03.11.2021).

<sup>38</sup> Price N. Increasing People’s Republic of China Military Pressure Against Taiwan Undermines Regional Peace and Stability // The U.S. Department of State. October 3, 2021. URL: <https://www.state.gov/increasing-peoples-republic-of-china-military-pressure-against-taiwan-undermines-regional-peace-and-stability/> (accessed: 03.11.2021).

<sup>39</sup> US Military Cites Rising Risk of Chinese Move Against Taiwan // The Associated Press. April 8, 2021. URL: <https://apnews.com/article/us-military-risk-china-move-against-taiwan-788c254952dc47de78745b8e2a5c3000> (accessed: 21.08.2021).

<sup>40</sup> Cordesman A. H., Hwang G. Chronology of Possible Chinese Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations // Centre for Strategic and International Studies. July 2, 2020. P. 15. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chronology-possible-chinese-gray-area-and-hybrid-warfare-operations> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. P. 27–29, 32–33.

<sup>42</sup> Zhong guo wei lai 50 nian li bi da de liu chang zhan zheng // Wen hui bao [The Six Wars to Be Fought by China in the Next 50 Years // Wen Wei Po]. July 8, 2013. (In Chinese). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130919044555/http://info.wenweipo.com/index.php?act-on-viewnews-itemid-62404> (accessed: 10.11.2021).

<sup>43</sup> Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress // Office of the Secretary of Defence. 2020. P. 70. URL: <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. P. 76.

<sup>45</sup> Raska M. Hybrid Warfare with Chinese Characteristics // RSIS Commentary. 2015 (December 2). No. 262. URL: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/CO15262.pdf> (accessed: 20.09.2021).

<sup>46</sup> Miracola S. Chinese Hybrid Warfare // Italian Institute for International Political Studies. December 21, 2019. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/chinese-hybrid-warfare-21853> (accessed: 03.11.2021).

<sup>47</sup> Li N. The Southern Theatre Command and China’s Maritime Strategy // The Jamestown Foundation China Brief. 2017 (June 9). Vol. 17, no. 8. P. 8. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/southern-theater-command-chinas-maritime-strategy/> (accessed: 01.12.2021). See also: (Cooper & Shearer, 2017, p. 305).

<sup>48</sup> Cordesman A. H., Hwang G. Chronology of Possible Chinese Gray Area and Hybrid Warfare Operations // Centre for Strategic and International Studies. July 2, 2020. P. 13. URL: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chronology-possible-chinese-gray-area-and-hybrid-warfare-operations> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. P. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Miracola S. Chinese Hybrid Warfare // Italian Institute for International Political Studies. December 21,

the sovereignty of Asia-Pacific states and shipping. According to retired US Navy Admiral J. Stavridis, China is thus implementing hybrid warfare operations.<sup>51</sup> It is noteworthy that not only China, but also other states, which enclose South China Sea are building similar Chinese facilities and trying to control land areas,<sup>52</sup> but this does not cause the same sharp reaction from foreign experts.

The credibility of the United States in the Western Pacific, as well as its credibility with regional players, has noticeably declined,<sup>53</sup> and thus returning to the South China Sea and gaining the trust of the region's powers are serious and significant challenges for the United States at present (Cooper & Shearer, 2017, pp. 308–309). Given the perceived decline of the US hegemony and power, forming anti-China alliances among Asian countries is a difficult task.

Another Chinese tool on this front is the “blue men.” This is how the West refers to Chinese fishermen who are trained and controlled by the PRC army. They are a naval militia that carries out military and non-military operations (escorting ships in Chinese maritime waters, obstructing US warships, controlling facilities, etc.) (Chakravorty, 2019, p. 87). Their activities do not violate international law and they themselves are legally civilians.

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2019. URL: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/chinese-hybrid-warfare-21853> (accessed: 03.11.2021).

<sup>51</sup> Stavridis J. Maritime Hybrid Warfare Is Coming // U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings. 2016 (December). Vol. 142. URL: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2016/december/maritime-hybrid-warfare-coming> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>52</sup> Occupation and Island Building // The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative and The Center for Strategic and International Studies. URL: <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

<sup>53</sup> Lucas E. A China Strategy // Center for European Policy Analysis. December 7, 2020. P. 6. URL: <https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/a-china-strategy/> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

The US presence in the Asia-Pacific region is thus presented as a means of containing China. Thus, the United States, together with other states, implements freedom of navigation operations (FONOP),<sup>54</sup> and US warships patrol the Spratly and the Paracel Islands, treating these waters as international waters and demonstrating denial of Chinese claims to the islands.

## Conclusion

Although the concept of hybrid warfare does not appear as an indigenous idea in Chinese foreign or security policy, it does feature widely in Western discursive imagination of 21st century international relations. It is an attempt at a US-led obstructive foreign policy against the global rise of China, where information is the domain of strategy used to try and obstruct China's growth in power and influence through a form of information warfare.

The totality of operations in the cybernetic, economic, psychological, geopolitical, informational, ideological and geographical spaces described by foreign specialists allows us to talk about a ‘Chinese hybrid war’ and puts it on the public informational agenda. However, this concept (‘Chinese hybrid war’) is not yet actively used by the experts of NATO, which is in the process of being implemented. In this respect, the claim that China is engaged in hybrid warfare is not an objective description of fact, but rather a subjective label that evokes negative associations. The process seems to be aimed at preventing and wedging China's system of relations with countries (especially in the context of the BRI), while at the same time

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<sup>54</sup> LaGrone S. China Says PLA Scrambled Aircraft, Ships to ‘Expel’ U.S. Warship from South China Sea Island Chain // USNI News. 2020. URL: <https://news.usni.org/2020/04/28/china-says-pla-scrambled-aircraft-ships-to-expel-u-s-warship-from-south-china-sea-island-chain> (accessed: 01.12.2021).

attempting to strengthen and expand the US system of networks and alliances.

The apparent aim is to engineer public consent in the US-led Western world towards the perception of legitimacy of a more hawkish foreign and security policy stance against China, which is based upon the false perception of an aggressive China that is bent upon destroying the so-called ‘rules-based order’ through subversive and deceptive means. The political legitimacy would be derived from a

sense of fear in the public that the Western way of life is worth preserving and is under threat, thereby an attempt to rally support around proposals that would preserve the US unipolar order and stop China and the multipolar order. However, the numerous contradictions, weaknesses and dilemmas of the US unipolar order mean at best it may slow the rise, but ultimately the unipolar order is beyond the point of sustainability and salvage.

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