

China's Vaccine Diplomacy Strategy During COVID-19 Crisis, 2020–2022

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Abstract

In the crisis of COVID-19 outbreak, China's health diplomacy was scrutinized after the country was accused of exploiting the pandemic to advance its geopolitical interests. China were also critical since the virus started in its jurisdiction, the city of Wuhan. This paper analyzes the driving factors of China's health diplomacy implementation as foreign policy during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis from 2020 to 2022. This research used descriptive and literary research methods by collecting secondary data, particularly from the WHO. Employing neoclassical realism as a framework, we identified the intervening systemic variables for China's foreign policy behavior during the pandemic. Xi Jinping's strategic thinking and vaccine production are two most important variables in his role as the head of the state in balancing foreign and domestic interests. His willingness to cooperate with WHO and other countries particularly in vaccine diplomacy (vaccine production and distribution) has contributed significantly to the global solutions to the pandemic, rebounded the domestic economy, and strengthened China's opportunities and capabilities to participate in global health development. Rather than undermining its power, the global health crisis has bolstered China's presence globally.

Keywords: China's foreign policy, COVID-19, Vaccine Diplomacy, Xi Jinping's strategic thinking

Abstrak

Di saat krisis seperti wabah COVID-19, diplomasi kesehatan Tiongkok menjadi sorotan karena tuduhan Tiongkok mengeksploitasi pandemi untuk memajukan kepentingan geopolitiknya. Makalah ini menganalisis faktor-faktor di balik implementasi diplomasi kesehatan Tiongkok sebagai bentuk kebijakan luar negeri selama krisis COVID-19 dari 2020 hingga 2022. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian deskriptif dan kepustakaan dengan mengumpulkan data sekunder, khususnya dari WHO. Lebih lanjut, teori realisme neoklasik digunakan sebagai kerangka penelitian untuk mengidentifikasi variabel-sistemik-antara untuk perilaku kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok selama pandemi. Terdapat dua variabel yang dominan, yaitu pemikiran strategik Xi Jinping dan produksi vaksin. Sebagai kepala negara, Xi Jinping memainkan peran penting dalam menyeimbangkan kepentingan luar negeri dan domestiknya. Kesediaannya untuk bekerja sama dengan WHO dan negara-negara lain, khususnya dalam produksi dan distribusi vaksinnya atau disebut sebagai diplomasi vaksin, telah berkontribusi secara signifikan terhadap solusi global terhadap pandemi, meningkatkan ekonomi domestik, dan memperkuat peluang dan kemampuan Tiongkok untuk berpartisipasi dalam pembangunan kesehatan global. Alih-alih merongrong kekuatannya, krisis kesehatan global telah semakin menguatkan posisi Tiongkok di tingkat global.

Kata kunci: COVID-19, Diplomasi Vaksin, kebijakan luar negeri Tiongkok, pemikiran strategis Xi Jinping

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, COVID-19 outbreak impacted the world's health, economy, and other sectors. Many countries temporarily close their borders to minimize the surge of test positive of COVID-19. During this time, social restrictions across the globe put many activities and operations on hold, making many countries suffer from economic inflation. To mitigate this, China took responsibility in helping other countries during the early COVID-19 breakout (CIDCA, 2020) by providing other countries with essential medical equipment for COVID-19, such as face masks for daily use, vaccination, medicine, and others. This health diplomacy was known as "mask diplomacy" and "medicine diplomacy."

Harley Feldbaum and Joshua Michaud (2010) state that health diplomacy is not simply an interaction between states. It is "an act to win global societies' hearts peacefully by providing medical equipment and personnel to countries that need them the most" (Feldbaum & Michaud, 2010: 1). Health diplomacy relies on the state decision-makers in conducting their foreign policies for national interests. Political challenges, especially in the international health system, have regulations for states' sovereignty while considering their national interest. Several developing countries view it as an instrument for their national security interests to find protection, while for industrialized countries, it will boost their public image (Feldbaum & Michaud, 2010). This paper analyzes China's health diplomacy process during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020-2022. To recover the pandemic and the country's tainted image at international level, China provided medical aids around the globe. This paper analyzes the factors behind the implementation

of China's health diplomacy as a form of foreign policy during the COVID-19 crisis from 2020 to 2022.

Literature Review

This study analyzed relevant arguments from scholars on related topics and investigated their opinions supporting further analysis.

China's past and current health diplomacy differs. In 2000s, China applied a horizontal approach to its medical aid which was diverse in bilateral and multilateral relationships by helping combat infectious diseases like HIV and malaria (Killeen, Davis, Tucker, & Meier, 2018: 8). In early 2020, China's health diplomacy focused on providing medical aid to meet the dire need for vaccines and oxygen supply during the pandemic (Lee, 2021: 2). However, countries like the US that implemented different approach deemed China's initiatives untrustworthy due to the fact the COVID-19 outbreak took place in Wuhan (Lee, 2021: 13; SCMP; 2021).

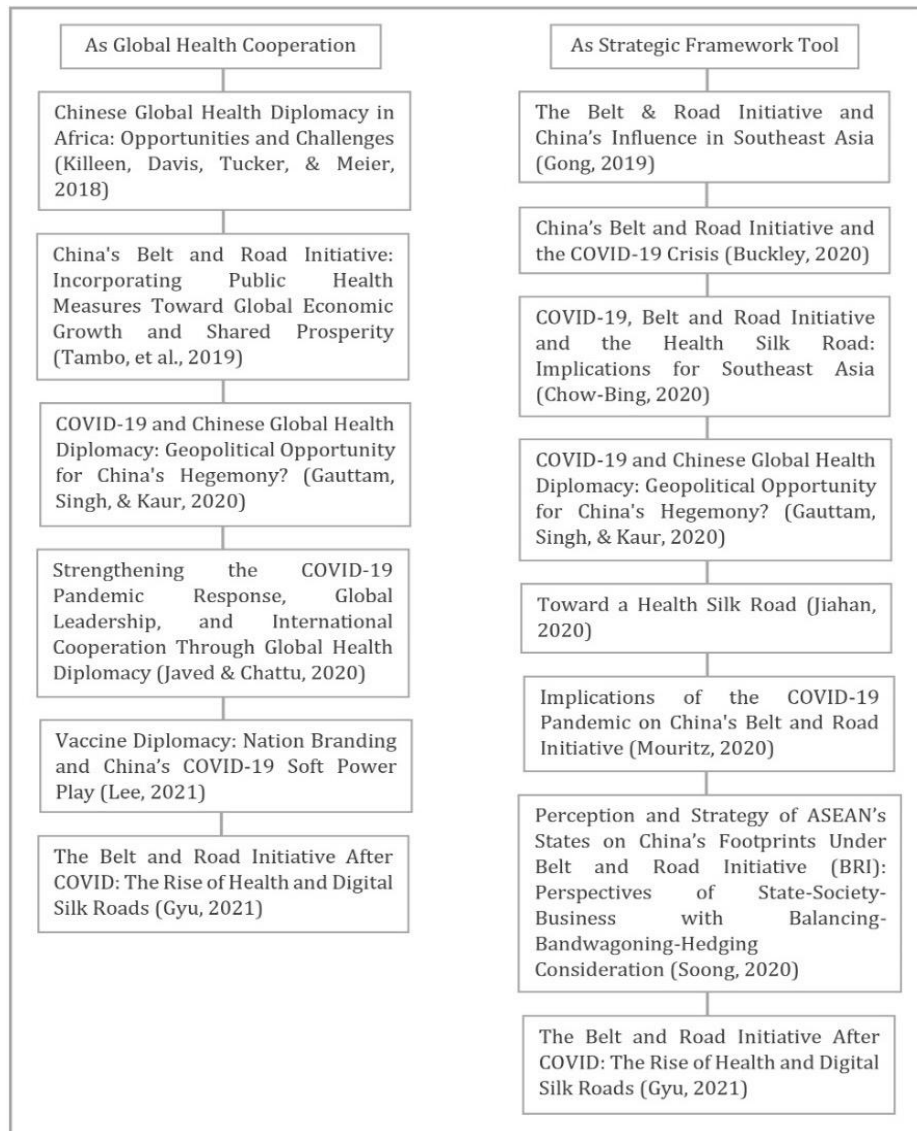
China's goal is to pursue health cooperation globally through health diplomacy. Before the pandemic, China had fostered cooperation with other countries to strengthen the country's public health. China's health diplomacy is more intensively active than the US and other EU countries (Tambo et al., 2019: 47; Gauttam, Singh, & Kaur, 2020: 321; Javed & Chattu, 2020).

At the dawn of COVID-19 pandemic, China faced challenging scrutiny from other countries because Coronavirus outbreak occurred in China's territory. In fact, the US president, Joe Biden, directly asked if the outbreak was part of China's strategic plan spiked with controversies and conspiracies. Despite this, the Health Silk Road (HSR) has grown as one of China's positive impacts due to

COVID-19 (Javed & Chattu, 2020; Gyu, 2021: 2).

In contrast, other scholars believe China's ulterior motive in conducting health diplomacy is promoting its strategic framework, the Belt and Road Initiative. This concept aims to achieve global economic integration that will benefit the country's members, especially in terms of international trade. This project will be environment-friendly and "greener" because it aims to help with global warming and climate change (Chow-Bing, 2020: 34-35). However, Western analysts view this as China's strategy to take hold on international hegemonic power. The competitiveness between the U.S. and China escalated to the point that World Health Organization (WHO) was accused of being biased toward China (Jiahan, 2020: 30; Gauttam, Singh, & Kaur, 2020: 327; Gyu, 2021: 3).

On the other hand, China also suffers the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The world's economy, including China's, has changed drastically over the past few months. ASEAN countries are concerned about the possibility to maintain their membership in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) because China's approach from this project potentially overtakes the ASEAN-led region goal in Asia. Moreover, BRI economic power can likely turn to political power (Gong, 2019: 643). Many countries have debt, especially during the pandemic. Even if there is Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) collaborates with BRI, it is unlikely because the debt impact that the virus brings makes other countries need to reevaluate this framework (Mouritz, 2020: 121; Buckley, 2020: 3; Soong, 2020: 2).



Source: Proceed by Authors, 2024.

Figure 1.
Literature Review Summary on China's Health Diplomacy

Interestingly, rather than retrenching its global rise, the pandemic served as a momentum for China to become a more assertive global player, especially in global health issues. This paper brings this new perspective by elaborating on China's so-called vaccine diplomacy through its massive vaccine production and distribution activities and examining Xi Jinping's global vision. In addition, the paper offers rarely compiled vaccine data in China that is

distributed domestically and internationally.

Theoretical Framework

Neoclassical Realism

This paper uses neoclassical realism as it is known to help analyze state behavior and international politics. It also uses the definition of neoclassical realism from two scholars.

First, Brian Rathbun perceives neoclassical realism as the way a state incorporates nationalism as its

fundamental power. The state should frequently analyze its domestic politics and ideas because any decisions made by the state, depending on the environment, potentially bring complications (Rathbun, 2008: 296). Rathbun believes that neoclassical realism and structural realism are the same but have two different levels of approach. Structural realism leans toward international system and analyzes its behavior, whereas neoclassical realism is how the state's policy-making determines its national capabilities. In other words, neoclassical realism is one of intervening systemic variables in international relations.

Second, Gustav Meibauer explains neoclassical realism as the outcome of international relations by analyzing state behavior (Meibauer, 2021: 6). Meibauer argued that neoclassical realism can be elaborated from two levels. The first is from the unit level. The decision-makers and governments need to consider the state's national interests by considering various circumstances from historical events. The second is from the international level in which policies as the outcome of decision-makers can assist the state in reshaping international structure. This correlates with China's health diplomacy as a foreign policy during the COVID-19 crisis from 2020 to 2022.

The core assumption is that neoclassical realism theory helps understand the behaviour of a state from its capabilities to maximize domestic potential as reflected in the foreign policy. Since international system is related to the state's internal dynamic, it is important to investigate the effects of a state's behaviour on its relation with others.

An example of neoclassical realism elaborating on a non-traditional

issue does exist. Scholars tried to explain the theory differently, which has familiarized chiefly itself with military power. In *Neoclassical Realism and International Climate Change Politics: Moral Imperative and Political Constraint in International Climate Finance*, Mark Purdon has used neoclassical realism to elaborate climate finance amidst international political turbulence and discuss how climate change plays a role at international and domestic levels. The political dilemma in climate change policy concerning cost mitigation and technological innovation is one option that seems unlikely for the carbon market (Purdon, 2017: 326).

The theory-practice can interpret non-traditional issues such as China's health diplomacy. Neoclassical realism is used as a framework to identify the intervening systemic variables for China's foreign policy behavior during the pandemic. The theory elaboration will be divided into several sections. First, China during COVID-19 will be elaborated on to what extent China's health diplomacy action process from its vaccine production and distribution. Second, China's evaluation of its domestic political circumstances amid the crisis and international pressure on its health diplomacy. Lastly, Xi Jinping's strategic thinking in handling the pandemic.

Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative method to understand the motives and goals of China's health diplomacy from both sides of the idea whether its goal is to pursue global health cooperation and interest in a strategic framework. It is interesting to discover whether China's health diplomacy as a foreign policy to overcome the COVID-19 crisis works. This research offers new insight by

giving an elaborate approach from China's perspective. It provides a descriptive explanation with secondary data from books, journals, reports, and official government and newspaper websites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

China During COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought crisis to the entire world with hundreds of millions contracting the virus and millions died in early 2020. It is known that coronavirus first broke out in China's city of Wuhan. The unprecedented pandemic rendered health sector in China and many countries around the globe struggling to fight the vast spread of the disease. Many countries blamed China for its shady coverage of information and lack transparent details on this issue.

China's Health Diplomacy Action

For China, acting quickly in mitigating COVID-19 cases is compulsory to fix their image. In other words, the longer they delayed the mitigation, the worse their already tainted image could be. China provided two-categories of aid for countries mitigating the pandemic. The first category includes distributing medical supplies such as oxygen, masks, and drugs and building medical posts to help hospitals in countries overwhelmed by the surging number of patients, especially in 2020-2021. They eventually dispatch volunteers worldwide, especially in countries with

a shortage of health personnel and facilities. The second category is producing vaccines, which happens to be the primary objective of China's health policy. Since the pandemic outbreak, WHO has studied and analyzed the virus and encouraged countries with health technology advancement to help produce the vaccine (WHO, 2021). China answered this call by producing WHO-approved vaccines and distributing them globally (Ashok, 2021).

To maximize the success rate of COVID-19 vaccines, China developed inactivated vaccines, recombinant protein vaccines, adenovirus vector vaccines, attenuated influenza virus vector vaccines, and nucleic acid vaccines. China must accelerate vaccine production and distribution nationwide to control further domestic and international outbreaks. On August 4, 2021, World Health Organization Director-General, Tedros Adhanom, stated that high-income countries received more vaccines than low-income countries (Meng, et al., 2021: 2-4).

A few months into the pandemic, China began to develop the COVID-19 vaccines through trials to ensure the correct dose and safety. The vaccines were made from a tiny part of the disease organism and designed in such a way that the recipients would not get sick or get side effects that resembled COVID-19 minor symptoms. Table 1 shows approved vaccines from China to be in China and around the globe.

Table 1.

Data of Vaccines Approved for Use in China

Vaccine	Type	Efficacy	Emergency Use Listing (EUL) From the WHO	Age Usage
Sinovac-CoronaVac	Primary	51%	✓	18 and above
Sinopharm (Wuhan) Inactivated	Booster	80,8%	-	18 and above
Sinopharm (Beijing) Covilo	Primary	79%	✓	18 and above
Shenzen Kangtai Biological Products Co. KCONVAC	Booster	83%	-	18 and above
CanSinoBIO	Booster	58%	✓	18 and above
CanSino: Ad5-nCoV-IH	Booster	70%	-	18 and above
Livzon Mabpharm Inc: V-01	Booster	47,8%	-	18 and above
Anhui Zhifei Longcom: Zifivax	Booster	81,51%	-	18 and above

Sources: Reuters, 2021a; Reuters, 2021b; Reuters, 2021c; Reuters, 2021d; WHO, 2022a; WHO, 2022b; WHO, 2022c. Processed and Edited by Authors, 2024.

Producing more vaccine doses than any other countries, China helped other countries manufacture vaccines using materials either derived from China or made by the host country with help from China (Baptista & Maler, 2022). Vaccine diplomacy is perceived as an opportunity to fix China's image in the world. In late 2020, China joined COVAX or COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access which helped provide vaccines to poor countries that could not produce vaccines.

Evaluating China's Foreign Policy on COVID-19 Crisis

The objective of China's health diplomacy is to provide medical aid to other countries and to restore its public

image since the COVID-19 first outbreak in Wuhan by providing medical tools and health personnel to other countries as well as producing and distributing vaccines worldwide (Mathieu, 2020; Karásková & Blablová, 2021). This section elaborates on neoclassical realism theory in the process of China's foreign policy behavior during the COVID-19 crisis. After the pandemic slowly began to subside, China also needed to adjust some of its policies to stabilize the country's position.

China's Circumstances on Domestic Politics Dilemma

Neo-classical realism contributes to the realism tradition by putting domestic politics in international

relation where state leaders balance domestic interest with international pressure. Playing a major role in world sectors, China has not seen through the end of positive results from its domestic politics. China has implemented the zero-COVID policy (near-zero positive cases) to curb the potential surge of COVID-19 positive cases. However, this policy received criticism from domestic and international parties because, despite most population being vaccinated, COVID-19 positive cases did decrease drastically. It is most likely because when the regulation started to loosen, people no longer wore face masks and assumed to be immune. China's government tried to curb the pandemic but unable to fully reopen the country borders due to high positive cases. China required international arrivals at the airport to for seven days and isolation for three days.

The COVID-19 pandemic, has made the world countries' economic growth fall instantly. According to the OECD, in 2021, China's per capita GDP dropped over 65% than its best performance and productivity fell by 70% (OECD, 2021). This situation worsened instantly where many people struggled with debt and economic issues.

In early 2022, China had been dealing with COVID-19 pandemic for two years, so policymakers decided to take strategic measures to face the economic impact while painstakingly simulating economic growth due to the scope and limitations of the zero-COVID policy. The government provided low to medium loans as a key figure in the last quarter. Another policy is to raise the quota bank as a financial tool of 300 billion yuan or more than 40 billion U.S. dollars (Reuters, 2022). These policies could have helped China maintain its economy until 2022. However, China

government was somewhat skeptical that the economy would experience significant inflation next year. The number of accumulated might be difficult to balance considering the predicted global recession in 2023 and China was likely be affected by it. Accordingly, while China's health diplomacy brought positive outcomes globally by producing and distributing vaccines, China's domestic economy received less positive impact than expected.

International Pressure on China's Foreign Policy

Amidst COVID-19, China and the U.S. continued to engage in competitive dynamics to set foot on new great power in producing and distributing vaccines. According to The International Task Force on Global Public Goods, vaccine is an essential issue for international community consumption and cannot be provided by one country alone. A cooperative international consensus (Freeman, 2020: 5) stated that it is vital to have a global cooperative vaccine campaign using vaccines with the highest efficacy rate. However, China and the US decided to block cooperative vaccine diplomacy.

Vaccine diplomacy has its benefits and risks to other countries. The benefits were made evident in terms of donation when China helped other countries such as Egypt, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates manufacture their vaccines (Mardell, 2021). However, many countries, mainly Western countries led by the U.S. disagreed with China's vaccine diplomacy strategy because China's vaccine was not made through COVAX, and therefore, unseen in COVAX database. Meanwhile, by October 25, 2021, China had donated 87 million

doses of vaccines (Bridge Beijing, 2022).

There have been risks from China's side in this vaccine donation. Its contribution to finding cures and vaccination is known worldwide, especially to those who did not have the technology and facilities to produce it. Because of that, Xi Jinping wants China's vaccine to be an IPG. He stated that this would be a good opportunity for everyone's well-being to help each other (Wheaton, 2020). Also, China's vaccine does not require sub-zero temperatures like other vaccines such as Pfizer and Moderna. This condition is one of the reasons why other poor and developing countries prefer China's vaccines. For example, as a tropical country, Indonesia has difficulty with Pfizer because of logistics challenges in storing it. China vaccines, which are mostly inactivated vaccines, are easier to store, unlike mRNA vaccines (Lee, 2021: 7; Hall, 2022). But in mid-2021, 200 million doses of Sinopharm vaccines have been administrated to be used worldwide before they reach phase III clinical test. This data also lacks information for usage in certain groups of the elderly and people with specific diseases (Pinghui & McCarthy, 2021). This condition is also because the Chinese pharmaceutical company does not provide transparent information to the public, resulting in the U.S. and other countries not authorizing the vaccine to be used independently. This decision is not entirely the company's own doing but rather the government system in general. It has formed a way for projecting decision-making from a political perspective rather than accountability and process. The existence of domestic political pressure from China has made the competition

with the U.S. in vaccines more direct (McDonagh, 2021: 115).

Although not fully transparent in distributing vaccines, China's aided the poor to middle-income countries that do not have enough resources and manpower for themselves. It aims to distribute COVID-19 vaccines to countries in need. How China proceeded with this act has other countries see it differently, especially scholars that must examine countries' foreign policies. Some thought this was China's strategy to rectify this disease and help as much as possible. On the other hand, scholars believe that this is China's way of promoting Belts and Roads Initiatives (BRI).

China vaccines are known to be in high demand from other countries because they are easier to store and can be purchased in many doses at once. China can provide free samples of its vaccine in small quantities to countries that want to purchase it. The vaccine resulted in a massive profit from selling it. It is a way of avoiding competition with other developed countries' vaccines. China is speculated to try gaining favor from poor to middle-class countries, such as African and Latin American countries that need vaccines but cannot afford to purchase them in large numbers (Lee, 2021: 9).

Xi Jinping's View on the Role of China in Global Health Diplomacy

As a policymaker and critical player in decision-making in China, Xi Jinping has come a long way from his first term as President of the People's Republic of China (Ruwitch, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi Jinping needed to make decisions for the well-being of China moving forward while considering public opinion a vital decision factor (Buckley, 2022). Since China's image was tainted because the

COVID-19 outbreak first occurred in its city of Wuhan, Xi Jinping and the other policymakers decided to have health diplomacy for COVID-19 relief reinforcement. Xi's action showed that China would not just be a passive actor amid the virus outbreak.

China's vaccine diplomacy was recognized on bilateral and multilateral levels. Sinopharm and Sinovac are both the primary vaccines China advocated. President Xi relentlessly mentioned the urgency of finding the best solution in producing and distributing vaccines to make them more accessible to poor and middle-income countries. He wanted the international community to be more engaged in closing the immunization gap in several countries. From its bilateral cooperation in donations and vaccine distribution, China has furthered its vaccine diplomacy through joint research of vaccines with other countries. President Xi announced that China would work with international organizations to have a shared future in advance vaccine cooperation (Liu, Huang, & Jin, 2022: 3-4).

President Xi Jinping maintained a positive outcome towards its global health diplomacy. Its vaccine production and distribution have continued to be one of the main factors in the international community as it helps other countries produce their vaccine. As a decision-maker, Xi is an excellent rational actor model of bounded rationality as he can decide after assessing the situation and considering the benefits and risks in a limited time with his advisers (Neack, 2019: 20). That is why vaccine diplomacy that China started in late 2020 has continuously been in motion until now.

Furthermore, Xi and other policymakers in China faced another

challenge since the beginning of 2022 when Omicron-positive cases forced China into another wave of lockdowns. This situation prevented China from recovering its economic growth from previous years. Xi might have proven that its global health diplomacy works for foreign affairs as it has positioned China for a better image since the first outbreak. However, it would not have positively impacted its country if Xi and other policymakers had enacted a zero-COVID policy. President Xi is confident that with this policy lockdown, the favorable cases will gradually decrease with its phases in motion.

During the early days of the lockdown, Xi was optimistic that this policy could help improve China's health crisis (Liu, 2022). It turned out quite the opposite, as the positive cases lingered. Xi continued the lockdown phases from one city and region to another. Until mid to late 2022, China imposed lockdown to more than 25 cities due to the escalating COVID-19-positive cases (BBC, 2022). At the same time, Xi Jinping also dealt with the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and the presidential election in late 2022. As he won the third term of the presidential election, his position as head of state was further legitimized. Again, Xi led China's global health diplomacy and restored its image to the international community. At its political power, China has shown concern about its economic growth and economic relations with the world as its currency has weakened. It is also unlikely that the Chinese government will lift the zero-COVID policy as Xi Jinping stated that it is for securing the well-being of the people of China (Liu, 2022).

However, while Xi considered lifting the policy, the economic damage could not be recovered quickly. Due to

the long-term lockdown, China's economy is in a jeopardized situation. As a policy maker, Xi Jinping needs to strategize decisions by gradually lifting the policy and maximizing vaccination for its people. Unfortunately, China is struggling to handle severe domestic issues as its global health diplomacy continuous to strive.

CONCLUSION

Gustav Meibauer's neoclassical realism approach to China's health diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic has proven that state behavior or foreign policy toward international relations can affect its state standing in the international system. Its vaccine diplomacy has made China one of the main contributors to global health cooperation. While struggling to fix its image to the world, China has strategized its vaccine diplomacy as effectively as possible. Despite criticism and backlash from other countries, China's foreign policy progresses as its vaccine diplomacy helped in combating the virus. China has developed vaccines such as Sinopharm and Sinovac as its primary

ones. It has a clear foreign policy of producing and distributing the COVID-19 vaccine to other countries.

In addition to vaccines, China distributed medical supplies such as masks, oxygen, and beds for poor to middle-income countries struggling to provide necessary materials for their people. China also dispatched and facilitated medical personnel. As the head of the state, Xi Jinping ensured that China's action is to pursue advanced global cooperation for a better future. It may still compete with the U.S. in terms of providing vaccine as a great power in the international community. However, both countries have compromised with each other, although criticism of China still emerges from the media. Cooperating with WHO and other countries has played a significant role in facing the challenges during the "New Normal." However, China's domestic economic growth is in a difficult situation. While China's health diplomacy or vaccine diplomacy continuing to strive, it faces hardship in its own country. China has a long way to go in balancing its foreign and domestic affairs as it should be.

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