

## ***China's COVID-19 Vaccine Diplomacy as China's Effort in Increasing Its Influence in the ASEAN Region***

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### **Abstract**

*The coronavirus outbreak (now known as COVID-19) is rapidly spreading throughout the world, and Southeast Asia is no exception. COVID-19 has affected many aspects of human life. The threat of this global pandemic is transnational, so regional and multilateral cooperation is needed. Therefore, it is necessary to find a vaccine to defeat the pandemic. Developed countries began to race to find vaccines and put the first access to vaccines for the benefit of their countries. In this case, China is a country that offers cooperation in providing massive vaccines to developing countries, including ASEAN member countries through its vaccine diplomacy scheme. This offer of cooperation cannot be separated from China's own interests. This research uses a qualitative case study method with analytical descriptive. This study uses an approach to China's interests and geopolitics in the Southeast Asia region. This article intends to explore and elaborate on China's efforts to increase its influence in the ASEAN region as a form of its geopolitical strategy in the form of vaccine diplomacy. The results of the research in this article are that China seeks to improve its image and achieve geopolitical interests in ASEAN by taking advantage of opportunities from the distribution of Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Large outbreaks of infectious diseases have always been a global challenge. From the Spanish Flu to the Coronavirus disease 2019 abbreviated as Covid-19, it has disrupted all aspects of the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 is a virus that causes the common cold to more severe illnesses such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV). This outbreak was first recorded in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, in December 2019. More than 100 countries and regions have now reported new cases of the coronavirus [1]. WHO subsequently declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and recognized it as a pandemic on 6 April 2020. The term pandemic does not indicate the severity of a

disease, but only the extent of its spread [2].

Members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) or the ASEAN Member States (AMS) were also affected in early 2020 during the outbreak of the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). The ASEAN Member States and Institutions responded quickly to the outbreak. Many AMS implemented protective measures before the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. AMS, including Vietnam, Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia were among the first governments in the world to put in place measures to control the spread of the virus. Governments across the region are supporting the urgent needs of local health systems and enacting various containment measures, movement restrictions, and social distancing requirements to slow the spread of the virus. The time frame and rigor of these measures varied significantly across

regions, reflecting the severity of the virus in each AMS. While these measures are critical to virus control, widespread restrictions on movement have significant consequences on the lives and livelihoods of people across the region [3].

The number of COVID-19 cases in the region shows that every country in the region has similar problems. ASEAN, a regional institution in the Southeast Asia region that oversees 10 member countries and was established in 1967, has issued several regional initiatives to deal with the problem of the COVID-19 outbreak that is spreading in the region. One of the initiatives that member countries have successfully agreed on is the COVID-19 Response Funds. However, apart from the initiatives launched by ASEAN, the reality of international relations amid a crisis will have implications for two possibilities, namely encouraging collaboration with other affected countries or carrying out restrictions for self-preservation known as self-help mechanisms [4].

At first, each country tried to limit itself and focus on restoring its own country's stability (state-centric). However, recently countries have begun to develop research into COVID-19 vaccines and are trying to offer cooperation with countries and international organizations, including ASEAN. It should be noted that the offer of cooperation in the constellation of international relations cannot be separated from the existence of certain goals to be achieved. These countries then offer assistance to other countries in terms of cooperation for recovery in the health sector through the provision of vaccines which is now known as "Vaccine Diplomacy." One of the countries that practice vaccine diplomacy is China.

The author focuses on the country's

level of analysis, namely China for several reasons. First, as the country at the epicenter of the spread of the corona virus, China has begun to show a slowdown in the rate of spread of Covid-19 cases. Second, China is the country that first identified and reported Covid-19, now experiencing positive developments. After lifting lockdowns in several regions in early April 2020, the number of new cases reported daily has decreased in recent times [5]. Third, China succeeded in creating a vaccine called Sinovac and offered cooperation with ASEAN countries through its vaccine.

The method used is a qualitative method by describing phenomena related to China's behavior in terms of handling the COVID-19 outbreak through its vaccine diplomacy. The data collection technique was carried out by Literature Studies, so that the data used came from official reports from the Singapore government and the ASEAN official website, journals and books related to China and ASEAN relations as well as online newspaper articles that correlated with the context of the issues discussed in this article.

Furthermore, the author formulates a research problem, namely how can vaccine diplomacy be China's strategy in expanding its influence in the ASEAN Region? This article attempts to analyze and describe China's efforts to expand its influence in the ASEAN region through its vaccine diplomacy. Further explanation regarding this matter will be divided into several parts, namely the relationship between China and ASEAN which is followed by the elaboration of cooperation between China and ASEAN through vaccine diplomacy, and an analysis related to the strategy of expanding China's influence in ASEAN member countries in geopolitics.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first journal related to this research is a journal article written by Muhammad Nuha Zakiyy, Rio Abei Santoso, Yehezkiel Pramaditya Alviano, entitled ASEAN Response to the COVID-19 in the Economic, Health, and Tourism Sector in 2020 which was published in the journal *Journal of ASEAN Dynamics and Beyond* [6]. In this article, the author tries to see the impact caused by COVID-19 and ASEAN's response in dealing with issues consisting of health, economic, and tourism issues.

The Covid-19 pandemic has spread in every country, including ASEAN members affected by this pandemic. Economic growth will certainly be greatly affected by this pandemic. Each country in ASEAN has its strategy to deal with the pandemic problem. The research describes China as BRICs and BRI.

An overview of collaborative activities, including through Poonam Khetrapa Singh, WHO Regional Director for the Southeast Asia region, discussing strategies to overcome the impact of COVID-19 in ASEAN member countries. Most of the discussions at the conference discussed the negative impact caused by the corona virus on economic sectors in Southeast Asia. Several supporting factors, such as the implementation of lockdown policies in several countries, affected the weakening of the ASEAN economy.

The impact of the pandemic that occurred especially in the Southeast Asian region on the economic sector was a change in the economic growth of a country. Unforeseen events. International trade activities and chains have also experienced a significant impact due to this pandemic. The ASEAN trade chain includes many partner countries which are consumers and suppliers to various ASEAN member countries. The European Union, America, China as the largest producer and consumer countries in the world, are also major trading partners for ASEAN, accounting for half (50.3%) of the total ASEAN trade worldwide, so that disruptions in trade activities will cause

shortages or effects on the global economy. these countries.

In addition to disruptions that occur directly from the economic sector, such as a decrease in demand, government policies to reduce the trading capacity of a country's external parties to prevent pandemic transmission can affect imbalances in the trade chain. The efforts made by ASEAN in dealing with this pandemic are by collaborating in determining policies, exchanging information about the situation of each country, and using tourism destination websites to restore the state of tourism in ASEAN.

The second journal related to this research is a journal article written by Rizky Widian and Vrameswari Omega W with the title *ASEAN Regional Potentials for Combating COVID-19 in 2020* [7]. In this article, the author explores and elaborates on ASEAN's potential to encourage the realization of cooperation and commitment from countries in facing regional challenges under the conditions of the corona virus outbreak. This article describes the spread of COVID-19 in the ASEAN region and provides an overview of ASEAN's role in efforts to resolve its impacts.

In the case explanation, the author provides an overview of the role played by ASEAN in its efforts to resolve the pandemic. This can be seen in ASEAN's commitment to issuing a recent declaration reflecting that ASEAN has the potential, especially in terms of goodwill and a framework or basis for cooperation, to fight the virus at the regional level.

The author explains several factors that cause a cooperation to be established according to Robert Jervis. First, the opportunity for cooperation will increase if something increases the incentive to cooperate or if there is something that reduces the cost of being exploited by others. Second, some reduce the incentives to exploit each other or those that make not cooperating expensive. Third, there is something that raises the expectations of countries that their counterparts are willing to cooperate. These factors are appropriate to conditions in ASEAN and can reflect the organization's potential to address problems cooperatively and

coordinatively. Therefore, it is clear that ASEAN has the potential to combat COVID-19 through regional efforts.

The third journal related to this research is a journal article written by Rizka Fiani Prabaningtyas, Atin Prabandari with the title Synergy of Political Motives and Normative Motives in China's Humanitarian Diplomacy during the Covid-19 Pandemic which was published in the LIPI Political Research Journal in 2020 [8]. In this study, the author tries to map out the pattern of implementing humanitarian diplomacy carried out by emerging power countries in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, in this case China.

By using a humanitarian diplomacy approach, the author analyzes that the humanitarian assistance provided by China is to gain a positive image as well as manage the impact of Covid-19 on China's relations with South Pacific countries. The author describes the understanding of the concept of humanitarian diplomacy and its relation to emerging powers by providing examples in the form of cooperation carried out Humanitarian diplomacy carried out by China cannot be separated from the existence of normative and political motives in its formulation and implementation.

The link between these two motives has long been part of the dynamics of the international humanitarian system. The emergence of China as one of the emerging donors is a dilemma for traditional donor countries because China does not want to be just a norm taker, but also wants to participate in reforming the existing system with the principles it believes in.

### III. ANALYSIS

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, China's relationship with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had experienced ups and downs. Historically, China has viewed ASEAN as an instrument designed to "encircle China" and thus maintain a safe distance from the regional body [3]. As China began to develop its economy starting in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping, and in the following decades harbored ambitions for a global role, he realized that he needed to first achieve dominance regionally, close to his country. As Yuen Foong Khong, Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy once wrote. In his writings, he mentions that Asia is a place where

China must build prestige or reputation for its power. In the 1990s, Beijing opened itself to seeking a settlement of differences and disputes among nations through peaceful means [9].

In 1991, China and ASEAN began a dialogue process marked by the presence of foreign minister Qian Qichen at the opening ceremony of the 24th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting. In 2003, China agreed to the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, ASEAN's first dialogue partner to do so, and established the China-ASEAN strategic partnership, which is again a pioneering effort. In 2010, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area was up and running. In 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed to jointly build a closer China-ASEAN community with a common future during his visit to ASEAN countries. In 2018, the China-ASEAN Strategic Partnership Vision 2030 was issued, a blueprint looking to the future [10].

In 2020, after COVID-19 hit all of us, China and ASEAN stand in strong solidarity to fight the virus, continue growth, and protect people's livelihoods. This solidarity is part of the form of humanitarian diplomacy. China has emerged as one of the emerging powers that consider the importance of cooperation between countries in this case humanitarian diplomacy through the provision of medical assistance in this case is the COVID-19 vaccine.

In general, there have been many previous studies on China as an emerging power and its humanitarian assistance. Broadly speaking, the main focus of the research is the evolution of China's involvement in the international humanitarian system and China's humanitarian assistance with development assistance in the context of providing Chinese foreign aid and the narrative of Chinese aid as part of China's foreign policy [8].

There are several previous studies that discuss the evolution of China's humanitarian aid goes hand in hand with the transformation of China's foreign aid system as a whole. In Hirono's research, there are aspects of foreign policy that shape China's current approach to humanitarian aid, namely national interests, China's degree of integration in the international humanitarian system, domestic influence, and humanitarian values [11].

Meanwhile, Kurtzer and Gonzales' writings highlight China's role in providing humanitarian assistance to achieve three interests. First, it

distracts from the Chinese Communist Party's inadequate initial response to the virus. Second, take advantage of the perceived moment of US withdrawal from global leadership. Third, strengthen existing investment in development spending. China has used medical humanitarian aid as a tool to counter the prevailing narrative of responsibility for the spread of Covid-19. According to the Chinese government's white paper, as of May 31, 2020, China had donated medical supplies to more than 150 countries, regions, and international agencies and sent medical teams to 27 countries. A Stanford study documenting China's state-affiliated Twitter accounts revealed that the systematic effort to promote Chinese aid deliveries was an attempt to distract attention from the alleged cause of the virus while enhancing its image [12]. In the context of the influence of geopolitical competition on China's vaccine diplomacy performance, it indirectly strengthens its position as a global leader, especially in ASEAN.

Developed countries are currently competing in the discovery of a COVID-19 vaccine. The competition to find a Covid-19 vaccine marks a new chapter in the global arms race. China, Europe, and the United States (US) have invested billions of dollars and mobilized scientists to be the first to produce a vaccine. The victorious country will get the first steps to protect its citizens and restart its economy [13].

Because vaccine development is expensive, funding is an integral part of successful vaccine development. Nation-states, institutions, and pharmaceutical companies are pouring large sums of money and resources into vaccine development. The United States, through its program dubbed "Operation Warp Speed" initiated more than \$18 billion dollars in vaccine development to various pharmaceutical companies to vaccinate hundreds of millions of Americans [14].

To date, several vaccines have been successfully developed and distributed, including [15]:

1. Modern. A vaccine manufactured by American biotech company Moderna was approved for general use in the US in December.
2. Oxford-AstraZeneca. A vaccine developed by the Swedish-British drugmaker in partnership with the University of Oxford has been approved for use in the UK, India and

Argentina.

3. BioNTech-Pfizer. The first coronavirus vaccines allowed for use in the EU — a drug produced by German biotech company BioNTech and U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer — have also been approved for use in the US, UK, Saudi Arabia, as well as at least 19 other countries.
4. Sputnik V, the vaccine produced by Russia and has been approved for use in Belarus, Argentina and Guinea.
5. Sinopharm and Sinovac. Both vaccines are produced by a Beijing-based biopharmaceutical company. This vaccine has been distributed to various regions, including ASEAN.

In general, there are 4 steps for a vaccine candidate to apply for approval. The first is the preclinical phase where vaccine candidates are tested with animal or human cells to ensure their safety before testing them on humans in clinical trials. Then, if successful, there are three phases of clinical trials to be carried out. The first involves a small number of healthy subjects to test primarily whether it is safe and also its ability to produce the antibodies needed to trigger an immune response. Phase II trials bring more people to determine dosages, schedules and assess the immune response from things like age, gender, and other variables. If promising, Phase III could be initiated as these trials could involve up to tens of thousands of people, looking at the effectiveness of the vaccine candidate for preventing infection [14], [16].

Based on the various vaccine variants developed, there are problems in terms of vaccine distribution. WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that 87 percent of this dose was administered in upper-middle-income countries while 0.2. According to a CNBC report, an estimated 700 million vaccines have been distributed worldwide. However, countries with high and middle gross domestic income (GDP) dominate the list of vaccine receipts. percent go to low-income countries [17]. This huge disparity should be a serious concern and one of the reasons it's happening can be traced back to how the company allocates its vaccine launches.

According to *kontekstual.com*, higher-income countries have funded vaccine development

in the billions, and in return drug companies provide these countries with safe doses of vaccines for their people. This is common in the West because they have the resources to take the investment risks, they are able to make deals early in the pandemic even when a vaccine has not been proven effective. In addition, these countries buy more doses than their population will need to replace if the drug company's vaccines fail to deliver. In fact, more than 6 billion doses are covered by these upper-middle-income countries, when they represent only one-fifth of the global population. With the current limited production capacity, almost all doses produced by Western manufacturers are almost full from deals with rich countries [14]. Of course, this has resulted in poor countries lagging far behind.

Some of these countries have pledged to share their vaccines. But most of these world leaders make it clear that their own country comes first, then the excess dose can be shared with the world. This nationalistic approach to vaccine procurement means that poor countries cannot depend on the West. With the gap left by western democracies, China is also taking advantage of this opportunity by providing its vaccine to countries that need it. But it all comes at a price, as vaccines give these powerful nations a strategic opportunity to further expand their influence and win the seemingly irresistible war of "vaccine diplomacy."

Citing from *thejakarta.post.com*, China has supplied or plans to supply 120 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine to ASEAN members. This is about 4.8 times the amount allocated to the region by the United States and European countries through the UN-backed COVAX global vaccine sharing program, according to a Kyodo News tally. The figures were compiled by Kyodo News based on data from Gavi, an alliance of governments, international organizations, companies, and charities promoting the COVAX program in collaboration with the World Health Organization, as well as from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations governments.

The tally also shows Cambodia and Indonesia get more than 90 percent of their vaccine doses from China. Laos gets about 89 percent of its dose from China and the Philippines more than 60 percent. Several countries in Southeast Asia have faced a resurgence of infections and are trying to get enough doses for their populations. With China's

vaccine exceeding those provided to ASEAN members through the COVAX program by the United States and European countries, leaders of the Group of Seven industrialized nations on June 12, 2021, said they aim to help developing countries emerge from the coronavirus pandemic by providing 1 billion doses. China's Sinopharm vaccine will be supplied to developing countries via COVAX but does not include those allocated to ASEAN countries on Friday [18].

From this, it can be seen that vaccines have become a diplomatic tool or weapon for China. In the Southeast Asia Region, the Chinese Government offers its vaccines, namely Sinovac and Sinopharm. The presence of Sinovac and Sinopharm provides access for developing countries to obtain vaccines in the midst of vaccine production from major world pharmaceutical companies controlled by developed countries, especially the United States and Europe. Even so, China's move has come under scrutiny from some experts who think the country has a political motive behind the vaccine distribution. Global health researcher at the US Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Huang Yanzhong, said China's 'kindness' was linked to the Panda Nation's interest in restoring their reputation. Many countries are angry that China is considered the source country of the coronavirus. China is also considered to benefit from increasing the credibility of its biotechnology companies if the vaccine is successful [19].

In addition, especially in Southeast Asian countries, China has an interest in developing global influence to facilitate geopolitical affairs. For ASEAN, this is a 'golden opportunity' that is very tempting to miss, especially for affected countries with the highest infection rates such as Indonesia and the Philippines. The exposure to the pandemic has severely disrupted the economic foundations of most ASEAN member states. Thus, with China's assistance in facilitating the development of a vaccine, it can accommodate the interests of the state to accelerate the acceleration of post-pandemic economic recovery.

On the other side, China has regional agenda interests related to the acquisition of the South China Sea. This motive is seen as increasingly visible when China made a vaccine diplomacy agreement for Malaysia and the Philippines. Previously, the two countries disputed China's expansion in the South China Sea. To expedite its

action, China is trying to make its vaccine production a global public good. This was stated by President Xi Jinping in a keynote address via video at the opening ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021 [20], [21].

Xi Jinping's movement to make the corona vaccine a public good seems to place Beijing at the forefront of public health. This effort is a kind of 'fill in the gap' of America's absence from the global alliance with 189 countries that promised to distribute vaccines equitably. America, which is China's competitor, only focuses on producing vaccines for domestic purposes. If Washington still refuses to compete, it is expected to cost the country the vaccine race.

China's vaccine diplomacy has focused on Southeast Asia, with Indonesia — the world's fourth most populous country — being one of the first recipients of Sinovac's shipments last December and now the leading foreign recipient of China's vaccines overall. The strengthening of China's vaccine diplomacy was further strengthened by the signing of cooperation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a large-scale trade agreement involving China, ASEAN, and several other Pacific countries in November 2020 [22].

### III. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has implications for changing the nature of relations in the international system. The pattern of existing relations shows two possibilities, namely building solidarity through cooperation or applying restrictive boundaries through protectionism. Through this paper, the author sees that the relationship between China and ASEAN leads to the first pattern, namely the emphasis on collaboration through cooperation in the region, in this case, the distribution of vaccines as a diplomatic tool.

The author concludes that the Chinese government offers the Covid-19 vaccine to ASEAN countries due to the interest to improve its geopolitics in the Southeast Asian Region. In addition, China is trying to rebuild its image which is considered bad because it is the epicenter of the spread of the coronavirus. With the presence of sinovac and sinopharm, it provides access for

developing countries to get vaccines during vaccine production from major world pharmaceutical companies controlled by developed countries, especially the United States and Europe.

China took advantage of the opportunity at a time when Western countries were still focused on domestic conditions. The provision of humanitarian assistance cannot be separated from China's approach to vaccine diplomacy, which differs in ambition, strategy, and operationalization. China as an emerging power country has global ambitions to provide vaccines to developing countries throughout the region because it aspires to expand its influence indirectly. And, diplomacy is a powerful tool to launch the action.

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