

China's COVID-19 Humanitarian Response: A Case Study on Indonesia Through Human Security Perspective

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ABSTRACT

China's humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the interplay between human security principles and strategic foreign policy. This study examines China's assistance to Indonesia, a key partner under the Belt and Road Initiative, focusing on the effectiveness, empowerment, and motives behind its actions. Drawing on the human security framework, the article analyzes China's rapid response through the provision of medical supplies, vaccines, and long-term capacity-building efforts. Key initiatives, such as the Sinovac-Bio Farma vaccine collaboration, illustrate how China integrated immediate relief with long-term cooperation, addressing both health crises and systemic vulnerabilities. The findings emphasize China's dual motivations namely upholding human security norms and advancing its global position. By leveraging multilateral platforms and bilateral partnerships, China demonstrated its commitment to addressing global health challenges while fostering deeper ties with Indonesia. This case provides valuable lessons for incorporating human security into future foreign aid strategies, underscoring the importance of international cooperation in tackling shared crises.

Keywords: Human Security, Humanitarian Aid, COVID-19 Pandemic, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Sino-Indonesian Relations

Bantuan kemanusiaan Tiongkok ketika pandemi COVID-19 menyoroti keterkaitan antara prinsip keamanan manusia dan kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok yang strategis. Studi ini mengkaji bantuan kemanusiaan Tiongkok kepada Indonesia yang berfokus pada tiga aspek, yakni efektivitas, pemberdayaan, dan motif, dimana Indonesia merupakan salah satu mitra strategis dalam kerja sama Belt and Road Initiative. Dalam perspektif keamanan manusia, dapat diketahui bagaimana Tiongkok menyediakan bantuan alat-alat kesehatan, yakni kerja sama vaksin Sinovac-Bio Farma dan upaya pengembangan kapasitas dalam jangka panjang, merupakan respons yang cepat dalam menghadapi krisis kesehatan dan kerentanan yang sistematis. Temuan tersebut juga menekankan pada motivasi Tiongkok dalam memberikan bantuan kemanusiaan, selain menegakkan norma keamanan manusia juga memajukan kedudukannya dalam skala global. Dengan memanfaatkan kerja sama multilateral dan bilateral, Tiongkok menunjukkan komitmennya untuk mengatasi tantangan kesehatan pada level global sekaligus membina hubungan yang lebih baik dengan Indonesia. Hal ini menjadi menarik ketika menggabungkan perspektif keamanan manusia dalam strategi bantuan luar negeri dengan tetap menekankan pentingnya kerja sama internasional dalam mengatasi krisis bersama.

Kata-kata Kunci: Keamanan Manusia, Bantuan Kemanusiaan, Pandemi COVID-19, Belt and Road Inisiatif (BRI), Hubungan Tiongkok-Indonesia

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It is widely known that China's humanitarian aid has significant role to affected countries, especially countries that join the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), such as Indonesia. In general, humanitarian aid is perceived as a part of international aid that comprise rapid disaster relief to people in temporarily need of support due to emergencies (Fink and Redaelli 2011 cited in Mogge et al. 2023). It is included in response to the spread of pandemic Covid-19 that was at its peak in the 2020 until the beginning of 2022. The outbreak is seen as one of the threats to the security and devastating humanitarian crisis in the decade, as virus has caused the more cases and deaths in the human population through human-to-human transmission.

Many countries have shown great courage and collaboration to help others in fighting the virus. It can be seen on how World Health Organization (WHO) urged to all countries to take urgent and aggressive action, including a whole of government and society to build around a comprehensive strategy to prevent infections, save lives and minimize impact (WHO 2020). When the outbreak had spread rapidly in Indonesia in March 2020, the Chinese government has offered its assistance to Indonesia, such as the country has received 12 tons of medical equipment, consisting of test kits, N95 masks, surgical masks, protective gear and portable ventilators. It will be distributed to hospitals (Haryati 2020).

Most studies have examined China's humanitarian aid during pandemic Covid-19 (Tritto et al. 2024); (Telias and Urdinez 2021); (Fuchs et al. 2022); (CSIS 2021); (Sun and Yu 2023). Few have investigated Indonesia and China's relations during pandemic Covid-19 (Yu and Han 2023); (Yeremia 2020); (Yuliantoro 2022). As such, further study is necessary to understand the important issue of China's participation in the international effort to address the Covid-19 outbreak, especially to Indonesia, providing us with several important questions related to human security perspective in particular. China's foreign aid, which is always considered to only focus on business, also has an impact on the humanitarian part. In human security context, the spread of infectious disease, such as the covid-19 is a part of human security issues causing in acute human insecurity and trigger economic turmoil and other societal impacts.

This article aims to contributes to the literature by laying out these questions; what are the motives from China's government to give humanitarian aid in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

to Indonesia and how effective are they? This article then goes to answer these questions by perceiving China's experience in the fight against Ebola Crisis in Western Africa countries in 2014 by using its human security analysis framework as there is not much literature that discusses the human security perspective. In addition, it will evaluate these policies with a focus on effectiveness, empowerment, and motives. The concluding section draws some lessons for future human security-oriented foreign policies.

Human Security in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The concept of human security, originating from the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report, emphasizes protection from chronic threats and sudden disruptions to daily life (UNDP 1994). As a multifaceted concept, it addresses the complexity and interconnectedness of threats to individuals and communities, balancing the immediate protection of people with the empowerment needed to build resilience against future challenges (Commission on Human Security 2003). In the context of COVID-19, human security broadens beyond state-centric frameworks to focus on individuals, addressing threats like disease and economic instability (Naohiro 2019). Key elements include protecting human lives, empowering communities, and addressing structural vulnerabilities (Woods 2008; UNGA 2013). Post-pandemic, the concept also encompasses interconnected challenges like environmental and animal health, requiring global, holistic responses (Garcia 2018).

To assess the effectiveness of human security policies, Cui (2019) identified three key aspects: effectiveness, empowerment, and motives, offering a framework for addressing both immediate and systemic challenges. First, Effectiveness. This part measures how well responses mitigate human suffering and address threats comprehensively. It includes the speed, scale, and cooperation with stakeholders. For instance, during the Ebola crisis, China's swift deployment of medical staff and financial support to the UN and WHO demonstrated its capacity to lead coordinated international efforts. Second, Empowerment. This part refers to a longer-term and more fundamental approach to human security that addresses the root causes of security threats and seeks to build resilience for future challenges. While capacity building often focuses on enhancing organizational systems, empowerment is more close-

ly tied to strengthening the abilities of individuals and communities. However, these two concepts are deeply interconnected; robust organizational capabilities, such as well-developed public health systems, can significantly enhance individual and societal resilience over time. Third, Motives: This part explore the rationale behind humanitarian aid, including economic, strategic and global image considerations. China's aid during the Ebola crisis signaled its growing role as a global actor and its shift toward being a responsible great power, distinguishing its approach from conditional Western aid models.

The Development of China's Humanitarian Aid

China's foreign aid dates back to 1950s, rooted in principles of avoiding political conditions and promoting equality to support economic independence in recipient nations (Johnston and Rudyak 2017; Yuan et al. 2022). Initially ideologically driven, aid targeted allies like North Korea and Vietnam before expanding to Southeast Asia and Africa (WOODS 2008; Yuan et al. 2022). Deng Xiaoping's 1970s reforms shifted the focus to align with global market strategies, emphasizing economic over political objectives through state-owned enterprises (Johnston and Rudyak 2017). The 1980s and 1990s reinforced this economic focus, with initiatives like Premier Zhao Ziyang's principles for Sino-African cooperation advocating joint ventures and mutual development (Johnston and Rudyak 2017). By the 21st century, China's foreign aid grew rapidly, with annual growth averaging 29% from 2004 to 2009 and funding increasing from \$4.9 billion in 2014 to \$6.4 billion in 2018 (Naohiro 2019).

China's humanitarian aid objectives have evolved to address poverty reduction, crisis response, and livelihood improvement, tailored to recipient needs and bilateral relations (Fuchs and Rudyak 2019). During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, China provided \$123 million in funding and deployed over 1,000 health experts, working closely with local teams and investing in regional health systems to build long-term resilience (Fuchs and Rudyak 2019). Unlike traditional donors, China emphasizes non-interference, respect for sovereignty, and swift aid delivery, finalizing agreements in months rather than years (Dreher et al. 2021). Investments in infrastructure, agriculture, and telecommunications often fill gaps left by other donors, delivering tangible benefits

while strengthening diplomatic ties (Bai et al. 2022; Lum et al. 2009).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's proactive aid efforts further cemented its image as a global humanitarian leader, contrasting with the United States, which temporarily froze WHO funding (Segev and Lavi 2020). In Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, China demonstrated its commitment through significant support following natural disasters. For instance, after the 2005 tsunami, China contributed over \$23 million for reconstruction, sent medical teams, and provided evacuation assistance (Sukma 2009). Similarly, during the 2006 Jakarta tsunami, Beijing deployed 44 medical and earthquake experts alongside \$2 million in cash aid (Sukma 2009). These efforts underscore China's sustained regional engagement and responsiveness to crises.

China's role during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized both immediate relief and strategic partnerships, particularly with ASEAN and Indonesia. Partnerships with Sinovac Biotech Ltd. and PT Bio Farma enabled vaccine production aligned with Indonesia's halal standards, including trials, technology transfer, and prioritized access. The Chinese Ministry of Defense also coordinated with Indonesia's military to deliver critical medical supplies, such as shipments facilitated by the Indonesian Air Force on March 23, 2020, and additional deliveries on May 12. These efforts highlighted the depth of Sino-Indonesian collaboration, fostering mutual support and reinforcing perceptions of China as a reliable partner in addressing both health crises and broader regional challenges (Yeremia 2020).

China Provides Humanitarian Aid in the Fight Against the Covid-19 in Indonesia

China's humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic was strategically distributed based on factors such as strategic partnerships, adherence to the One China Policy and alignment with U.S. interests (Telias and Urdinez 2021). In Latin America, nine out of 13 countries, including Brazil and Chile, had strategic partnerships with China, benefiting from aid. Conversely, countries recognizing Taiwan received little to no assistance. Aid also correlated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) interests, with Muslim-majority nations and ASEAN members receiving targeted medical supplies, while in Africa, aid was linked to Chinese investments

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and infrastructure projects (Moritz 2021). China committed \$2 billion in international aid, providing medical supplies, vaccines, and expert teams to combat the pandemic globally, with 90 million vaccine doses sent to Asia and 54 million to Africa (Azis and Basen 2023). Notable examples include Italy receiving substantial medical supplies and expert teams, and African countries benefiting from vaccines, protective gear, and partnerships for local vaccine production (WHO South Sudan 2020; Wood 2020; Mcalister and Daly 2021). China's efforts also extended to collaboration with the WHO and other global stakeholders, sharing critical information and technologies for improving global public health (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2021).

China's role in fighting COVID-19 was particularly significant in the early stages of the pandemic, demonstrating its strategic approach to aid distribution. As the number of cases surged in early 2020, countries such as Indonesia turned to China, its key trading partner, for critical support. China had contributed by donating test kits, masks, and personal protective equipment. This ensures fast and smooth deliveries from December 2020 to be received in January 2021. On top of it, the deal with China saved the Indonesian government's face that leads to positive sentiment of Indonesian citizens (Fitriani 2022). Thus, Indonesia was keen to emphasize Chinese assistance and reliability of Chinese vaccines.

By mid-2020, China had supplied Indonesia with 40 tons of medical equipment, followed by additional shipments worth \$10 million in June, including surgical masks, PCR kits, and PPE. Collaborative efforts also included agreements between Indonesia's BioFarma and China's Sinovac to develop and produce vaccines. Priority access to vaccines resulted in 1.2 million doses arriving by December 2020, undergoing emergency authorization and distribution by January 2021 (Yu and Han 2023). This partnership showcased China's commitment to addressing Indonesia's health crisis while strengthening bilateral ties.

Micro-level collaborations further enhanced aid effectiveness. For instance, the Fuzhou City Government provided digital training and resources to Semarang, Sichuan Province donated 20,000 surgical masks to West Java, and Guang City supported Surabaya with 40,000 masks. Additionally, a Chinese company, Wuling Motor, donated 10,000 non-medical masks to Bandung (Hakim 2020; Kurniawan 2020). These localized efforts highlighted the

depth of cooperation between Chinese provinces, cities, and private sectors with Indonesian counterparts.

In response to the Delta variant surge in 2021, China delivered \$7.8 million worth of medical supplies, including ISO tanks and oxygen concentrators (CNBC Indonesia 2021). In 2022, the People's Liberation Army Naval deployed the "Peace Ark" hospital ship to Indonesia, reinforcing its humanitarian commitment through military medical aid (Rakhmat and Purnama 2022). By October 2021, Sinovac accounted for 80% of Indonesia's administered vaccines, further solidifying China's role in Indonesia's pandemic response. President Jokowi's decision to receive the first vaccine dose emphasized the significance of this partnership in Indonesia's vaccination strategy (Yu and Han 2023).

The Effectiveness of China's Humanitarian Aid in Indonesia

China's humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated its effectiveness through comprehensive support and multi-level cooperation (Cui 2019). Globally, China played a significant role, providing over \$4.6 billion in aid and surpassing Western donors like the U.S. and Germany (Miao 2024). In Southeast Asia, countries such as Cambodia, the Philippines, and Myanmar were early recipients of medical supplies, reflecting China's strategy to align humanitarian aid with regional priorities and partnerships. This assistance included civilian and military medical teams and vaccine donations, which China positioned as a "global public good" for developing nations (Fook 2020).

In Indonesia, China's efforts were extensive and timely. In March 2020, Indonesia received 12 tons of medical supplies, including test kits, N95 masks, and ventilators, delivered by the Indonesian Air Force from Shanghai (Haryati 2020). Later, in August 2021, China donated 120 ventilators, 400 oxygen generators, and additional medical supplies, followed by one million Sinovac vaccines in September. By the end of 2021, Indonesia had received 273 million vaccine doses, with a significant portion supplied by China. These efforts underscore the strong bilateral cooperation between the two nations during the pandemic (China Embassy 2021).

China's multilateral initiatives further bolstered its humanitarian response. Financial contributions included \$50 million to the

WHO and the UN's Global Humanitarian Response Plan, representing a milestone in China's international aid (Kurtzer and Gonzales 2020). The ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting in February 2020 exemplified regional collaboration, with China and ASEAN countries jointly addressing the pandemic's challenges. Such efforts highlight China's commitment to leveraging multilateral platforms to combat global crises (Wanandi 2020).

China's coordination with non-governmental actors marked a significant evolution in its aid strategy. Unlike its Ebola response in 2014, where government-to-government aid was prioritized, China embraced public-private partnerships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mobilizing institutions and private sectors enhanced the efficiency of its aid efforts (Song 2020). The China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) reflected the country's growing commitment to humanitarian spending, aligning with its aspiration to solidify its role as a rising global power (Kurtzer and Gonzales 2020).

The Empowerment of China's Humanitarian Aid in Indonesia

Empowerment refers to a longer-term and more fundamental approach to human security that addresses the root causes of security threats and seeks to build resilience for future challenges. While capacity building often focuses on enhancing organizational systems, empowerment is more closely tied to strengthening the abilities of individuals and communities. However, these two concepts are deeply interconnected which robust organizational capabilities, such as well-developed public health systems, can significantly enhance individual and societal resilience over time.

China's support for Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic also focused on strengthening long-term resilience rather than merely providing immediate relief. Empowerment plays a vital role in fostering resilience and addressing the underlying causes of human security threats. During the COVID-19 pandemic, China's commitment to enhance long-term capacities for dealing with similar crises reflected in four key areas namely (1) medical training, (2) regional health preparedness, (3) vaccine manufacture cooperation, and (4) economic collaboration.

First, one significant empowerment effort was China's initiative to provide training for Indonesian healthcare workers. Through virtual conferences, Chinese health experts shared their experiences and knowledge in preventing, controlling, and treating COVID-19. This collaborative knowledge exchange allowed Indonesia to benefit from China's early successes in managing the pandemic, equipping local medical personnel with enhanced capabilities to address current and future health crises (Margono 2021).

Secondly, China's cooperation with Indonesia in vaccine development and production stands as a landmark example of empowerment through bilateral collaboration. Starting in March 2020, the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, alongside other government bodies, engaged with Chinese vaccine developers to ensure access to COVID-19 vaccines. The partnership between Sinovac Biotech and PT Bio Farma resulted in joint clinical trials, vaccine manufacturing, and technology transfer. By August 2020, phase-three clinical trials for Sinovac's vaccine, CoronaVac, were conducted in Bandung, involving 1,620 volunteers. PT Bio Farma not only secured priority access to vaccine doses but was also designated as a regional production hub, significantly boosting Indonesia's self-reliance in vaccine production (Yeremia and Raditio 2021).

Thirdly, China also demonstrated its commitment to regional health empowerment through its support for the Public Health Emergency Cooperation Initiative, particularly the Program on Public Health Emergency Preparedness Capacity (PROMPT). This program, backed by a \$5 million commitment from China, aimed to strengthen ASEAN's capacity to respond to pandemics and other public health emergencies. PROMPT served as a reference for ASEAN member states, including Indonesia, to develop project proposals funded by the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund (ACCF). Such initiatives emphasized the importance of sustainable collaboration to build regional preparedness and resilience against health emergencies (Susilowati 2023).

Lastly, along with its focus on public health systems, China emphasized poverty reduction and economic and social reconstruction in its pandemic response. Even amid global challenges, bilateral economic cooperation between China and Indonesia flourished. According to the Indonesian Central Statistics Agency (BPS), in March 2022, Indonesia reached a record import value of \$21.97 billion, with \$15.79 billion coming from China as a

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leading exporter of non-oil and gas commodities (Central Bureau of Statistics 2021). Despite the pandemic, Indonesia's exports to China rose significantly in 2020 compared to 2019, totaling \$78.5 billion in bilateral trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021). Indonesia's bilateral trade with China had reached \$53.5 billion in the first half of 2021, reflecting a 50.3 percent increase compared to the same period in the previous year. During this time, Indonesia's exports to China amounted to \$26.2 billion, marking a 51.4 percent increase, while imports from China stood at \$27.3 billion, rising by 49.3 percent (Rakhmat 2021).

By 2021, China had become Indonesia's second-largest foreign investor, with investments amounting to \$4.8 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021). Discussions between Chinese President Xi Jinping and former Indonesian President Joko Widodo further underscored the importance of sustaining economic ties during the pandemic while planning for long-term cooperation. Notably, the two nations agreed to expand infrastructure and maritime projects, prioritizing Indonesia's less-developed eastern islands. This economic collaboration reflects China's dual focus on immediate humanitarian aid and long-term socioeconomic empowerment, reinforcing Indonesia's post-pandemic recovery and resilience (Suhita 2021).

Collectively, these efforts illustrate how China's engagement went beyond short-term protection to address systemic vulnerabilities and build a more resilient future for Indonesia. This multifaceted approach highlights the critical role of empowerment in enhancing human security amid global crises.

The Motives of China's Humanitarian Aid in Indonesia

In this part, human security as a fundamental value is perceived having a growing influence on China's national foreign policy and strategic decisions. Moreover, Falkner and Buzan (2017) as cited in Cui (2019) found that human security principles have become a legitimate basis and an impact on 'the criteria for rightful membership' in international society. Nevertheless, China actively participated in fighting against the Covid-19 indicating its 'growing position within the international community as a responsible player on the global stage in humanitarian aid' (UNDP 2017 cited in Cui 2019). It is in line with crucial changes in its foreign policy orientations, mainly in its foreign aid goals, and was reflected

on China's latest white paper (the third white paper) on foreign aid, entitled "China's International Development Cooperation on the New Era" published by the State Council Information Office of China on January 10, 2021. One of them emphasizing on the importance of promoting humanitarian assistance in facing the unprecedented changes in the global threats (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2021).

Furthermore, on China's first foreign aid white paper in 2011, the country has transformed its global image to become a responsible great power. It is proven by changing its focus from self-interested motivations to humanitarian aspects to recipient countries. The basic principles of China's foreign aid clearly stated, the 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence' and the 'Eight Principles' for economic aid and technical assistance to other countries. Furthermore, in the second white paper released in 2014, explaining in two aspects particularly in line within the values of human security that promoted by the UN and the international community, 'helping improve people's livelihood' (改善民生) and 'promoting economic and social development'. Thereby, China now has new perspective in conceiving global security challenges and its national interests, by seeing the global threats as a part of its foreign aid agenda (Cui 2019).

However, it cannot be ignored that China's national interests growing in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The infrastructure project of Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway can be an example that the Chinese Government have economic interests in the country. Despite experiencing a decline in activity during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-2022, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project continues to be developed by China to improve connectivity in the Indo-Pacific Region. Until October 2, 2023, the Chinese Government celebrated its signature and the launch of "Woosh" high-speed railway (HSR) in Indonesia became operational. Thereby, this marked as a significant achievement for Indonesia and point of pride for China's BRI (Berger 2023).

Second, when the beginning of the outbreak was spreading in 2020, Indonesian sinologist, Suryadinata (2020), wrote in his article that there were nearly 25,000 *xin yimin* (新移民) (new migrants, especially migrants from China who have been coming to Southeast Asia since the beginning of the 21st century) in Indonesia, with the actual number is much larger. Some of them

came as investors, but the majority arrive as migrant workers, especially working for Chinese companies in several regions in Indonesia, mainly in Java islands. Moreover, more than 1,000 mainland Chinese companies operate in Indonesia, with some of them are state-linked enterprises while others are owned by individuals. Yet, national economic interests alone cannot explain China's proactive engagement in the global fight against Covid-19. As explained above, China still holds its national interest and human security norms as important part of its national foreign policy orientations.

Conclusion

China's humanitarian aid to Indonesia during the Covid-19 pandemic is perceived as an important example on how human security perspective works. As one of the countries under the Belt and Road Initiative, Indonesia's collaboration with China showcased how humanitarian assistance can go beyond immediate relief to address broader health and socioeconomic challenges. By providing medical equipment, vaccines, and capacity-building initiatives, China not only mitigated the impact of the pandemic but also empowered Indonesia to strengthen its public health infrastructure.

The effectiveness of China's aid was reflected in its swift response, delivering 12 tons of medical supplies at the onset of the pandemic and later providing millions of vaccine doses. This effort was complemented by partnerships such as the Sinovac-Bio Farma collaboration, which enabled vaccine production and technology transfer in Indonesia. Such initiatives highlight how China's aid strategy integrated empowerment with crisis response, fostering long-term resilience in the face of global health challenges.

Motivated by both human security norms and strategic interests, China's actions during the pandemic emphasized its role as a responsible global actor. Through multilateral platforms, public-private partnerships, and bilateral cooperation, China demonstrated its commitment to addressing shared threats while advancing its position on the global stage. For Indonesia, this aid reinforced bilateral ties and demonstrated the potential of collaborative approaches to tackling complex crises.

To conclude, the case of China's humanitarian aid to Indonesia offers valuable insights into how foreign aid can be leveraged to ad-

dress immediate needs while promoting sustainable development and resilience. This approach serves as a model for integrating human security into international aid strategies, emphasizing the importance of global solidarity in overcoming shared challenges.

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