

China's Mask Diplomacy: Health Assistance for South Pacific Countries During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which generates many negative areas in the field of life, China has become one that shines. China tends to actively contribute to international activities in combating COVID-19. One of the ways is trying to provide assistance to countries affected by COVID-19, one of which is the Pacific countries. This article will explain China's diplomatic efforts to Pacific countries through the distribution of health assistance. Improving China's image is the motive behind this activity. By using the literature study method, this article will discuss more about the reasons behind China's diplomacy in the form of providing health assistance.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2020, the world was shaken by the spread of the coronavirus. Wuhan, China was the first area where a positive case of corona was found. The virus spreads quickly through saliva. Until March 2020, WHO declared this virus a pandemic, because of its significant negative impact in several areas of life, not only health but also economic, social, etc. In the international world, there are several beliefs where China is the country that needs to be blamed for this disaster, because this virus comes from China. Many criticize the weakness of policies regarding the animal market, which is suspected to be the source of the emergence of the virus that has claimed many lives in various parts of the world. The United States is at the forefront to rain criticism towards China. President Donald Trump himself referred to the coronavirus as the "China Virus" in his speech at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. The US blamed the Chinese government for its

slowness in trying to contain the spread of the virus in its early stages.

On February 3, 2020, President Xi Jin Ping made a speech and expressed his desire to win international support and understanding through diplomacy and propaganda. The President also ordered the media to publish positive news related to China's efforts to deal with COVID-19. Several Chinese media expressed their denial that this virus came from that country, and there were some who stated that this virus came from the United States. In restoring its image, Beijing has succeeded in proving its success in dealing with the virus that has been infected by almost all countries of the world by showing indications of zero cases of infection. China's third effort in showing a clear path is to provide some medical aid and medical equipment to countries in the world. The country is committed to providing assistance to 82 countries, WHO and the African Union. One of the targets of China's health

assistance is the Pacific island countries.

Pacific island countries—especially developing countries such as Fiji, Kiribati, the Unitary State of Micronesia, Nauru, Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu—have limited health care capacity to deal with the coronavirus. This makes these countries vulnerable to the negative impacts of the pandemic, including social and economic impacts. China, which has long been good friends with small countries, has come forward to provide assistance in the form of medical supplies to support the Pacific in dealing with the spread of the coronavirus. Beijing provided \$800,000 in aid and sent Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) troops to Fiji and other Pacific Island countries. Reliefweb.int reports that China will re-inject USD 500,000, of which USD 100,000 will be channeled to Fiji. Since the article was published, China's aid to the Pacific islands has totaled USD 2.4 million. Beijing is here not only providing assistance to countries, but also to regional organizations in the South Pacific, namely the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP), which is also aimed at supporting relevant organizations in helping to eradicate the concerns experienced by the South Pacific, not only the corona virus but also climate change.

Public diplomacy is an implementation of state interests as stated in foreign policy. Public diplomacy in China, in its traditional sense, emphasizes high politics and ignores political grass roots. In the regard to diplomatic relations, China believes more in people-to-people relations. China's image in the international world is also reflected in its domestic politics. But now, along with the development of China, public

diplomacy is getting more attention by the government. In 2004, the country's public diplomacy began to be carved out, which was aimed at realizing two roles. The first role is as a function of wise strategic thinking & defense reasons. The second is as an effort to facilitate the rise of China as a soft power. Beijing is determined to change its international image. The country is trying to tackle the image of the "China Threat" and is also trying to make the world accept China's rise to power. Public diplomacy is more focused on government-to-government relations. The government is also trying to get closer to civil society in launching its diplomacy.

China's efforts in the form of providing health assistance to several countries in the world have attracted a lot of interest from academics to explore its motives. This is stated in R. Verma's writing which describes China's diplomatic efforts in changing the narrative about COVID-19 in Europe. Other researchers such as Francisco Urdinez also discussed Beijing's steps and motivations in carrying out mask diplomacy aimed at Chile. There is also a journal article written by Denny Roy that discusses the weaknesses and strengths of China's efforts to carry out health diplomacy in the period January to May 2020. However, the author has not found any articles that discuss the motivations of China to carry out its diplomacy specifically to Pacific countries. Therefore, the author of this article would like to raise the question of what is China's hidden motivation for health assistance actions for Pacific Island countries? Using the literature study, this paper will discuss further the relationship between China and the South Pacific countries. Likewise, this paper would like to explore China's motivation to make diplomatic efforts to the related countries in the South Pacific.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

National Interest

In the study of international relations, the origin of national interest is rooted in Machiavelli's realist view, which believes that without power and the will to use that power, people will get nothing. Realism believes that the state can take tough steps to protect itself and ensure its defense. Friedrich Kratochwil in his writing entitled *On the Notion of "Interest" in International Relations* explains that the idea of the national interest is part of political reality and is an integral part of debates in public affairs. The concept of national interest itself is important and useful for policy makers.

The interests of the state are one of the factors that contribute to the release of a country's foreign policy. Quoted from the writings of Ibnu Pratama, Donald E. Nutcherlain stated that national interests are divided into 4, namely;

- a. Defense interest is an interest to protect the country or its people from physical threats originating from other countries or threats from other countries' systems.
- b. Economic interest is an interest that generates additional economic value, in the context of creating relations with other countries, which are beneficial,
- c. World order interest is the interest of the world system that guarantees the maintenance of the world's political and economic system, which provides security to the state so that international actors are free and safe in carrying out cross-border life safely,
- d. Ideological interest is an interest which protects the values and beliefs held by the people of a country.

Policies in the national interest are aimed at getting the good of a country.

National interests are not directed to influence allegiance and justify a particular unit, such as a region, race, or continent. Williams M.C argues that a strong, morally cohesive society with a clear public interest provides the basis for the national interest. The national interest is built on the lines that will support the creation of the maintenance of the public interest. National interest is a product and symbol of the public interest which not only provides guidelines for foreign policy, but also in the process supports the operation of domestic political policies.

1. Foreign Policy

Ninggimus, et al explained, foreign policy or foreign policy is a guideline, principle, and purpose of a country's decisions in achieving the interests of the country in the international world. Foreign policy is based on national interests and needs. K.J Hosti views foreign policy as an instrument of the government to establish relations with international actors. Foreign policy is a set of goals that explain the behavior of a country in interacting with international society. International Relations theorists such as Thucydides note the importance of perception, at the elite and mass levels, in influencing foreign policy. In addition, foreign policy is shaped by decision makers to deal with other countries or other international political units and is controlled to achieve their national interests. The decision to take foreign policy is never separated from the internal factors of a country, which include social, economic, political aspects, interest groups, etc.

Barry Naughton emphasized that after 1978, China's economic development strategy shifted from belief in self-sufficiency and military

industry to compromise, with a middle ground strategy that allowed China to reap significant benefits from its participation in global trade. In line with this idea, Taylor argued that China's post-cold war foreign policy consisted of a demand to develop the economy and a shift of power to the Asia-Pacific region. He said that since 1978, China had begun to implement an economic open-door policy and since the early 1990s had begun to emphasize multilateral diplomacy, which was carried out to build and improve relations with developing and developed countries. China has also begun to emphasize practice over dogma. China's foreign policy to Pacific countries began to develop in the postwar period, and focused on countries such as New Zealand and Australia. Asia-Pacific is the main parameter of China's defense policy.

China's foreign policy is based on the concept of peaceful development, which is reflected in the recognition of the Chinese leader - who stated that China's domestic reform and development and restoration of the country's great power status can be realized in a peaceful and stable external situation. With that in mind, China's top foreign policy priority since the early 1990s has been to calm external concerns about the threat posed by China's rise. The country seeks to calm these concerns by emphasizing peacekeeping efforts in the external environment. Angela Poh and Mingjiang Li brought the debate on the changes in China's foreign policy, which began in 2012. This debate began when Xi laid out his vision of the "China dream" which has the goal of realizing a prosperous society in all aspects and also a strong, civilized and

harmonious modern socialist state. Since the 18th Party Congress, in 2012, Xi emphasized his vision on various international and domestic occasions regarding the development of "*minyun gongtongti*," or so called a community on a common destiny. With this vision in mind, debates have come from academics. Some argue that China has moved away from its humble international strategy in matters relating to foreign policy to shape global and regional order according to its values and interests. Some scholars argue otherwise. However, Poh and Li stressed that under Xi's leadership, China launched several new initiatives to expand its influence at the regional and global level.

2. Public Diplomacy

Sukawarsini Djelantik explained Sir Ernest Satow's opinion in defining diplomacy, in which he believed that diplomacy was the application of intelligence and strategy to establish official relations between sovereign governments, which was often extended to their colonized countries. Barston also has the same opinion regarding diplomacy. He defines diplomacy as the management of relations between states or relations between states and other international actors. States through the actors who represent them seek to convey, coordinate, and secure their national interests. This can be done by means of correspondence, informal talks, exchange of views, negotiations, visits, etc. Diplomacy has a duty to manage a conflict as well as change. Even up to the maintenance efforts that can be done by persuasion.

Joseph S. Nye in his journal describes Edward R. Murrow's view

of public diplomacy, which he defines as an interaction between foreign countries as well as non-governmental individuals and organizations. Public diplomacy sometimes also conveys some public views in support of the state's view. Public diplomacy can be viewed from various perspectives. Skeptics believe public diplomacy is a euphemism of propaganda. However, Nye argues that good public diplomacy should be seen beyond propaganda. Public diplomacy is also not just a public relations campaign. Efforts to convey information and a positive image is one part. But what he emphasizes here is public diplomacy which includes efforts to build long-term relations, which can build an atmosphere that can support government policies.

In China, public diplomacy is considered a foreign concept. China often uses the term *dui wai xuan* or *wai xuan* which means external propaganda and emphasizes recognizing China's achievements and enhancing the country's image on the global scene. *Xuan chuan* (propaganda) has a positive meaning which is an activity that is basically harmless. This refers to a Press Release, a general form of ideology, or even an advertisement. Propaganda or *Xuan chuan* itself has two types, namely Internal Propaganda (*nei xuan*) and External Propaganda (*wai xuan*). Internal propaganda is intended for the Chinese people or is also known as domestic propaganda. Meanwhile, China uses External Propaganda to emphasize and advertise China's achievements and improve the country's image abroad. China's internal propaganda has a strong influence at home, but in contrast to

China's public diplomacy abroad, which tends to be weak. In China's glossary, the concept of diplomacy sits alongside another key concept, *wai shi* (foreign affairs). All kinds of official organizations in China have a foreign affairs section. China's practice of public diplomacy emphasizes cultural exchange. The reason is that Chinese culture is highly developed while the media is still not globally integrated.

In the past, China's domestic propaganda tended to be strong compared to its weak public diplomacy. Beijing emphasizes the concept of people-to-people diplomacy in public diplomacy. However, during Xi Jinping's reign, China became more active in international relations. In the early seven months of his reign, Xi spent 33 days abroad, attending several international forums and visiting the homes of leaders of other countries. At the 18th National Party Congress held in January 2013, there was a study session discussing China's diplomatic strategy, which focused on the theme of peaceful development. This peaceful development rhetoric is widely considered to mean that China is substantially improving its relations with foreign countries, especially countries in the Asia-Pacific. This is manifested in diplomacy known as "charm offensive" diplomacy, which focuses on expanding economic relations and increasing engagement with regional institutions.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



Description:
→ influence

ANALYSIS

China Diplomacy In The Form Of Covid-19 Assistance To Pacific Countries

China's foreign policy in the Xi Jinping era is considered to be more open and more active in international activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China has also actively contributed to international-scale activities. One of them is manifested in mask diplomacy, which is used by the country to win the hearts and minds of other countries. Regarding this diplomatic model, China has already launched its strategy before the COVID-19 outbreak. It was proven through the mask diplomacy carried out by China in 2009, at which time Mexico was hit by the H1N1 outbreak. At that time, China was trying to show its image as a benevolent country. The mask diplomacy was also carried out during the COVID-19 virus outbreak. China seeks to assist countries in providing medical assistance, such as sending medical professionals, medical equipment, and providing information exchange. These aids were distributed to several countries affected by COVID-19. Pacific island countries are also the targets of the Chinese aid. China's assistance to Pacific countries is divided into four types of activities. The first is foreign aid in the form of a USD 1.9 million donation, of which the funds are intended to mark grants and supplies of medical equipment. The second activity

is information sharing. This is manifested in a video conference organized by The Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs, custodian of China-PICs relations at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Department of Internal Cooperation at the National Health Commission. At the conference there was an exchange of information where the sources were obtained from senior health and experts from ten Chinese partners in Pacific countries. At the conference, China pledged to support Pacific countries in the face of the virus and also pledged to protect Pacific citizens living and studying in China. In addition, China is also trying to contact the media in South Pacific countries, where the media are asked to publicize China's support and achievements in dealing with the pandemic.

Through its actions, China is trying to show its image as a reliable and responsible partner. With this image improvement, it will be easier for China to establish cooperation with Pacific countries, which will also make it easier for China to achieve its national interests. The point is, by providing a good image, China can expect support from these Pacific Island countries. One of the essential supports is voting in international forums, such as the United Nations. In addition, cooperation with Pacific countries can be used as an instrument to gain support in disputes between China and Taiwan. This is related to the principle of One China Policy, where China considers that Taiwan is part of China. Therefore, China is trying to regain its control over Taiwan. However, this is hampered because basically, many Pacific countries have recognized Taiwan as a country. It's not just about Taiwan and China. The support from the Pacific countries was sought by China in order to help support China's conflicts with Southeast Asian countries, one of which

was related to the South China Sea conflict. Therefore, diplomatic efforts in terms of image enhancement and providing assistance are the right way to attract Pacific Island countries to China's side.

In addition, China's diplomatic efforts are an embodiment of its strategy, namely opening up to the outside world. By opening up, China's expectation is to fulfill its economic interests, one of which is by allowing Chinese companies to expand their business by seeking opportunities offered abroad. China's diplomatic efforts in the form of providing assistance are also a concept which later developed into a strategy known as China's Peaceful Rise or China's peaceful development. This concept is a policy that emerged during the reign of Hu Jintao, which emerged in response to the China Threat Theory. The concept seeks to characterize China as a responsible world player, emphasizing the use of soft power, and its commitment to internal problems and the welfare of domestic society before taking part in international affairs. This form of diplomacy can be categorized as one of China's efforts to prove its peaceful development. China is trying to prove that its rise is not a threat, but instead can help maintain the stability of the world's peaceful order.

The diplomatic efforts carried out by China are quite effective in achieving its national interests. This strategy through diplomacy to Pacific countries has received several positive responses, especially from Pacific Island countries. One of them came from Vanuatu, where in March 2020, its foreign minister expressed his gratitude for the assistance provided by China. On this occasion, Ralph Regenvanu, his foreign minister, also emphasized the friendship between the two countries. This appreciation also came from Papua New

Guinea, which was conveyed by its foreign minister.

CONCLUSION

China was the first country where the coronavirus infection was discovered. There are also many ideas about blaming China for the pandemic. There is also criticism from international actors who state their incompetence in managing the animal market, which is the cause of the presence of COVID-19. But for all these blasphemies, China was able to rise up and show the world its strength in dealing with this virus. One of them is China's contribution in helping countries in the world affected by COVID-19, one of which is the Pacific Island countries that are vulnerable to the negative impact of the coronavirus. China is here to provide assistance in the form of an injection of funds, including medical equipment and the delivery of professional medical personnel, as well as the exchange of information related to COVID-19, which will be useful as a reference in making policies. These things are motivated by China's efforts to improve its image in the Pacific region. By enhancing this image, China can expect support from PICs, including support in international forums such as the United Nations. In addition, PICs can also support China in dealing with its problems with Taiwan and countries in Southeast Asia. This support is also meaningful in terms of helping to realize the one China policy principle brought by China. This diplomacy can also be an example of China's efforts to implement its peaceful development strategy.

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