Quad: Origin and Evolving Dynamics  
_Srabani Roy Choudhury_

Japan and Foreign Territory Strike: Debathe, Deterrence, and Defense Strength  
_Corey Wallace_

Health Diplomacy as an Instrument of Indonesian Foreign Policy in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic  
_Dino Patti Djalal, Agus Subagyo, and Mariane Olivia Delanova_

Coup de Grace: How the Quad is Hastening the Destruction of Asean  
_Quinissa Putirezhy_

Unit-Level Explanation on Indonesian Foreign Policy: Elite Consensus and Sink the Vessel Policyi Under the Jokowi’s Presidency  
_Miftachul Choir_

A Prayer for Democracy: Secretarian Violence and Regime Type in Indonesia  
_Donald Greenlees_

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HEALTH DIPLOMACY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INDONESIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE ERA OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Indonesia’s foreign policy is dynamic, especially in the COVID-19 Pandemic Era. When Indonesia experienced an increase in COVID-19 cases, it identified it as a foreign policy issue requiring attention. It focused on promoting national health resilience in health care as one way to protect the Indonesian state during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to explain and analyze Indonesia’s health diplomacy as an instrument of Indonesia’s foreign policy in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that, so far, the results of Indonesia’s health-focused approach are good and in line with Indonesia’s national interests. Indonesia’s active role and involvement in international forums has a diplomatic purpose but has also helped other countries. This indicates that the health diplomacy carried out by Indonesia has had a major impact on regional and global stability. In addition, Indonesia’s health diplomacy has resulted in it receiving assistance in the form of medical devices and vaccines provided by other countries for handling COVID-19 in Indonesia. Indonesia was also the driving force in the initiation in the 75th United Nations General Assembly of measures giving voice to the availability of medical devices and vaccine equality for all countries in the world.

Keywords: Health Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, COVID-19 Pandemic, Human Security

Indonesian Foreign Policy in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Foreign policy is a reaction to stimuli that come from the domestic and external environment (Rosenau, 1980). Foreign policy is an activity carried out by state actors who undertake actions based on decisions to achieve identified goals. The
foreign policy carried out aims to achieve the national interests of a country. In order to achieve national interests, the state in many cases carries out cooperation with other nations at the bilateral, trilateral and multilateral level. During the first period of Joko Widodo’s leadership (beginning in 2014), there were four priorities in his foreign policy: namely (1) strengthening Indonesia’s identity as a country; (2) enhancing Indonesia’s role and building international cooperation as it strengthened middle power diplomacy; (3) expanding the influence of involvement in the Indo-Paësor Region; and (4) prioritizing the public interest in its foreign policy (Connely, 2014: 6). The foreign policy carried out by Indonesia targets external entities to show that the state’s action and control cannot be separated from the Indonesian national interest. National interests are related to the needs of the state vis-a-vis other countries that are part of the social environment (Nuechterlein, 1976: 247).

Furthermore, Nuechterlein (1976: 248) notes that the national interest is comprised of four dimensions which determine a country’s foreign policy, including (1) defense interests vis-a-vis external threats; (2) economic interests which refer to the economic welfare of the country and its relationship to establishing relations with other countries; (3) the interests and attitude towards the world order, which refers to the maintenance of world peace and security in the international system if it is judged to be beneficial; and (4) ideological interests that refer to the protection of values that come from universal beliefs embraced in that nation. In Indonesia’s foreign policy in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, the above interests are important because the COVID-19 pandemic has not only penetrated the economic and health sectors but has also affected the world order. Indonesia’s foreign policy carried out by Joko Widodo has focused on the people, also known as pro-people diplomacy (Ranny Virginia Utami, 2014). The pro-people diplomacy that is carried out is in line with the foundation and principle of being free-active. In addition, in its foreign policy targets, Indonesia actively participates in international forums and cooperation. As an actor who plays an
active role in international forums and cooperation, this is the right place for Indonesia to achieve its national interests. Involvement in international forums and cooperation will hopefully provide solutions to the challenges faced.

Indonesia’s foreign policy has become dynamic, especially the COVID-19 Pandemic Era. In 2019, when COVID-19 hit the whole world, countries changed the direction of their foreign policies for the sake of national interests and protecting their citizens. The change in the direction of foreign policy is in line with Rosenau’s (1974) theory that foreign policy is implemented in accordance with changes that occur in the international environment by considering and defending national interests. This is in accordance with foreign policy behaviour itself in that the government must encourage changes in its external environment with the aim of maintaining the existence of the state (Rosenau, 1974: 367). In the development of foreign policy theory, we must not only examine decision making, but the ‘psycho-environment’ of certain individuals or groups can influence the foreign policy process. This results in the foreign policy-making being carried out not only to influence external actors but also to target domestic entities as part of the national interest. For example, in 2021, the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that Indonesia had five foreign policy priorities and that one of the five priorities was national health resilience in health care to ensure protection for the people of the Indonesian state during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). This is supported by President Joko Widodo’s statement at the United Nations in 2020 that health is the most important aspect, especially access to vaccines to end the COVID-19 pandemic (Humphrey Wangke, 2021). In ensuring health resilience, of course, it is necessary to have a concrete policy in reviewing these problems.

Determining the direction of foreign policy can be accompanied and strengthened by big data (Pizaro Gozali, 2020). This is because we have greater access to data and data integration, so that in formulating foreign policy in the era of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we do not only look at the economic sector, but also
the health sector. In formulating Indonesian foreign policy, all sectors should be considered in determining the direction of foreign policy (Asep Setiawan, 2021). Furthermore, Indonesian foreign policy is not only limited to issues or problems that occur in the region, but globally. This is in accordance with the statement from the Deputy Chairperson of the Indonesian House of Representatives Cooperation Agency, that foreign policy is an effort by the government to support and contribute to maintaining world peace (House of Representatives, 2021). Through adopting a constructive foreign policy direction in dealing with contemporary issues, one goal is to increase global awareness of Indonesia and its participation in mutual solidarity.

One notable example is Indonesia’s foreign policy through health diplomacy. Health diplomacy is a target for the Indonesian government as it seeks to ensure access for all to health in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hoped that Indonesia’s foreign policy will not only be limited to collaborating and being actively involved in health forums. It is also hoped that it will ensure the provision of adequate access to vaccines for all Indonesian citizens. In line with the 1945 Constitution, Indonesia’s national interest in the COVID-19 era puts priority on health resilience in order to protect the entire Indonesian nation and create world order with lasting peace and social justice (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, 2021). Indonesia’s health diplomacy includes short-term and long-term efforts focusing on diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccinations (JPNN, 2020). Indonesia’s health diplomacy must be adaptive, innovative and active in dealing with current issues.

Health diplomacy carried out by Indonesia started to run at the beginning of the pandemic. Joko Widodo mandated the Minister of Foreign Affairs along with the Minister of SOEs and the Ministry of Health to pave the way to find vaccines to meet the needs of the Indonesian people (National Resilience Institute of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Retno Marsudi, also stated that as Indonesia carrying out efforts to find vaccines
for the Indonesian people, it would also fight for equal access to vaccines for all globally. Health diplomacy is, therefore, currently a priority for Indonesia. With the COVID-19 pandemic, of course, the pattern of state relations and interactions has changed, so that health issues become a top priority for Indonesia and other emerging nations in building their national resilience. In addition, the existence of health diplomacy can also build independence in the health sector in the long-term.

One concrete form of health diplomacy carried out by Indonesia in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic was actively involvement in multilateral forums focused on strengthening cooperation around COVID-19. Indonesia carries out many activities in international forums in order to achieve its national interests. This is evidenced by the 67 million vaccines in Indonesia has secured from bilateral and multilateral relations (Indonesian National Resilience Institute, 2021). Access to this vaccine is expected to increase every month because Indonesia’s need for vaccination is still lacking. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) that there are at least 3 (three) steps that can be taken in handling COVID-19, namely borderless, conducting global cooperation, and ensuring that all countries are fair in accessing the same health (Humphrey Wangke, 2021). Indonesia’s cooperation can be seen in Indonesia’s involvement in various international forums such as the International Coordination Group on COVID-19 (ICGC). This forum collectively aims to distribute vaccines for post-pandemic global economic and health recovery (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, 2020). This collective initiative is certainly a framework for multilateral cooperation that emphasizes the importance of joint solidarity in fighting COVID-19, because COVID-19 is a threat to all countries in the world.

When discussing the problem of COVID-19, of course, it cannot be separated from the role of WHO in handling COVID-19. WHO is a forum to pursue common interests, especially in ensuring the distribution of medical devices and vaccines for all countries in the world. The cooperation forum in the
International Coordination Group on COVID-19 should be a study looked at by the WHO as an example of how to build concrete cooperation in handling COVID-19, especially in the procurement of medical devices. Through multilateralism cooperation, it is possible to create trust between people and countries in the world to join forces and fight common problems. This Cooperation Forum is expected to be a forum to improve health diplomacy through joint production in producing medical devices and medicines in handling COVID-19 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020b).

In addition to playing an active role in international forums, Indonesia also participates in the Southeast Asia Region. Indonesia took part in the 25th Meeting of the ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC). In the 25th ACC, four important points in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic that are relevant to health diplomacy. At the 25th ACC, four agreements were made, including to compile a protocol for cross-border public health responses which aims to ensure health among citizens who cross national borders get health services in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rizki Ari Kurniawan, 2015). ASEAN countries also worked together in protecting their citizens, especially migrant workers, as a form of post-pandemic recovery. In this case, ASEAN also pays attention to health protocols. In addition, Indonesia proposed the establishment of the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund which is used to help purchase medical equipment and other necessities to achieve prosperity and protect the nation from the COVID-19 virus in the Southeast Asian Region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020a).

In fighting for equal access to vaccines for all countries, Indonesia, Ethiopia and Canada become Co-Chairs in the COVAX AMC Engagement Group (AMC EG). This is a forum between donor countries for the procurement and distribution of vaccines for AMC countries (Indonesian National Resilience Institute, 2021). In addition, as a form of health diplomacy, Indonesia also participates in the Ministerial Coordination Group on COVID-19 (MCGC) as
well as the ICGC which focuses on the distribution of the medical equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2020c). Indonesia’s foreign policy in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic is primarily focused on health diplomacy as an effort to create the welfare and health of its citizens, especially in providing access to vaccines for all of its citizens. The lack of access to vaccines in Indonesia, which has not been evenly distributed, makes Indonesia’s health diplomacy an essentially strategic and security concern as it threatens state functionality and national wellbeing as well as world peace. It must continue to be carried out through Indonesia’s involvement in international forums.

The Success of Indonesian Health Diplomacy

The degree to which Indonesia has succeeded in handling COVID-19 cannot be separated from health diplomacy and Indonesia’s foreign policy. The COVID-19 pandemic has become a threat concept that not only threatens national security, but also threatens human security as individuals. In line with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report (1994), security threats are broad and include the threat of hunger, the threat of infectious diseases, the threat to daily human life—at home, in the work environment, and in the community. The UNDP later identified seven elements that comprise security threats, including: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (UNDP, 2006). Of course, this is a challenge for Indonesia in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, which does not only carry out health diplomacy, but also looks at other aspects. Broadly speaking, the social disruption that occurred due to COVID-19 not only threatened the stability of the country, but also will have major implications for economic performance, and directly threatens human security. This makes it a big challenge for Indonesia as it continues to make efforts in handling COVID-19 and makes it much more than a simple health issue.
Bilaterally, Indonesia is increasing cooperation with several countries in health, especially in COVID-19 medical procurement. In 2020, Japan provided assistance to Indonesia amounting to US$ 14.5 million or equivalent to Rp. 224 billion to support Indonesia’s COVID-19 response (Nugraha, 2020). Japan provided assistance to Indonesia for technical needs for medical personnel in Indonesia. For this assistance, Japan agreed to protect Japanese citizens in Indonesia as a form of reciprocity for the assistance as well as the operational stability of Japanese companies in Indonesia (Baadilla & Daties, 2021). This makes health diplomacy carried out between Japan and Indonesia constructive in that it yields results addressing the national interests of each country and achieving win-win solutions. Indonesia and South Korea also carried out diplomacy in response to COVID-19. In 2020, South Korea provided assistance and support for Indonesia comprising US$500,000, provided 300 units of disinfectant sprayer, and provided assistance for 32,200 PCR test kits (Nugrahenny, 2020). This was done by South Korea on the basis that Indonesia is one of the countries in ASEAN that it wants to enhance strategic cooperation and because Indonesia is the main partner in the New Southern Policy for South Korea (Subarkah & Bukhari, 2020). Seeing that Indonesia has not overcome the COVID-19 problem made South Korea get more involved by providing assistance. Indonesia does not only carry out health diplomacy with Japan and South Korea. There are at least 9 other countries that have engaged in health diplomacy with Indonesia including: the United States, Singapore, China, Vietnam, India, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates (CNN Indonesia, 2020).

The success of Indonesia’s health diplomacy can’t be separated from the implementation of foreign policy and the use of established bilateral relations. In bilateral relations, Indonesia cooperates in the health sector by prioritizing the following priorities: (1) strengthening the health system; (2) improvement of human resources; (3) health technology development including e-Health; (4) dispatching health workers; (5) pharmaceuticals and medical devices; (6) health
at the border; (7) universal health insurance (“Health for All: Indonesia’s Global Health Diplomacy Strategy” Independent Study 2018, 2018). Indonesia’s cooperation in the health sector certainly has a purpose to it. In addition, the Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi promoted the importance of vaccine equality for Indonesia and others. This struggle has resulted in Indonesia being able to enter the Advanced Market Commitment group where Indonesia is entitled to receive access to vaccines for 20% of the population provided by WHO (Humphrey Wangke, 2021). The Indonesian Foreign Minister also visited countries such as China, Britain, and Switzerland to ensure that the Indonesian people received the vaccine. Due to this bilateral approach, Indonesia received vaccines of various types including Sinovac, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca (Purbantina & Hapsari, 2020; Rudolf, 2021). Health diplomacy carried out by Indonesia can be said to be successful, because Indonesia has obtained the objectives.

Indonesia is also actively involved in seeking the availability of vaccines for all countries in the world. Indonesia’s proposal in the 75th UN General Assembly emphasised the importance of collaboration in handling the pandemic. Indonesia succeeded in initiating and passing a resolution, namely “Global Health and Foreign Policy: Strengthening Health System Resilience through Affordable Healthcare for All” (Humphrey Wangke, 2021). Based on this resolution, equality in the availability of vaccines for all countries in the world and health services must be strengthened so that they can be accessed easily (Wicaksana, 2020). Real evidence of the success of Indonesia’s health diplomacy is not only fighting for the national interest of the country, but also contributing to justice in world welfare and order to increase international solidarity in global health, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the success of Indonesia’s diplomacy is not only collaborating and partnering with various countries in the world, but by giving voice and sharing commitment to common problems that challenged sovereignty and global order.
Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly not only threatened health security in Indonesia but has threatened global health. Of course, every country is competing to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic in its own way. The policies carried out by Indonesia are on the one hand taken to deal with changes that occur with the aim of maintaining state existence and national interests. Indonesia, in overcoming these problems, conducts health diplomacy through bilateral and multilateral cooperation and relations with other countries. Indonesia’s active role and involvement in international forums has yielded tangible results for Indonesia. Where Indonesia does not only have diplomatic goals in its role, but also helps other countries in voicing health equipment and vaccine equality for all countries in the world. Health diplomacy carried out by Indonesia has had a positive impact on global stability. This can be seen from the results of the 75th UN General Assembly that Indonesia proposed vaccine equality for all countries in the world and succeeded in passing a resolution in the General Assembly. Health diplomacy which is one of Indonesia’s foreign policies cannot be separated from the good relations that Indonesia has developed in the past with other countries, such as Japan and South Korea, who also helped Indonesia to respond to COVID-19. This assistance indicates that maintaining good relations between countries will continue to remain an asset into the future. Indonesia’s health diplomacy was initiated at the beginning of the pandemic and sought to leverage Indonesia’s good relations with others and international reputation. The Indonesian government issued a priority in national health resilience in health care to ensure protection for the people of the Indonesian state during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was then supported by the efforts made by the President, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and others who realised the severity of this security challenge for Indonesia.
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