



ASSESSING CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY TO SOUTH EAST ASIA: THE COVID19 VACCINE AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA ISSUES

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Abstract. *International relation is about the interaction between state actors. Doing so relates to the foreign policy owned by the state actor. To execute foreign policy, there are four dimensions of foreign policy instruments, namely diplomacy, information, military and economy under the realism paradigm. Using the research methodology by doing literature study and descriptive analysis in qualitative research, this writing will make use of relevant sources related to the issue. The argumentation arouses in this writing will provide the picture of how China's foreign policy to ASEAN to pursue its global initiative through the dimension of diplomacy, and military. Thus, through the question on how the reflection of China's foreign policy to ASEAN, the finding obtained in this writing is that China's vaccine intention towards ASEAN is reflecting China's foreign policy, but China's aggressive activity, is not reflected China's foreign policy. It is something outside. Taking the cases of the COVID19 vaccine and China's activity in the South China Sea will give a brief perspective to understand the implementation of China's foreign policy to ASEAN.*

Keywords: *China, ASEAN, foreign policy*

1. Introduction

Since the pandemic happened at the end of 2019, all countries have to readjust the foreign policy of their international engagement vis-à-vis COVID19. It is because of the unstable and unpredictable spreading effect of the virus. It is well-perceived that the virus has given a significant change in the global constellation and raised the tension to some countries, such as China, as the source of this political and economic turmoil. China as the first country to suffer from the COVID19 becomes a global parameter on how to handle the virus and learn the virus characteristics. When China struggled to deal with the virus so it would not become a pandemic, the world seemed to be late in anticipating



this virus (aside from the accusations that China kept secret the existence of this virus in the Wuhan Lab at the beginning as the cause of the outbreak). Consequently, starting in early 2020, the COVID-19 virus has become a global pandemic, and countries are starting to be preoccupied with various efforts to maintain their health, which of course will have implications for all other aspects of life, such as politics, economics, and social life. Dealing with that situation, many countries attempt to make a vaccine as the game-changer for this outbreak, including China as the virus' country of origin.

President Xi Jinping narrated China's commitment to helping the world by providing open and accessible vaccine in order to cope with the virus in the First Meeting of the International Forum on COVID-19 Vaccine Cooperation on 5 August 2021. He stressed that committed to building a global community of health for all, China is providing vaccines to the world, particularly fellow developing countries, and is actively advancing cooperation on vaccine production (MFA, 2021). When in early August 2021 World Health Organization (WHO) has approved the emergency use of the Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines which can be obtained through the COVAX scheme, many countries, including Southeast Asia, took advantage of them in order to contain immediately the transmission of the COVID-19 virus in their country. Particularly for Southeast Asia countries, the decision to use Chinese vaccines can be perceived as one successful approach of China to ASEAN countries, remembering the tension situation that currently happened in the South China Sea. Relating to that issue, in the 23rd ASEAN-China forum statement has agreed to halt the military activity in the South China Sea during the time in the common fight against COVID-19 (ASEAN, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the global issue that also relates to China during this pandemic of COVID-19 is about the tension in the South China Sea. It has already known that the situation in the South China Sea seems to be far from peace during China's aggressiveness through its unilateral claimant of historical nine-dash line map. Definitely, China's activity in the waters has generated protest and condemnation from the South East Asian countries that ring the waters, even from other countries outside the region, like the United States and its allies. History has recorded that China's aggressive

actions firstly happened in 1974. There was a dispute over sovereignty in the Paracel Islands, according to history. China claimed some atolls and reefs in the Spratly Islands in 1988, sparking a conflict with the Philippines. The dispute continued in 1994 when China built a structure on Mischief Reef and peaked in 2012 with the Scarborough Shoal incident when China was forced to hand over control of the area's fishing grounds to the Philippines, and the related case is still happening today.

A similar activity still occurs in the Spratly Islands as the result of China's claim in the South China Sea. Since President Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative as China's "Going Global" policy, China wants to revive China's predecessor trade road, namely the Silk Road, as the BRI's international route. It aims to promote orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets by enhancing connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas (Xinhua, 2015). This ambitious initiative – which includes overland routes spreading in the Central Asia region called the Silk Road Economic Belt, plus a seaborne corridor that goes around the southern rim of Asia passing the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and Europe namely the Maritime Silk Road – is a center of China's ambition of being the preeminent world power. To notice, the Maritime Silk Road corridor skirts the South China Sea as the route of East and Southeast Asia side (see figure 1 below).



Figure 1. China Belt and Road Initiative Map (Kapila, 2018)



Referring to the map, it is argued that the unilateral claimant in the waters is implicitly a part of fulfilling China global policy through that initiative. Aspects of China's Belt and Road Initiative have led many analysts to conclude that Beijing seeks to establish an illiberal "sphere of influence" in Asia. China seems to demonstrate this influencing action by doing hard approach, such as deploying sea patrols of several Chinese warships reaching the tip of the nine-dash line adjacent to the Indonesian border in the North Natuna sea and increasing the construction of Chinese military installations in the Spratly Islands, located 250 kilometers from the Philippines. As one of the world's emerging economic powers, China shows its capacity not only in the economic sector but also in other sectors like defense or military. This is the hegemonic power that China built in the South China Sea to present its domination and existence.

Between the Vaccine Diplomacy and the Nine-dash Line Unilateral Claimant

The implementation of foreign policy can be categorized from the four instruments of foreign policy, namely diplomacy, information, military and economy. Since the instruments have a different context, however, it will be intertwining in practice. From the perspective realism, state actors, power competition, self-help strategy, national interest, the world disorder, and the balance of power remain important aspects in international politics (Manan, 2017, p. 176), and it practically appears in the foreign policy. Thus, the writing will raise the inquiry on how does China pursue its global policy through the COVID19 vaccine commitment and the hegemony in the South China Sea?

Referring to the instruments of foreign policy, the scope discussion will only address the aspects of diplomacy and military to delineate the contexts of soft power and hard power approaches. It is interesting to find out the reason why China does these two approaches simultaneously. On one hand, China is performing an aggressive activity in the South China Sea which raises big protests from most ASEAN countries, on the other hand, this country inclusively helps and supports the COVID19 handling to most ASEAN countries as well.



2. Literatures Review

2.1. The Context of Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is a vision of the desired outcome or set of interests in interacting with another state/actor, the strategies and ideas used in achieving these goals, and the available resources at a state's disposal, in guiding her interaction with other states. It is about the use of foreign policy as the state's strategic instrument to pursue its national interest at the state's disposal. Speaking of foreign policy, it will bring to the understanding of a state behavior toward other states or global system with the objective to achieve state's national interest. The behavior manifested as the foreign policy has the influencing factors which the state should consider.

Referring to Bojang's (2018), his elaboration to the various notions about foreign policy has come up with the understanding of two factors that considerably influence to the determination and implementation of foreign policy. The implementation of foreign policy has three concepts to explain the relationship between countries regarding the outside event and situation, namely foreign policy as a cluster of orientation, a set of commitments to and a plan or action, and a form of behavior (Perwita, 2017, pp. 53-54). It is manifested through the instruments of diplomacy, information, military, and economy. In addition, foreign policy can be defined as "all actions of a government against other countries in international politics, based on a set of assumptions and certain goals, and intended to ensure national security" (Ikbar, 2014, p. 208). It determines how the attitude and intentions of a country towards other countries in building cooperative relations.

2.2. China's Foreign Policy

In this context, it would be useful to review the writing from scholar Tung-Chieh and Ming-Te, *et al*, (2011) entitled respectively China's foreign policy in Southeast Asia: Harmonious worldview and its impact on good neighbor diplomacy. In this context of the Southeast Asia region, China has adopted a good neighbor policy towards its surrounding regions (Tsai Tung-Chieh & Ming-Te, 2011, p. 33). They, in his article



mentioned above, has described the three guidelines as the foundation of China foreign policy, as follows:

- five principles of peaceful coexistence, as its policy foundation for shaping a peaceful international environment to the benefit of China's economic advancement; (ibid)
- five guidelines of regional cooperation, to resolve residual historical problems in Southeast Asia through negotiations
- great power as key, neighboring states as priority, it has strengthened its regional leadership role (Tsai, 2008)

According to the three guidelines, it can be derived in one main idea that China policy is basically to emphasize peacebuilding in China's surroundings. It seems that China wants to be a great country but at the same time needs to ensure the stability of its region and surroundings. Thus, this idea is in line with the context of BRI initiative. At a glance, BRI appears to provide more benefit for countries within it, in the form of facilitation for infrastructure development, renovation of ports which is beneficial in terms of sustainable development (Haetami, 2019, p. 51). China considers highly the establishment of peace and stable cooperation with the Southeast Asia countries or ASEAN will be the essential factor for the implementation of China's foreign policy to achieve the national interest. In addition, China's harmonious worldview policy may be examined in four aspects: politico-security, economics, multilateral diplomacy and soft power (Tsai Tung-Chieh & Ming-Te, 2011, p. 33)

- politico-security, China and ASEAN has committed to building peace and stability in the region by signing a mutual non-aggression pact. China becomes the first non-ASEAN country who have a treaty with ASEAN.
- economics, for ASEAN, China commitment to support the economic growth lies on the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement and other commitments under the economic sector, such as ASEAN Regional Forum, or ASEAN+
- multilateral diplomacy, for China, paves the way for the establishment of international cooperation based on the exploitation of international institutions



and non-state actors in order to foster peaceful development. China has become the prominent ASEAN strategic and dialogue partner since 1996.

- soft power, China increase the use of soft power as the approach to build cooperation with ASEAN. The manifestation of this approach is, for example, the promotion of social-cultural exchange and encouraging capacity building.

Undoubtedly, China has a great contribution to the development of ASEAN from the economic and socio-cultural aspects. As one of ASEAN's important dialogue partners, the commitment to build regional peace and stability is a priority for both. As mentioned earlier, in the COVID19 pandemic situation, China has committed to supporting the availability of vaccines for ASEAN countries. indeed, this contribution gives an impact in tackling the pandemic to build ASEAN resilience regarding this health issue. However, despite this mutual cooperation, China's aggressive behavior and activities in the South China Sea have damaged the good perception that has been built so far.

3. Research Methodology

This writing uses a literature study to analyse the issue. By conducting a descriptive analytical method, the writing would like to figure out China's policy towards ASEAN regarding current situation in the South China Sea. Data and information collected are obtained from the relevant journals, books, and sites to strengthen the analysis and argumentations. In the analysis, it will try to compare the China's foreign policy derived from the reviewed journal above to the current real situation regarding China's aggression in the South China Sea and vaccines procurement for ASEAN states. Eventually, the result will come up with the viewpoint of China's intention in the region.

4. Result and Discussion

To some extent, the practice of international politics today is still in accordance with the principles of realism (Manan, 2017, p. 176). Realist sees that the interaction between state actors is relating to the power competition for the will to survive and dominate other countries. It can be achieved by utilizing soft and hard power approaches in the



interaction. Joseph Nye (1990) defined soft power as an ability to shape the wants of others or the ability to influence the behavior without applying coercive or hard-power, indeed, it is the ability to change what others do (Nye, 2008, pp. 100-101). On the other hand, hard power is defined similarly with soft power except the way to influence other is by utilizing armed forces or military might. The power itself can be defined in terms of economic, military, and cultural power; they will change over time (Burchill, 2005, p. 36). As the world's current emerging power, China has utilized its power through the utilization of those foreign policy instruments to show its capability for dealing with the COVID19 outbreak and dominating its role in the South China Sea.

4.1. The Perspective of Diplomacy

This instrument prioritizes coordination and consultation in dealing with an issue. In the context of ASEAN and China, the role of ASEAN as a collective power in the Southeast Asian region is important, where the competition between the two great powers will rely on ASEAN capacity and role of action. Regarding China's hegemony in the South China Sea, ASEAN is indeed facing a dilemma. On the one hand, China is a strategic partner of ASEAN who contributes to several ASEAN forums. On the other hand, China has violated the sovereignty of the sea region as stated in the UNCLOS 1982 where China is one of the signatories. It is a big contrast.

ASEAN itself recognizes that China has a major contribution to ASEAN member states dealing with the current pandemic. Nevertheless, aggression that harms one party remains unjustified. Thus, ASEAN and China should address to uphold the commitment agreed in the cooperation and respect the sovereignty of each country. In terms of vaccines, China has committed to providing sufficient vaccines for developing countries, including the Southeast Asia region. This intention might be China's responsible action for the failure of keeping the virus securely in Wuhan Lab so that China intensively distributes its vaccine to many countries, particularly the neighboring countries. What China does here is about demonstrating China's capability in a non-military sector, in this term is the health issue.



4.2. The Perspective of Military

The current trend to use military might is contextually increase. Since China's claim in the South China Sea, it has generated several reactions from other state actors. The U.S.-allies formed Quadrilateral Security Dialogue which one of the intentions is to confront China's position in the waters. Conducting warship patrol in the waters seems to be China's intention to show its defense capacity. Sending troops or military crafts can be considered a threat to the sovereignty. As the embodiment of hard power, China is also known to have built its military bases in the Spratly islands as the manifestation of the claim. This can also be assumed as China's attempt to give understanding to other countries about China's domination of the waters.

A direct military confrontation with China is impossible for ASEAN. Thus, under ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) or ADMM plus, ASEAN can use this platform to build dialogue with China regarding the armed force activity in the region. The ADMM/+ is a veritable 'workshop' for cooperation in maritime security, humanitarian assistance and counterterrorism involving the armed forces of all 18-member states (Tan, 2020). For instance, from ADDM/+, ASEAN can remind China for the commitment agreed in the 23rd ASEAN China Summit, in Vietnam to maintain and promote peace, security, stability, safety and freedom of navigation in and overflight above the South China Sea, and recognized the benefits of having the South China Sea as a sea of peace, stability and prosperity, especially during this time in the common fight against COVID-19 (ASEAN, CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT OF THE 23rd ASEAN-CHINA SUMMIT, 2020).

Having a discussion regarding China foreign policy towards ASEAN through the glasses of vaccine diplomacy and aggressive activity in the South China Sea, China seems to play dual capacities, soft and hard power in the interaction with ASEAN. Furthermore, conducting those two types of power as the approach is in line with the guidelines of China's foreign policy but not for the military aggression that occurred in the South China Sea. The fundamental aspect of China foreign policy is peace. Principally, to achieve



domestic stability and prosperity, China needs to ensure the stability of the surrounding environment. One way is to build cooperation with neighboring countries for the sake of creating peace and stability together. This is reflected in China's commitment to providing COVID-19 vaccines to ASEAN countries and playing its role as a good neighbor.

Regarding aggression in the South China Sea, basically, there is no statement that legitimizes the deployment of military force as a form of China's foreign policy. Thus, it can be said that China's aggression in the South China Sea is a context outside the conception of China's policy towards ASEAN. If it can be linked between a soft power approach in terms of vaccines and a hard power approach in terms of aggression in the South China Sea, both will lead to one intention, namely the BRI initiative. China appears to have strong ambitions to ensure the success of BRI, of which the South China Sea is part of the BRI corridor. Thus, it can be assumed that if China does not play its dominance in the South China Sea, the Maritime Silk Road will be difficult to achieve, because China should deal with UNCLOS 1982. By claiming the waters unilaterally through the nine-dash line, China will not go with the UNCLOS 1982 because the South China Sea is its territory. However, the reality is not on the same page with China.

5. Conclusion

In the conceptions of foreign policy, the interaction between states in the framework of international relations requires the state strategy to fulfil the national interest. The manifestation of the interaction between states is commonly known as the form of cooperation. Doing so is in line with the realism that the state as the actor of international relations, must define and impose a particular foreign policy in conducting interaction. Although the foreign policy has several manifestations in the implementation of international relations, it is back to the context of four dimensions, namely diplomacy, information, military, and economy.

Based on the analysis from the instruments of diplomacy and military, it is indeed China uses soft and hard power approaches in conducting its foreign policy to ASEAN.



China's attitude in the case of COVID-19 in ASEAN is in accordance with the principle of China's foreign policy, namely being a good neighbor by upholding the nuances of peace. But when it comes to aggression in the South China Sea, it is not a reflection of China's foreign policy. Military aggression is something outside China's foreign policy. Thus, what can be assumed is that China's hegemony in the South China Sea consists of two ideas, first, ensuring the success of the BRI by using force, and is supported by the soft power shown through the vaccine which aims to reduce protests against China from ASEAN countries; two, as a strong country, China is free to do anything, including aggression, even though it will invite condemnation. There would be a shift in China's foreign policy to ASEAN with the use of armed forces.

6. Acknowledgment

In this nice moment, the author would like to greatly thank to God Almighty for His blessing for the author may write this article, and humble thankfulness also to Prof. AA. Banyu Perwita for his lectures and insight shared to the author, hence this writing can be made. Author believes that this writing needs still more improvement and hopes it can be a reference for further writing.

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