

The Politics of Vaccine Diplomacy and Sino-Indonesian Relations

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has shattered many aspects of human life worldwide. Many believed China was the origin of the coronavirus that sparked the pandemic. While dealing with the virus domestically, China has also pleaded to help many countries overcome the impact of the pandemic. Within this context, China runs the so-called vaccine diplomacy: providing Chinese-made vaccines to countries in need, including Indonesia. This article argues that although vaccine diplomacy can be seen as evidence of China's soft power, it is also carried out to serve China's national interests. Vaccine diplomacy to Indonesia is to demonstrate China's goodwill and friendship. It is also to help Indonesia recover its economy with the support of Chinese investment and to promote its influence in the region within the context of great power rivalry with the United States.

Keywords: *vaccine diplomacy; China; Indonesia; the South China Sea; great power rivalry*

Sejak awal tahun 2020, pandemi COVID-19 telah menghancurkan banyak aspek kehidupan manusia di seluruh dunia. Banyak yang percaya Cina adalah asal mula virus Corona yang memicu pandemi. Sembari menangani virus di dalam negeri, Cina juga telah membantu banyak negara mengatasi dampak pandemi tersebut. Sebagai kekuatan besar yang bertanggung jawab, Cina menjalankan apa yang disebut diplomasi vaksin: menyediakan vaksin buatan Cina ke negara-negara yang membutuhkan, termasuk Indonesia. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa meskipun diplomasi vaksin dapat dilihat sebagai bukti soft power Cina, ia juga dilakukan untuk melayani kepentingan nasional Cina. Diplomasi vaksin ke Indonesia ditujukan untuk memperlihatkan itikad baik dan persahabatan Cina. Ia juga dimaksudkan untuk membantu Indonesia memperbaiki ekonominya dengan dukungan investasi Cina serta memajukan pengaruhnya di kawasan dalam konteks persaingan kekuatan besar dengan Amerika Serikat.

Kata-kata kunci: *diplomasi vaksin; Cina; Indonesia; Laut Cina Selatan; persaingan kekuatan besar*

In January 2021, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited four Southeast countries—Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines—to boost Chinese-made coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine distribution (Jibiki and Hadano 2021). The lack of reliable treatment and drugs to cure the symptoms caused by the virus has left the world to rely so far on vaccines. Part of the so-called “coronavirus diplomacy” (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2021), Wang’s visit can be seen as a strategic step from China, which has been trying hard to deal with the coronavirus pandemic and its impacts domestically and restore its image as a great power internationally. Previously, China’s image was shattered because COVID-19 was initially discovered in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province in central China. The virus has spread quickly, causing many deaths and the collapse of many economies since the first half of 2020.

As countries in Southeast Asia have been struggling very hard to deal with the pandemic, the region has become one of the main targets of China’s vaccine diplomacy, as indicated by Wang’s visit. Vaccine diplomacy is understood as China’s providing vaccines to many countries. China has been doing vaccine diplomacy in line with its mask diplomacy, providing medical equipment and assistance to other countries to deal with the virus. These countries had difficulties making vaccines independently, while Chinese companies produced more than their domestic needs with the government’s support. As of February 2021, at least five countries in the region have committed to accepting Chinese-made vaccines compared to back then. Only Vietnam and the Philippines were still hesitant to use Chinese-made vaccines due to their low efficacy and reported side effects. The alarming situation caused by coronavirus has encouraged the Indonesian government since the middle of 2020 to forge partnerships with China to provide vaccines through purchase and production. Receiving as many as 125 million Sinovac vaccines as of June 2021, Indonesia was the largest recipient of China’s vaccine diplomacy (Zaini 2021). Later, this policy was paid back. Indonesia had the highest number of cases and deaths due to COVID-19 in the region, especially from July to August 2021, when the Delta variant of the virus was widespread in the country. However, the government data shows that the number of deaths from the virus has been slowing

down since October 2021 – thanks to the mass vaccination of Indonesians; most of them had arguably Chinese-made vaccines.

In February 2021, Indonesia welcomed three million ready-to-use doses and another twenty million bulk vaccines from China. It is a part of the country's deal with several vaccine suppliers, including Sinovac and Sinopharm. According to Indonesia's Ministry of Health, the government is also expected to receive 45 million vaccines in August 2021 from Sinovac, Moderna, and Pfizer – of which the last two are produced in the U.S. (Jakarta Post 2021). The emergency use of Sinovac, while still waiting for a full report of its efficacy, had been authorized by the Indonesian government soon after the vaccine arrived. The authorization is understandable given the situation, as vaccines are expected to prevent many people from contracting the virus. During Wang's visit, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was publicly getting the vaccine shot, making him the first Indonesian – some even reported “the first major world leader” – to do so (Hung 2021). This event marked a mass inoculation program that targeted Indonesian health care workers as its first vaccine priority. Six months later, the recipients of the vaccines have expanded to include civil servants, community and religious leaders, teachers and lecturers, people aged between 12 to 60, and pregnant women. The government is targeting to have as many as 208 million people vaccinated by the end of the mass inoculation program (Satgas COVID-19 2021).

This research examines the aim of China in distributing its vaccine for coronavirus to Southeast Asian countries, particularly Indonesia. In doing so, the research will also seek for specific goals that the Chinese government expects to have from its vaccine diplomacy in Indonesia. It is expected to explain China's growing role in international politics as it claims to be a responsible great power. On the one hand, China has always been committed to showing its friendly nation image; it is not a threat to the international community. This image-building is arguably what its vaccine diplomacy wants to demonstrate. However, on the other hand, China is also seen as an aggressive power in the region, having enormous geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Vaccine diplomacy can be used to understand China's international role and interest in this pandemic era, particularly in its relations with

Indonesia as the largest economy in Southeast Asia.

This paper is divided into five sections. After this introductory section, the second section will provide an overview and explanation of China's vaccine diplomacy. After that, a brief overview of the relationship between China and Indonesia will be presented in the third section. As the core of the discussion, the fourth section provides arguments about what China is trying to achieve with its vaccine diplomacy in Indonesia. Finally, a short conclusion will end the paper.

What is Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy?

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many countries to compete for vaccine access so that the virus' damaging effects, especially on the economy, can be immediately resolved. There is some international cooperation in distributing vaccines more broadly and fairly. One of them is COVAX (COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access), whose objective is to "accelerate the development and manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines, and to guarantee fair and equitable access for every country in the world." As of 21 December 2021, COVAX reported that more than 790 million vaccines had been distributed worldwide, supported by 144 participants (GAVI 2021). Some countries—notably China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and India—are developing their relative capacity to produce vaccines on an immense scale for domestic consumption and export to countries in need. While these vaccine-producing countries have donated their products individually to many countries, China will always receive more attention, especially in Asia and Africa. China's vaccine diplomacy "is broadly seen as a way for Beijing to shore up its global standing after the outbreak that started in Wuhan spread to the rest of the world." (Yang 2020). Vaccine diplomacy is China's answer to a worldwide call to work together in dealing with the coronavirus and China's way to restore its international image.

By its vaccine diplomacy, China demonstrates its intention to help other countries overcome the pandemic's destructive effects. Some might say that China pays the compensation for the economic damage that many countries suffer because the virus is thought

initially of as China. China, of course, rejects this argument and reiterates that its vaccine diplomacy is evidence that China is a responsible great power trying to solve global problems (Yi 2021; Zhao 2021). Most countries in Southeast Asia, which have been hit hard by the virus, had accepted China's offer to help them cope with the virus and its impacts. In a crisis like a pandemic, it can be argued that there is practically nothing wrong with the acceptance of these countries for vaccines produced by Chinese companies because they could save lives.

Some countries, including China, see vaccine diplomacy as a way to expand their soft power (Ellwood 2021; Jennings 2021). Soft power, a term coined by Harvard University's scholar Joseph S. Nye, is defined as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment." (Nye 2008). A country can develop and increase its soft power by projecting its culture, political values, and foreign policies. Public diplomacy plays an important role in drawing the attention of others to a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye 2008) so the country can have, among others, a good global image. Li suggests that China has been using soft power to develop its global image. He writes that soft power "is largely perceived as a tool for defensive purposes such as cultivating a better image of China to present to the outside world, correcting foreign misperceptions of China and fending off unwelcome Western cultural and political inroads into China." (Li 2008). There are arguments that China's vaccine diplomacy had mixed reception (Huang 2021) and did not help much of the country's global image (Zhang and Jamali 2022). However, it is also reported that China has benefited from its vaccine diplomacy to Southeast Asia (Vannarith 2021). Indeed, "Chinese vaccine donations and early shipments to Southeast Asian countries certainly bolster Beijing's credentials as a responsible big neighbor...[and if it succeeds] these campaigns will likely enhance Beijing's appeal in the region... deepening its influence in a critical periphery" (Pitlo III 2021).

Beijing may argue that "[t]he goals of this vaccine diplomacy are to reverse the negative perceptions, bolster the diplomatic engagement with the other countries, and attract the friend in the region" (Ernesto 2020). Nevertheless, given the assertive-

some even suggest aggressive—posture China demonstrates in the South China Sea, it is argued that vaccine diplomacy can be used for political and security purposes. The South China Sea has long become one of the hotspots in international politics and security: six countries—China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, and the Philippines—are claiming to have the said waters as part of their territory, based on different grounds. It is alarming that Chinese actions in the said waters are reportedly getting stronger, forcing the claimant countries to put themselves in an awkward situation. While they needed China's assistance in dealing with the pandemic, the Chinese-made vaccines could have impeded their response to protest China's increasingly aggressive actions. From here comes the argument that "Chinese vaccine aid is another form of inducement to politically and strategically advance its power during the pandemic" (Ernesto 2020). In line with this argument, The Strait Times (2020) reported that "China's 'vaccine diplomacy' is not unconditional...Beijing may use its vaccine donations to advance its regional agenda, particularly on sensitive issues such as its claims in the South China Sea." As intriguing as it reads, one may ask: is it the case? We can examine further this argument by looking at China's vaccine diplomacy in Indonesia, starting with a short description of the relations between both countries.

Relations between China and Indonesia

For years, Indonesia has been a vital partner of China in its international relations. It can be said that the ties between China and Indonesia have been through very lively dynamics. After experiencing good relations in the 1950s and mid-1960s (during the reign of the Old Order in Indonesia), the relations were severed after the New Order government accused China of being held accountable behind the failed communist coup in 1965. Consequently, the two countries had cold ties, in line with President Suharto's policy of trying to erase everything associated with China, from Indonesians of Chinese descent's names to food, clothing, language, arts, and traditions. Only after dramatic changes occurred at the global level with the collapse of the Soviet Union and claims of capitalism's victory the official relations between the two were reopened in 1990. Relations between the two countries

had improved since then, especially when President Xi Jinping took power in China in 2013 and President Joko Widodo led Indonesia in 2014. Pandemic aside, economic relations between the two countries have boosted since, especially in investment and trade. Chinese investment in Indonesia is now second only to Singapore, doubling from \$2.4 billion in 2017 to almost \$4.8 billion in 2020 (Radio Free Asia 2021). By August 2021, Indonesia's total bilateral trade with China amounts to \$53.5 billion from January to June 2021. At the same time, it is reported that Indonesia's exports to China were \$26.2 billion, while the value of China's exports to Indonesia also increased to \$27.3 billion (Rakhmat 2021).

In the last seven years, it can be said that relations between the two countries have been relatively positive to a large extent. There are, however, some problems in their ties in recent years, particularly regarding the entry of migrant workers from China to Indonesia and tensions in the waters of the North Natuna Sea. The migrant workers have been a constant source of debate in Indonesia these years as locals see them taking their jobs and the government seems to allow their entry despite the pandemic. The influx of Chinese migrant workers had prompted anti-China sentiment and protests in some places in the country. In the North Natuna Sea, near the highly contested South China Sea, there had been several clashes between the Indonesian Navy and Chinese sea patrol. While China claims that the North Natuna Sea used to be included in its "historical waters" so its fishermen could enter the sea, Indonesia emphasizes that according to the international laws of the sea, the North Natuna Sea is part of its territorial sovereignty. Despite this, Indonesia and China see each other as good partners that can be relied upon to achieve their respective national interests. China sees Indonesia as strategically positioned for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, particularly its maritime silk route aspects (Du 2016). In the words of Wang Yi:

"China will explore the strength of our respective markets and potential of our domestic demand, increase import from Indonesia as well as Chinese investment in Indonesia, and promote the sound and balanced development of bilateral trade ... We will further align China's Belt and Road Initiative with

Indonesia's vision for the Global Maritime Fulcrum, and strive for substantive progress in major projects such as the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Corridor, and the Two Countries, Twin Parks." (Anggoro 2021)

At the same time, Indonesia needs China's assistance to develop the infrastructure essential for its development. Nowadays, the two countries have closer, mutual relations in infrastructure development (Jetin 2018). Muhammad Rakhmat describes the mutually dependent relations as follows: "[T]he implementation of the BRI, and increased connectivity and influence in Southeast Asia for Beijing, and foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade to further the ambition of transforming the country into a "global maritime fulcrum" for Jakarta." (Rakhmat 2020). He also adds that soft power is an essential keyword for the relations between the two countries.

It is interesting to note that among all Southeast Asian countries, China chooses Indonesia to be its "special" partner in dealing with the pandemic. Indonesia is projected as the hub of Chinese vaccine production in Southeast Asia. This development is perhaps the result of the ongoing "special" relations that both countries have during these years, at least at the government and business sector levels. It is reported that during their phone conversation in early September 2020, President Xi told President Jokowi that China "attaches great importance to Indonesia's concerns and needs in vaccine co-operation." (Connors 2020). This attention from the Chinese president can also be seen in a more symbolic context, where the two countries celebrated 70 years of relations in 2020. Later, in another phone conversation with Xi in April 2021, Jokowi called China a "good friend and brother," presumably due to the BRI and the vaccine cooperation. This reference to China by Jokowi was shared by Indonesian respondents of the 2021 *State of Southeast Asia* report, who largely view their country's future relations with China positively (Grossman 2021).

What to Expect from China's Vaccine Diplomacy with Indonesia?

Finding a specific motive or reason for a particular action in a country's foreign policy is not easy. It is even a very challenging task if that country is China, which today – despite the pandemic – has been showing the development of its strength in international politics, economy, and security. The reality that China is one of the major powers cannot be denied. It is perhaps not wrong to say that China's actions will constantly be scrutinized internationally. Within this context, the view that China is a threat will always go hand in hand with the international image it has always strived for, namely as a friendly country that will cooperate with others for mutual security and prosperity. This view is shared by those observing China's international relations in recent years.

Any action in foreign policy must be based on specific interests, with survival the most important one as suggested by realism. It may not be wrong to think of vaccine diplomacy as China's way of showing that it is willing to help the world cope with the virus and its effects, which may partially stem from the fact that the coronavirus was first discovered in Wuhan. China's image as a friendly country must always be maintained through vaccine diplomacy. However, some would argue that “[T]he largesse is not entirely altruistic ... The strategy carries multiple possible benefits: deflecting anger and criticism over China's early handling of the pandemic, raising the profile of its biotech firms, and both strengthening and extending influence in Asia and beyond.” (The Strait Times 2020). Another argument says that China is “actually using the vaccine to promote the diplomacy of [its] foreign policy objectives.” (Cohen 2021).

What is China trying to achieve with its vaccine diplomacy? If China desires to survive, vaccine diplomacy will arguably serve it well. China is a major power. Still, it needs to endure domestic and international problems and challenges. China has these main objectives in its international relations: maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity, securing a supportive environment for its economic development, and creating a good international image. These objectives play their respective roles in keeping China

surviving by any means necessary, including vaccine diplomacy in Indonesia.

China's objective to maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the region can be best described by the situation concerning the South China Sea. Indonesia is not a claimant state in the South China Sea conflict, but the situation in the North Natuna Sea has put the country into shaky relations with China. In early December 2021, China strongly protested against Indonesia's oil drilling in the North Natuna Sea, demanding the drilling of "Chinese territory" stop (Strangio 2021). Believing that the international laws guarantee its sovereignty in the waters, Indonesia did not show any sign of being provoked and had no comment over the protest. With its silence, it is argued that Indonesia warned China it was not appropriate to question the policies taken by Indonesia in the area. Several observers have argued that China's vaccine diplomacy may soften Indonesia's position on the South China Sea issue, as Yeremia and Raditio (2021) reported. Still, there is little evidence to support their argument. Despite the vaccine cooperation, Indonesia does not change its approach to the issue and believes China should not question its sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea.

China is currently Indonesia's largest trading partner and second-largest investor. China's economic potential has significantly helped build the Indonesian economy in recent years. Economic relations between the two have been getting closer as China has announced the BRI. Indonesia is one of the countries that gets special attention in Chinese projects under this initiative. Since 2014, China has invested millions of dollars in Indonesia's infrastructure projects under the BRI scheme. China had invested in 33 infrastructure projects in Indonesia by 2016 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2017). Later, Jakarta also offered Beijing as many as 16 other projects in four economic corridors, with an estimated cost of \$91.1 billion (Lalisang and Candra 2019). With the BRI standing as the main issue, it is in China's interest to ensure that these projects continue as scheduled. However, it is not an easy thing, considering that the pandemic has ruined the economies of many countries, including China and Indonesia.

One of the main BRI projects in Indonesia is the construction of a high-speed rail line from the national capital Jakarta to Bandung in West Java. The project has been a controversy since its start in 2016 because the Indonesian government chose China over Japan to invest in it, even though the latter is well-known for its high-speed rail technology. Recently, it was revealed that the cost to finish the project soared drastically, from the projected Rp86.5 trillion or \$6,07 billion to Rp114.24 trillion or \$8 billion (Yati 2021). While the pandemic may play a part in this increasing cost, the government decided to take a substantial portion of the state's budget to cover it, making the project more problematic. The project was initially estimated to be completed in 2019, but the government revised it to 2022. The Indonesian government has difficulty completing this particular project on time, while China may still benefit from the situation. China does not want the project to halt or dismiss like what happened in several countries because of the lack of funds or internal political competition.

China is reportedly also eyeing Indonesia's plan to move its capital from Jakarta to Penajam Paser Utara district in Kalimantan. Like the high-speed rail line project, the plan also draws criticism from the Indonesian public. The main complaint is the enormous costs of the move and the infrastructure development of the new capital. It is projected that the plan may need Rp466 trillion (\$32.16 billion) to be completed in 2024. Realizing that the vast cost will burden the state's budget, Indonesia welcomes investment from its partners, notably China, to help build roads, bridges, airports, government buildings, energy supply facilities, and so on. Several Chinese companies reportedly approached the relevant Indonesian top officials once the plan was announced (Yuniar 2019). The pandemic has forced the government to allocate more funds to health issues and economic recovery. However, the Jokowi administration still prioritizes the plan, supported by the parliament. Recently, Indonesia's Coordinator Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Panjaitan mentioned China's possible investment to help build the new capital (Said 2022). It is argued that China, whose investments have previously helped the development of some projects in Kalimantan, "will translate into a prominent role in the development of the new capital." (Rachmat and Purnama 2022).

The pandemic might be the reason for delays in some BRI projects in several countries, including Indonesia (Ni 2020). As of February 2021, the Indonesian government had been reported to spend approximately Rp1.104 billion (\$65,2 billion) to secure the Chinese vaccine and its equipment. Nevertheless, Indonesia is expected to remain committed to providing access to Chinese investment. While it is understandable that the state's money went into something critical and highly needed during this time, the pause of the BRI projects, to a certain extent, may slow down Indonesia's effort to recover its economy. Beijing hopes that vaccine diplomacy can encourage Jakarta to continue Chinese investment projects. China certainly does not want to lose the investment opportunity in Indonesia, while Indonesia can also have advantages from its economic cooperation with China, especially in infrastructure projects (Mietzner 2021). From this point, we can see that Indonesia's position is very strategic for China's economic growth, so it makes sense for China to consider Indonesia one of the main target countries for its vaccine diplomacy.

The pandemic has put China in dire need to portray its image as a friendly nation. China is helping other countries deal with the pandemic and it also wants to keep its influence in the region. It is the very reason why it conducts vaccine diplomacy. The current situations in Southeast Asia and East Asia highlight the competition among two great powers, the United States and China. Since the Donald Trump administration, the U.S. has always criticized China over some issues, from the trade deficit (resulting in the ongoing trade war) to China's human rights records in Xinjiang and treatment of the democracy movement in Hong Kong. The U.S. and its allies are constantly "bullying" China on many occasions as they are afraid that China's rising power may take their dominance and influence in world politics. China feels that the Western powers have mistreated it and that everything they do aims to contain China's rise. The great power rivalry represents "the country that is always right vs. the country that is never wrong" mentality (Gering 2021) in Southeast Asia and East Asia. These two regions are home to some of the world's hotspots, including conflicts in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, the alarming situation across the Taiwan Strait, and the instability in the Korean Peninsula.

On 15 September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States declared the establishment of AUKUS, a trilateral security pact. Although it is not stated in the announcement, it is clear that the pact is targeted to counter China. Australia will develop nuclear-powered submarines with the help of the U.S. and the U.K., resulting in great concern for security in the region. Western observers understand that AUKUS will not exist if China is not threatening the international order (Edel 2021). China was swift to respond to AUKUS, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman Zhao Lijian condemning AUKUS as “extremely irresponsible” and “seriously undermines regional peace and intensifies the arms race.” (BBC 2021). Before AUKUS, there had been Quad – a loose coalition consisting of the U.S., Australia, Japan, and India – and the American idea of Indo-Pacific. China sees AUKUS and Quad as efforts to block its ‘peaceful rise’ and role in international politics (Gering 2021; Rudd 2021). Later, the countries of AUKUS, plus Japan and Canada, declared a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing on China’s human rights abuses (Crossley and Yew 2021).

China has been developing relatively good relations with countries in Southeast Asia for many years. China wants its influence in Southeast Asia to be maintained and promotes regional security amidst the U.S. presence. Another country with nuclear power is the latest thing Southeast Asian countries expect to have as they have declared the region nuclear-free. AUKUS will complicate the stability in the region, so it is in China’s interest that Southeast Asian countries will oppose AUKUS. However, responses from these countries to the pact were varied. Singapore and the Philippines have supported AUKUS – the former is an American ally in the region, while the latter has deteriorating relations with China. Indonesia and Malaysia, two recipients of Chinese vaccine diplomacy, stated that AUKUS would only bring about a new arms race and unlock the potential for the development of nuclear weapons in the region (Supriyanto 2021). Although AUKUS came after China ran vaccine diplomacy, great power rivalry in Southeast Asia has been a general concern to Indonesia. The current development seems to justify China’s vaccine diplomacy to share a similar interest: preventing Southeast Asia from becoming an arena of contestation for the big powers. It is, however, not to

suggest that China would use its vaccine diplomacy to ensure that Indonesia will always be on its side. Indonesia shall respond to the great power rivalry by following its agenda and national interests.

China's survival will depend on its ability to achieve and maintain the three mentioned objectives of its international relations. Indonesia is a key to China's interests and China plays a vital role in assisting Indonesia's national development. Against this backdrop, both countries can significantly benefit from vaccine diplomacy. Sino-Indonesian relations would be "mutually beneficial as long as Sinovac shows promising clinical results in Indonesia, allowing China to strengthen its global health governance and helping Indonesia combat the health and economic crisis." (Hung 2021) In May 2021, Reuters reported that the "Sinovac Biotech COVID-19 vaccine [under the name of CoronaVac] was 98% effective at preventing death and 96% effective at preventing hospitalization among a group of inoculated Indonesian medical staffs." (Reuters 2021). Nowadays, Chinese-made vaccines may have the most challenging test with worldwide concern on Omicron, the new variant of coronavirus. If Chinese vaccines are proven effective, that will be a success story for China and the recipient countries. Indonesia's vaccine deal with China would arguably strengthen their bilateral ties beyond the pandemic. Further, this will be an essential case for China of its growing efforts to win the hearts and minds of Southeast Asians and project its image as one of the major powers in our time.

Conclusion

Vaccine diplomacy conducted by China does not aim merely to help other countries deal with the coronavirus and its impact but also to promote the good neighbor image that China wants to portray in its international relations, especially with countries in Southeast Asia. Within this context, the decision to choose Indonesia as one of the primary recipients of Chinese-made vaccines, even the hub of Chinese vaccines in the region, is due to Indonesia's strategic position and influence as a middle-power country. Vaccine diplomacy is conducted to demonstrate the goodwill and friendship of China to Indonesia in this difficult time. Vaccine diplomacy is an attempt to improve China's image and to win the hearts and minds

of Indonesians, but the results are difficult to measure. However, it may relate to the provision of Chinese investments to help Indonesia recover its economy, especially through infrastructure projects. In a larger context, China also wants Indonesia to share a similar interest in avoiding worse scenarios of its rivalry with the United States in the region.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a game-changer in international politics, economy, and security. As many countries are trying to recover their economies, vaccines are perhaps the most relatively available tools to prevent more casualties. China is using the situation by promoting its vaccine diplomacy. However, there is no such thing as free lunch in international politics. As generous as it may seem, China's vaccine diplomacy has particular objectives. It is the responsibility of the recipient countries, including Indonesia, to have healthy relations with China and make sure that their national interests do not submit to those of the latter.

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