

Conference Paper

Rethinking Medical Diplomacy as a Part of the Public Diplomacy: The Case of China

Rara Shertina, Ario Bimo Utomo*

Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jawa Timur, Surabaya 60294, Indonesia

*Corresponding author:

E-mail:

ariobimo.utomo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article reviews China's efforts to provide medical assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, the author uses the point of view that this assistance can be categorized as a public diplomacy effort because it is aimed at people in foreign countries. This article attempts to broaden the definition of medical diplomacy which leads to public diplomacy. This was found by the author after analyzing the impact of Chinese diplomacy on the image of his country and linking it to China's medical diplomacy efforts that had been carried out.

Keywords: China, public diplomacy, Covid-19

Introduction

The Coronavirus has become a threat on a global scale since the beginning of 2020. Reporting to CNN, a virus similar to SARS is believed to have come from China, more precisely from a traditional market that sells wild animals in Wuhan City, Hubei Province in December 2019. The Wuhan City Health Service found cases of lung disease namely, pneumonia, however, the virus causing it is unknown. Then this case went viral until the World Health Organization (WHO) received a report from the Wuhan Health Service. China immediately moved quickly by closing the Hunan Seafood Wholesale Market because it was considered that the virus originated from animals sold there.

In January 2020 WHO officially named this virus 2019-nCoV. Cases of death that continue to increase due to this virus have forced the Chinese government to immediately close total access to Hubei Province and President Xi Jinping to immediately prepare for treatment. One month later WHO named the corona virus as Covid-19 and announced that the corona virus had become a pandemic. The Chinese government, which has been in lockdown since January 2020, has succeeded in lifting the lockdown status in Hubei Province and Wuhan City within three to four months.

The occurrence of the global corona virus pandemic did not dampen competition between the United States and China. This condition has even become a battlefield for the two superpowers to improve their nation's branding or their country's self-image. The two countries again engaged in verbal exchanges by accusing each other of being the culprits of the virus which has infected more than 2.6 million people in 210 countries and regions in the world (CNN, 2020). China became a country that suffered greatly from this incident, especially when the narratives about the "Chinese Virus" were echoed by the President of the United States (US), Donald Trump.

Various criticisms against China continued to come, this was because China was considered not to be transparent about data on the spread of the virus from the start. According to CNN (2020), this accusation did not only come from the US but other Western countries. Britain and France even urged President Xi Jinping to conduct data transparency regarding the coronavirus.

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Instead of being silent and accepting all accusations, the Chinese government instead used this momentum as a medium to carry out medical diplomacy.

In this paper, the author will redefine medical diplomacy in a case study of China's efforts to assist countries in the world to minimize the spread of the corona virus. This article attempts to broaden the definition of medical diplomacy which leads to public diplomacy. This was found by the author after analyzing the impact of Chinese diplomacy on the image of his country and linking it to China's medical diplomacy efforts that had been carried out. This research uses a descriptive method with the data that the author uses of the secondary data type obtained from the literature study.

Discussion

According to Youde (2010), Medical diplomacy is not necessarily a new concept, but its usage and application have changed in recent years. Historically, medical diplomacy has focused on international collaboration to protect human and commercial interests against the spread of certain infectious diseases. This diplomacy is considered to be underperforming as a tool to encourage closer diplomatic relations between countries. However, this diplomacy is more of a way to prevent commercial interests. The threat of bubonic plague—an infectious disease to humans caused by the enterobacteria *Yersinia pestis* and spread by rodents, especially rats—or cholera—diarrhea caused by a bacterial infection called *Vibrio cholera*—is enough to close ports or impose quarantine measures.

Both of these diseases have an impact on hampering the exchange of goods and people. In 1851, diplomats and doctors from 11 European countries met in Paris for the first International Sanitary Conference. They seek to create a comprehensive quarantine policy that will simultaneously prevent trade disruptions. This first conference failed to produce any agreement due to differences of opinion regarding the etiology of the disease, but it did help set the stage for future international health diplomacy efforts (Stern & Markel, 2004). Over the next 50 years, another ten international sanitation conferences were held which eventually led to the creation of international standards for quarantine measures and disease control (Howard-Jones & World Health Organization, 1975).

In its more contemporary usage, health diplomacy is a political activity that fulfills the dual objective of improving health while maintaining and strengthening international relations (Novotny et al., 2008). Others describe it as a mechanism for managing health risks moving in and out of each country (Drager & Fidler, 2007). This approach moves beyond an explicit focus on specific diseases and instead emphasizes how various manifestations of ill health can have negative consequences for the international community. For example, the World Health Organization's Commission on Macroeconomics and Health calls on donor countries to increase their foreign aid budgets.

These aids include increasing foreign aid budgets to 0.7% of the gross national product, strengthening the effectiveness of international health programs such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, and ensuring that the poor in developing countries have access to medicines. -required medication. Doing so, the Commission argues, will stimulate economic growth in developing countries (WHO, 2003). Health, in this way, is seen as a tool to promote economic growth. It becomes an important component of broad-based economic and social development, integrated into a larger strategy.

China's medical diplomacy began with its efforts to send medical aid to countries around the world. China sends medical supplies and protective equipment such as masks too many countries and has provided US\$ 20 million to the World Health Organization (Tempo.co., 2020). This step taken by China is in contrast to its rival, the United States in response to the global problems of this pandemic. According to news published in *The Guardian*, on April 14, 2020, Donald Trump officially announced that the US would freeze funding for WHO. This US decision was later criticized by many parties because it was considered to endanger many lives for its decision.

Responding to all the unpleasant accusations from Western countries prompted China to launch a strategy of medical diplomacy to increase its positive image in front of other countries. China's medical diplomacy efforts had been carried out long before the corona pandemic, one of which was in Africa. China's involvement in Africa has gone beyond financial donations and training in the anti-colonial movement. This involvement extends to infrastructure support and one of the strategic keys in this support is health cooperation.

In 1963, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai sent a medical team from China to Algeria (Eisenman, 2007). This effort paved the way for China to support the health system in Africa by providing medical troops, and medical equipment across the African continent. According to Youde (2010), medical diplomacy in China in the 1960s and 1970s managed to build a fairly positive image. Chinese medical teams working in the countryside represent the most successful form of assistance in Africa. The successes that have been achieved through China's previous medical diplomacy efforts have made this global corona pandemic a potential moment for medical diplomacy.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Chinese government has provided medical assistance to 82 countries, WHO and African Union countries. Despite accusations from EU countries, China continues to help Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Serbia, and EU countries which have been heavily affected by Covid-19. So far, this form of assistance includes 20 medical experts and 26 tons of relief supplies which include ventilator monitors, protective equipment, and essential medicines. China also provided Spain with 500,000 masks and has sent 1 million masks to France. Other EU countries will receive 2 million surgical masks, 200,000 N95 masks, and 50,000 testing kits (Tempo.co., 2020).

During China's medical assistance to other countries on various continents and the WHO, many experts have given their views on China's actions and tried to find the motives behind them. Media such as Tempo.co put forward the opinion of experts, one of which is Graeme Smith, an academic from the Australian National University (ANU) with a concentration on China. He believes that the assistance provided by China is an attempt to shift the narrative of China as the source of the corona virus to China, which is the world's savior in a pandemic. Even though this assistance was intended for the foreign public, he argued that the government was only trying to control the domestic narrative in China, not aimed at the global community.

An academic at the East-West Center in Hawaii named Denny Roy said that China is trying to show its reputation as a responsible country. This momentum was used by China because the international system was experiencing tension. This tension is visible in the European Union countries whose territories are affected by the highest cases of the corona. It was at this time that Germany and France decided to keep medical supplies at home and prioritize their own country.

Even reported by Warta Ekonomi (2020), a professor of public administration at the University of International Relations in Beijing named Chu Yin thinks that China is still lagging behind the US and Europe regarding public diplomacy efforts. He argues that China only expects humanitarian aid to be a diplomatic return. So that there are no elements that aim to enhance a positive image or image branding. He proved this with the reason that China is helping Italy because indeed Italy has joined the One Belt and Road Initiative program.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang stated that this assistance is a form of China's traditional virtue of returning kindness. Quoted from his statement "You gave me peaches, and in return, I gave you white jade as a form of friendship". China is trying to show that it really only wants to be reciprocated and nothing more than that, and vice versa if a country is assisted then there must be reciprocity to China. He stated that China would strengthen cooperation with other countries in dealing with Covid-19 while building communities that would become part of the future of humanity (Tempo.co, 2020).

The author here sees that China is trying to cover up its efforts to improve national branding. China doesn't want it to be obvious that apart from cooperation they also want to appear to have a positive image internationally. The author believes this because China has actually carried out

medical diplomacy for a long time, even starting in the 20th century in Africa. These non-profit endeavors may not quite fit the same notion of health diplomacy as donated clinics, but they do further the goal of providing health care in underserved areas of Africa to help elevate China's "status" on the continent (Youde, 2010).

According to Youde (2010), China's medical diplomacy efforts have improved China's image in the eyes of ordinary people, not just the elite. After this positive image is built, people will trust medical products produced by China. Medical diplomacy is seen as a clever and inexpensive way to promote Chinese-made medicines. The impact of China's medical diplomacy has formed a new view that it is not only aimed at cooperation between countries or for national security stability.

From the ideas mentioned above, this medical diplomacy can be made part of public diplomacy. Given the increasingly widespread impact not only on the elite but also on the foreign public. It is this trust that has been built by the foreign public that makes it inclined to acts of public diplomacy. Public Diplomacy is diplomacy to improve communication between the state and society whose implementation involves the state and society. According to Mellisen (2006) on Public Diplomacy and Global Business, public diplomacy is an attempt to positively influence other countries or organizations to change their perspective on that country.

Efforts to influence the public through Chinese diplomacy can be seen in the current media reports regarding assistance from China. Some wrote that the world is currently grateful for China's help. Even as reported by medcom.id (2006), there is information that the whole world is indebted to China. The article wrote that China deserves gratitude and appreciation from around the world for its efforts to save society globally and reduce the transmission of the corona virus. In this case, China is trying to communicate with foreign publics, not only with state elites.

News about China's continuing to aid during a crisis and its desire to maintain national stability will build a positive image of China in the eyes of the foreign public. The aforementioned statements from the Chinese government have shaped the notion that China is a "moral" country. This is part of China's soft power which follows the concept of Nye (1990), that a country's culture, political values, foreign policy, and economic attractiveness as an essential components of national strength, provide the capacity to persuade other countries to willingly adopt their goals. the same one.

Here, China always thinks that its assistance is a form of "traditional Chinese virtue" to repay each other's kindness and repay kindness better than what is received. This idea will open the eyes of the foreign public that traditional Chinese norms are values that are considered good so that they can be accepted by the foreign public. Added to this is the role of the media in preaching China's kindness in providing medical equipment and medical personnel. So that the foreign public is also influenced by the narratives built by the media and is also grateful for China's assistance.

Conclusion

China's medical diplomacy in the global pandemic crisis has provided space for China to enhance its positive image to the foreign public. Even though China has never openly or explicitly shown efforts to increase nation branding, in fact China has always involved its traditional norms as an excuse to help other countries. These narratives involving traditional Chinese ideas will appeal to foreign audiences especially after seeing the implications for China's policies to help countries in the world when other countries prioritize themselves.

The author sees that this Chinese strategy is not new but has been proven and clearly illustrated in previous medical diplomacy on the African continent. China's medical diplomacy in Africa, which has increased the nation's "status" or self-image among African people, is certainly the cornerstone of China's further medical diplomacy efforts, including during this global corona pandemic. Therefore, the authors see that the definition of medical diplomacy previously described only includes political cooperation activities aimed at improving the quality of health. In practice medical diplomacy has an impact that is more than just increasing diplomatic

cooperation there is communication that is established between the government and the community. This communication creates trust and a favorable view of the country providing medical assistance.

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