

NAVIGATING THE COVID-19 LANDSCAPE

CHINA'S HEALTH DIPLOMACY APPROACH IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

In the context of globalization and increasing severe disease outbreaks, global political attention to health issues has grown significantly. Consequently, health is transitioning from a peripheral or reactive issue to a more central position in foreign policy agendas. Major powers, including China, are increasingly leveraging health diplomacy as a strategic instrument. China's health diplomacy initiatives extend globally, with a significant focus on Southeast Asia. This study critically examines China's health diplomacy efforts in this region. It begins with an analytical overview of health diplomacy, elucidating the contextual factors behind its emergence and related terminological debates. The study then categorizes and scrutinizes specific health diplomacy measures undertaken by China in Southeast Asia. Finally, it analyzes recipient countries' responses and evaluates the regional impact of China's health diplomacy endeavors. The research reveals that China's health diplomacy in Southeast Asia encompasses a wide range of activities, including participation in regional health mechanisms, provision of medical aid and supplies, and efforts to enhance healthcare capacity. While these initiatives have generally been received positively, particularly by countries with closer ties to China, concerns persist regarding the quality, timeliness, and potential political motives behind the assistance. The study concludes that despite some limitations, health diplomacy remains a crucial instrument in China's strategy to consolidate its influence in Southeast Asia.

Keywords:

China; Southeast Asia; ASEAN; COVID-19; health diplomacy

Healthy populations form the foundation for prosperity, security, and stability. Conversely, poor health not only damages the economy but also poses threats to the economic and political interests of any nation¹. In a globalized world, health issues receive political atten-

tion at the highest levels of national and international politics [Feldbaum, Michaud, 2010]. Alongside the increasing role of health, health diplomacy has gained significant attention, particularly during serious disease pandemics. In this global trend, China's participation in

¹ Health is Global: A UK Government Strategy // HM Government. 2008. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130105191920/> (accessed: 10.03.2021).

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the health sector in Southeast Asia from 2019 to 2021 has become prominent and attracted substantial interest.

To delve deeper into this topic, it is essential to first understand health diplomacy. Studies such as “Health Diplomacy and the Enduring Relevance of Foreign Policy Interests” by Harley Feldbaum and Joshua Michaud [2010] assess global research on health diplomacy, discussing why global health issues are prioritized politically, examining health diplomacy initiatives, and clarifying the stakeholder groups related to health diplomacy. The works “Global Health Diplomacy: How Foreign Policy Can Influence Health” by Ilona Kickbusch [2011] and “Framing Health and Foreign Policy: Lessons for Global Health Diplomacy” by Ronald Labonté and Michelle Gagnon [2010] aim to answer questions about whether foreign policy serves health or vice versa, and which factors prevail in state decision-making. While these studies provide an overview of the definition and objectives of health diplomacy, they do not focus on China’s health diplomacy as the primary research subject, only mentioning it in some examples.

The paper “Health Diplomacy in Pandemic Times” by Tanisha Fazal [2020] focuses on health diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, differentiating its purpose from the general practice of health diplomacy by countries. The article contributes to clarifying the definition of health diplomacy, especially its objectives, and presents a model for analyzing health diplomacy in practice. However, Fazal examines health diplomacy across global pandemic phases, without specifically focusing on China or Southeast Asia. The studies “China’s Health Diplomacy during COVID-19: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Action” by Moritz Rudolf² and “Toward a Health Silk Road (HSR): China’s Proposal for Global Health Cooperation” by

Cao Jiahua [2020] delve into China’s health diplomacy within the BRI framework. The latter article offers a unique perspective on China’s health diplomacy from an internal standpoint. While these two papers deeply analyze China’s health diplomacy within the BRI framework, they do not concentrate on Southeast Asia.

Although there is abundant literature on China’s health diplomacy, the majority focuses on China’s global endeavors or its involvement in Africa. China’s health diplomacy in Southeast Asia is only briefly discussed in a few studies related to aid and support, such as “China’s COVID-19 Assistance to Southeast Asia: Uninterrupted Aid amid Global Uncertainties” by Lye Liang Fook³ [2020]. The author offers insights into China’s aid activities in Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting variations in aid activities among ASEAN member states (AMS) and predicting China’s intentions. To date, no comprehensive document has focused on examining China’s health diplomacy in Southeast Asia, especially from 2019 to 2021. This paper aims to fill this research gap.

To answer questions such as what is health diplomacy, how is China implementing it, how do AMS react to these activities, and what has health diplomacy brought to China, the article employs a combination of qualitative analysis methods including historical and logical analysis, synthesis, and policy analysis through the use of secondary data sources relevant to the research topic.

First, the historical and logical method has been used to provide an overview of the development and evolution of the concept of health diplomacy, tracing its origins and the key definitions proposed by scholars over time. It also examines and categorizes the specific health diplomacy measures that China has implemented in Southeast Asia.

² Rudolf M. China’s health diplomacy during COVID-19 the BRI in action // SWP. 2021. No. 1. URL: https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2021C09_ChinaHealthDiplomacy.pdf (accessed: 07.07.2021).

³ Fook L.L. China’s COVID-19 assistance to Southeast Asia: Uninterrupted aid amid global uncertainties // Think China 10.06.2020. URL: <https://www.thinkchina.sg/chinas-aid-southeast-asia-amid-adversity-sign-deeper-cooperation-ahead> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

Second, the synthesis method is used to consolidate existing literature on health diplomacy and identify gaps in research, particularly related to China's health diplomacy activities focused on Southeast Asia. This primarily synthesizes policy documents, agreements, and scholarly publications to gather information and evidence on China's health diplomacy initiatives in Southeast Asia from 2019 to 2021.

Third, the policy analysis method is used to analyze China's health-related policies, programs, and mechanisms with a diplomatic approach in the region, assessing their intended goals and impacts.

By combining these research methods, the paper will lay out a comprehensive and in-depth assessment of China's health diplomacy in Southeast Asia, contributing to a broader understanding of this emerging field of study.

1. What is health diplomacy?

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, health diplomacy gained prominence in political discourse, particularly in global technical and scientific literature [Held 2014: 61]. However, the concept itself had emerged earlier. In 1978, "health diplomacy" was mentioned in an article by Peter Bourne, the Special Assistant for Health Issues to President Jimmy Carter. Bourne argued that "the role of health and medicine as a means to improve international relations had not been fully explored by the United States (US)" [Bourne 1978]. He stated: "...some humanitarian issues, especially health, can be the basis for establishing a dialogue and bridging diplomatic barriers" [Bourne 1978]. For Bourne, beyond ensuring health, medicine could facilitate connections between nations, helping them overcome diplomatic obstacles and fostering amicable relations.

Over time, more specific definitions of health diplomacy have emerged. Scholars like Horton emphasized the influence of health issues on foreign policy for humanitarian and health goals: "Health is a catalyst for rearranging power privileges within governments. It sets a new standard for measuring foreign policy. Health shifts foreign policy from a debate

about national interests to a debate about global generosity" [Horton 2007]. However, other scholars argue that health diplomacy does not solely serve health objectives. In practice, global health is not prioritized in health diplomacy; foreign policy remains the main driver guiding the content and processes of this field [Feldbaum, Michaud 2010]. One proponent of this view is Fidler, who stated that health diplomacy "uses health-related cooperation to pursue non-health goals" [Kevany 2014] and defined health diplomacy as "the policy-shaping processes through which nations, intergovernmental organizations, and non-state actors negotiate how to address health challenges or use health concepts or mechanisms in negotiation strategies and policy shaping to achieve political, economic, or other social goals" [Fidler 2013: 693]. It is evident that Fidler shares Bourne's idea that health diplomacy can be used to achieve goals unrelated to health. Although many proponents of community health argue that health should not be used for other purposes, in an interdependent world, few programs serve purely humanitarian purposes [Kickbusch 2011]. Fazal [2020] also asserts this perspective: "Not all health diplomacy is about health. I define health diplomacy as aid or international cooperation aimed at promoting health or using health programs to promote non-health-related goals abroad."

Moreover, Novotny and Kickbusch present a compelling perspective, defining health diplomacy as "political activity responding to dual goals of improving health while maintaining and enhancing international relations" [Novotny, Kickbusch 2008]. They suggest that it can balance humanitarian objectives with national interests. However, foreign policy interests often play a crucial role in determining which global health issues receive political priority and funding. Increasingly, health, economy, and politics are intertwined [Kevany 2014]. The use of health interventions as tools to promote foreign policy interests is on the rise. Countries utilize health initiatives to enhance security, extend influence, improve national image, or support other traditional foreign policy goals [Feldbaum 2010]. For

instance, the US military conducts Civil-Military Medical Programs in Iraq and Afghanistan to “support stability, gather local intelligence, or reward the local population for their cooperation”⁴. Provincial Reconstruction Teams in these regions also work to improve local health conditions as part of a broader counterinsurgency strategy⁵. Former Secretary of Health Tommy Thompson articulated the global health mission of the US, stating, “What better way to break down hatred, racial barriers, and groups that fear and hate America than to provide good health policies and health to these countries?” [Inglehart 2004].

China, on the other hand, often refers to this concept as “public health diplomacy.” This term dates back to 1949–1972, the initial stage of China’s public health diplomacy with socialist and third world countries. Cheng Ting and Tan Zhimin [2022] identify four stages of China’s public health diplomacy: the initial stage (1949–1972), the reform and adjustment stage (1972–2003), the rapid development stage (2003–2019), and the leap forward stage from participation to global leadership in public health cooperation (from 2019 to the present). Throughout this evolution, China’s public health diplomacy has developed four main characteristics: it has consistently aligned with the policies of the Communist Party of China; it has expanded from partial to comprehensive exchanges; it has transitioned from hard exchanges to soft exchanges; and it has elevated its diplomatic status from participant to global leader. This success has been shaped by various stages of development, with many Chinese scholars offering diverse perspectives on its connotations. Jin Jiyong [2008], for example, has examined global public health crises that prompted the emergence of public health diplomacy, defining it as “a global governance

action taken by multiple actors to address global public health security issues.” Similarly, Lu Yuhan has explored the current evolution of global public health diplomacy amid the COVID-19 pandemic, describing it as: “a decision-making process involving consultation with non-governmental organizations on responding to public health challenges or using public health concepts or mechanisms in negotiation strategies and policy development to achieve other political, economic, or social goals. The functions and effects of global public health diplomacy are diverse, as it can influence a country’s soft power and image building, it can also be used as a tool for a country to implement its foreign policy, and it can also affect a country’s foreign relations...”⁶.

Despite variations in how health diplomacy is defined—whether in terms of humanitarian goals (enhancing global community health) or national interests—most scholars agree that it points to the growing intersection between foreign policy and health. Health diplomacy involves using health initiatives to achieve foreign policy goals and utilizing diplomacy to attain health objectives. It encompasses international political activities in the health sector, such as cooperation, assistance, or aid, aimed at achieving traditional foreign policy goals like ensuring security, economic benefits, strengthening relationships, improving international image, and enhancing power and influence, as well as fulfilling global humanitarian objectives.

Motivations for China’s Health Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

Significance of Southeast Asia for China

The strategic importance of Southeast Asia for China can be analyzed through political, economic, and security lenses. Politically, the

⁴ Baker J. Medical Diplomacy in Full-Spectrum Operations // Military Review. September–October 2007. URL: https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/militaryreview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20071031_art010.pdf (accessed: 15.03.2021). P. 67–73.

⁵ Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan and Iraq // United States Government Accountability Office. 2008. URL: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d0986r.pdf> (accessed: 10.03.2021).

⁶ Yuhan L. The evolution and current development of global public health diplomacy // People’s Tribune. July 2020. URL: http://paper.people.com.cn/rmlt/html/2020-07/01/content_2000493.htm (accessed: 12.04.2024).

region is crucial for China to cultivate beneficial relationships and secure its southern periphery. It serves as a strategically located gateway that facilitates China's aspirations to become a maritime power. Economically, Southeast Asia includes critical sea lanes essential for China's import and export of commodities, notably oil and commercial resources from the Middle East and Africa. Bilateral trade between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) amounted to \$684.6 billion in 2020, making them each other's largest trading partners⁷.

Additionally, the region encompasses the resource-rich South China Sea, which boasts abundant fisheries, oil, and natural gas reserves, along with a dynamic economy and a promising market. However, China's image in the region is not optimal, with territorial disputes existing between China and four of the ten ASEAN member states. Diplomatic efforts could potentially improve China's regional image. Furthermore, the health situation in Southeast Asian countries has direct implications for China's national security, particularly health security. China shares land borders with Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar; if health conditions in Southeast Asia are not adequately addressed, the risks of disease transmission and potential biological threats could breach China's borders. Mitigating health threats, both proximate and distant, to ensure security is a diplomatic imperative. This underscores the necessity for China to engage in health diplomacy initiatives within Southeast Asia.

Assessing Health Vulnerabilities and Capacity Limitations in Southeast Asia

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Southeast Asia has a high likelihood of becoming a hotspot for various diseases. This is primarily due to the rapid increase in population and population density. The current population of the region is approximately

580 million people, having increased by over 30% since 1990. Population growth and density are independent predictors significantly associated with the potential for disease transmission [Coker et al. 2011]. Additionally, increased population mobility contributes to the spread of diseases. The region's hot and humid tropical climate creates ideal conditions for the development of diseases. The unique geography of Southeast Asia also makes it one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world, with health being susceptible to earthquakes, typhoons, floods, and environmental pollution. Climate change and rapid economic development exacerbate the spread of emerging infectious diseases [Chongsuvivatwong et al. 2011].

Beyond demographic and environmental factors, the capacity to respond to health services in Southeast Asia is also limited. According to WHO data from 2019, while developed countries have a minimum of 20 doctors per 10,000 people, most developing regions like Southeast Asia have fewer than 10 doctors per 10,000 people. The density of doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, and pharmacists in the region is also lower than the global average (only higher than Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean)⁸. In addition to human resources, several other health factors in some AMS are in short supply. For example, Laos, Cambodia, and Indonesia spend less on healthcare per capita compared to other countries in the region, making it challenging for them to meet the Millennium Development Goals. Healthcare facilities in these countries are also very limited, as evidenced by the low number of hospital beds per capita [Coker et al. 2011]. Modern medical technology is often more expensive than what most populations in the region can afford. All Southeast Asian countries are facing chronic diseases or outbreaks [Newton et al. 2003]. Given the significance of Southeast Asia, deploying diplo-

⁷ 30 years on China, ASEAN countries beef up regional cooperation // Xinhua. 21.07.2021. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202107/21/content_WS60f772abc6d0df57f98dd4fb.html (accessed: 21.07.2021).

⁸ Density of select health workforce per 10 000 population // WHO. 2019. <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/health-workforce> (accessed: 01.04.2021).

matic activities to ensure benefits is necessary for China.

“China sees neighboring countries as the foundation for development and prosperity. It prioritizes neighborhood diplomacy in foreign relations and promotes peace, stability, and development in the region as a clear mission”⁹. This, coupled with the need for health support from AMS (especially during the period 2019–2021), makes health diplomacy an effective tool for China to engage more deeply with regional issues.

The Core Components of China’s Health Diplomacy Initiatives in Southeast Asia

China’s health diplomacy in Southeast Asia is an integral part of its broader diplomatic strategy, following the country’s overarching policies. Although there is no separate official document solely dedicated to health diplomacy, it is frequently mentioned in various Chinese policy documents. In 2016, health diplomacy was addressed in the *China Health Vision 2030*, which stated that China would implement a global health strategy and promote comprehensive international health cooperation, with Southeast Asia being a key component of this overall strategy¹⁰.

Earlier, China’s health diplomacy was specifically outlined in documents related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹¹. Recognizing the need to “enhance China’s voice and influ-

ence in managing multilateral health” through “health cooperation in BRI countries,” China announced the *Vision and Action to Jointly Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road* in March 2015. This document outlined health cooperation between China and other countries, including sharing disease information, exchanging prevention and treatment technologies, training health experts, improving capacity to address community health emergencies, providing emergency health assistance, and expanding cooperation in traditional medicine (TM)¹².

In 2015, China also introduced the *Three-Year Action Plan to Promote Health Cooperation under the BRI (2015–2017)* with a three-stage strategy: 2015–2017, mid-term (2017–2020/2022), and long-term (5–10 years or 2020–2030). The plan identified priority areas such as securing political support for health cooperation, establishing infectious disease control mechanisms, particularly with Southeast Asian countries, enhancing capacity building and personnel training, conducting crisis-focused health drills, exploring the potential of traditional medicine, collaborating on healthcare systems and policies, and institutionalizing health assistance for BRI countries, particularly poorer nations¹³. These documents provided a roadmap for specific areas of cooperation, offering insight into China’s health diplomacy. Among these areas, ASEAN played

⁹ China and the World in the New Era // The State Council the People’s Republic of China. 27.09.2019. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201909/27/content_WS5d8d80f9c6d0bcf8c4c142ef.html (accessed: 01.04.2021).

¹⁰ Chow-Bing N. COVID-19, Belt and Road Initiative and the Health Silk Road: Implications for Southeast Asia // Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. October 2020. URL: http://www.iis.fudan.edu.cn/_upload/article/files/ce/74/cafe2f0b4384bb467e261c71afe2/5b170623-de28-4233-bd90-8609e02eec65.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2021). 22 p. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung was recognized as an undesirable organization in Russia.

¹¹ Pal D., Bhatia R. The BRI in Post-Coronavirus South Asia // Carnegie India. 26.05.2020. URL: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Pal_Corona_BRI4.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2021). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was recognized as an undesirable organization in Russia.

¹² Vision And Actions On Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt And 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road // The State Council of the People’s Republic of China. 30.03.2015. URL: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyy/qwfb/1084.htm> (accessed: 01.04.2021).

¹³ Chow-Bing N. COVID-19, Belt and Road Initiative and the Health Silk Road: Implications for Southeast Asia // Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. October 2020. URL: http://www.iis.fudan.edu.cn/_upload/article/files/ce/74/cafe2f0b4384bb467e261c71afe2/5b170623-de28-4233-bd90-8609e02eec65.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2021). 22 p. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung was recognized as an undesirable organization in Russia.

a significant role as BRI partners, particularly in infectious disease control.

The Health Silk Road (HSR) initiative elevated health within the BRI framework, focusing on activities such as organizing high-level regional health forums, establishing the Belt and Road Public Health Network, enhancing professional capacity and training, collaborating in monitoring, controlling, and preventing infectious diseases, scientific research and development, and the use of traditional medicine. Other focal areas include health assistance and contributions, exchanges between healthcare systems, projects on maternal and child health, trade and investment in the healthcare sector, health standardization, and improving access to medication¹⁴.

China's health policies in Southeast Asia are also detailed in various agreements with ASEAN, including Memoranda of Understanding, joint statements, and action plans. For instance, the *Action Plan (POA) to Implement the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity for the 2016–2020 period* includes initiatives such as strengthening policy dialogue and exchanges through existing mechanisms, implementing a Memorandum of Understanding on Health Cooperation, preventing, controlling, and treating diseases, improving public health and living standards, and promoting cooperation in traditional medicine, pharmaceuticals, and health technology¹⁵. The 2021–2025 POA expands this collaboration to support innovation, enhance healthcare service quality, implement Universal Health Coverage (UHC), address healthy aging, and contribute to the ASEAN Cultural

Declaration for a Peaceful, Inclusive, Flexible, Healthy, and Harmonious Society¹⁶.

In 2020, China's *International Development Cooperation in the New Era* document emphasized contributions to a Global Health Community by actively supporting developing countries in the fight against COVID-19. This support includes providing medical supplies, technological collaboration, dispatching health expert groups, and a \$2 billion international assistance fund for countries severely affected by COVID-19, especially developing countries; helping these nations improve their public health systems¹⁷. Another document, *Combating COVID-19: China in Action*, reinforces China's commitment to deploying medical expertise and essential supplies where needed, sharing information and experiences, and collaborating on research. These documents illustrate China's diplomatic health activities in Southeast Asia, emphasizing collaboration, support, and aid through various mechanisms, projects, and health initiatives, with a focus on infectious disease prevention.

Deployment of China's Health Diplomacy Activities in Southeast Asia

Participation in Regional Health Mechanisms

One of the most significant manifestations of China's health diplomacy in Southeast Asia is its active involvement in establishing, participating in, and maintaining health cooperation mechanisms in the region. Some of the key regional health cooperation mechanisms involving China include:

- **ASEAN+3 High-Level Official's Meeting on Health Development (APT-SOMHD):** Recently, special teleconferences have been

¹⁴ Chow-Bing N. What's behind China's controversial Health Silk Road efforts // Channel News Asia. 31.05.2020. URL: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/china-health-silk-road-what-is-it-push-influence-covid19-coronav-933506> (accessed: 01.04.2021).

¹⁵ Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2016–2020) // ASEAN. 2016. URL: <https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/November/27th-summit/ASEAN-China%20POA%20%202016-2020.pdf> (accessed: 01.04.2021). 23 p.

¹⁶ Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN – China Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity (2021–2025) // ASEAN. 2021. URL: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ASEAN-China-POA-2021-2025_Updated-with-ANNEX.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2021). 28 p.

¹⁷ China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era // The State Council the People's Republic of China. 2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content_WS5ffa6bbbc6d0f72576943922.html (accessed: 03.04.2021).

held, such as on February 3, 2020, focusing on the 2019-nCoV¹⁸.

• **ASEAN-China High-Level Meeting on Health Development (AC-SOMHD):** Held annually, the 9th AC-SOMHD meeting in Siem Reap, Cambodia, on April 4, 2019, agreed on priority areas for cooperation, including non-communicable diseases, active aging, infectious diseases (dengue fever, malaria, schistosomiasis, HIV/AIDS), and traditional medicine¹⁹.

• **ASEAN-China Health Minister's Meeting (ACHMM):** Held biennially, the 7th ACHMM on August 30, 2019²⁰, focused on setting new priorities for ASEAN-China health cooperation for the years 2020–2021, emphasizing innovation to enhance healthcare service quality. This event has continued to be organized regularly since then, serving as a crucial platform for health cooperation between ASEAN member states and China. Subsequent meetings have addressed emerging health challenges and strengthened regional collaboration in healthcare.

• **China-ASEAN Health Cooperation Forum:** Held biennially, this forum aims to promote the exchange of experiences on major public health issues, support traditional medicine, and enhance communication and coordination in international organizations²¹.

In addition, China and ASEAN collaborate through multilateral forums to strengthen health cooperation:

• **Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance (MBDS):** This network focuses on cross-border

cooperation at selected locations to enhance capacity in monitoring infectious diseases and responding to outbreaks. The mechanism is maintained with members regularly participating in cross-border meetings, conferences, and workshops on regional health issues²².

• **Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC):** Originally focused on water resource management, the LMC's scope has expanded to include livelihoods, environment, health, and community health. One of the priorities of the LMC is the prevention and control of infectious diseases, with a particular emphasis on establishing and improving early warning systems and common monitoring mechanisms. Most recently, on June 8, 2021, during the 6th LMC Foreign Minister's Meeting, there was an agreement to enhance collaboration in the production of vaccines, medical supplies, and technology transfer. Additionally, the use of the LMC Special Fund for Community Health was endorsed to ensure the ultimate victory over the pandemic²³.

There are also various health cooperation projects and initiatives, such as the China-ASEAN Hospital Management Cooperation Forum and the China-ASEAN Public Health Cooperation Initiative.

While the study outlines the various health cooperation mechanisms established between China and ASEAN, it is crucial to assess their practical effectiveness objectively. Despite the proliferation of platforms and initiatives, sev-

¹⁸ Fighting Covid-19: China in Action // The State Council the People's Republic of China. 2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202006/07/content_WS5edc559ac6d066592a449030.html (accessed: 01.04.2021).

¹⁹ ASEAN plus three senior health officials reaffirm cooperation to stop spread of 2019-ncov // ASEAN. 2020. URL: <http://aseanhealthcare.org/article/detail/28> (accessed: 01.05.2021).

²⁰ ASEAN Secretariat Information Paper April 2020 // ASEAN. 2020. URL: <https://asean.org/storage/2012/05/Overview-of-ASEAN-China-Relations-22-Apr-2020-00000002.pdf> (accessed: 01.05.2021).

²¹ Nanning declaration on China – ASEAN health cooperation and development // ASEAN. 2016. URL: <https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-10/29/5125850/files/79c4cc63d1224e3a9ed8a88de3220a8a.doc> (accessed: 01.05.2021).

²² Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance E-Newsletter NO.70 // WHO. 2021. <https://extranet.who.int/sph/news/mekong-basin-disease-surveillance-e-newsletter-no70> (accessed: 05.04.2021).

²³ Joint Statement on Enhancing Sustainable Development Cooperation of the Lancang-Mekong Countries // The State Council of the People's Republic of China. 2021. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/ministrydocument/202106/09/content_WS60c029edc6d0df57f98daf78.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

eral challenges persist, hindering their optimal functionality.

First, some mechanisms lack robust governance structures and sustainable financing models, hampering their operational capabilities. For instance, the MBDS network suffers from inadequate leadership and severely limited funding, mobilizing only \$20,000–\$30,000 annually [Zhu et al. 2019]. These constraints undermine the network's ability to fulfill its intended roles effectively, relegating it to disseminating newsletters rather than actively monitoring and responding to disease outbreaks.

Second, the multitude of overlapping mechanisms and initiatives may inadvertently lead to duplication of efforts, inefficient resource allocation, and coordination challenges. The lack of a centralized, streamlined approach could result in fragmented efforts, diminishing the overall impact of health cooperation endeavors.

Third, while the established mechanisms facilitate information exchange and dialogue among health officials, their tangible impacts on enhancing regional healthcare capacities and preparedness remain unclear. Concrete outcomes, such as joint research initiatives, capacity-building programs, or harmonized regional health policies, have yet to be extensively documented and evaluated.

Overall, the degree of active participation and commitment from AMS varies, with some countries demonstrating greater engagement than others. This uneven involvement could create disparities in the distribution of benefits and limit the mechanisms' ability to address regional health challenges holistically. It is

worth noting that some of these mechanisms are relatively new, and their long-term sustainability and effectiveness may become more evident over time. Therefore, periodic assessments and evaluations are crucial to identify areas for improvement, address shortcomings, and ensure that the established mechanisms remain responsive to evolving regional health needs.

Assisting Efforts: Funding, Healthcare Supplies, and Personnel Assistance

Support and aid activities play a crucial role in China's health diplomacy. In 2020, Premier Li Keqiang declared China's commitment to assisting ASEAN through non-repayable aid. This assistance involved using commercial channels, supporting the establishment of the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund, contributing through the ASEAN-China Cooperation Fund, and the APT Cooperation Fund. China pledged \$10 million to the Asia Development Bank Poverty Reduction and Regional Cooperation Fund to aid regional disease control programs. It also welcomed the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank's proposal for a \$5 billion COVID-19 Recovery Facility²⁴. China agreed to establish an APT medical supplies reserve and committed to contributing to the ASEAN Response Fund²⁵. Notably, China was the first partner to complete a \$1 million contribution to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund²⁶. In April 2020, China donated medical supplies to ASEAN, including 75,000 surgical masks, 300 bottles of hand sanitizer (500ml each), and 35 infrared thermometers²⁷. In Table 1, specific details of China's healthcare aid to AMS (ASEAN Member States) are outlined as follows:

²⁴ Speech by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang at Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 // Xinhua. 2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/speeches/202004/15/content_WS5e965ef5c6d0c201c2cc0eee.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

²⁵ Wibisono A.A. Mitigating the Geopolitical Fallout in ASEAN – China Cooperation in Overcoming COVID-19 Crises // Fudan University. 2020. URL: http://www.iis.fudan.edu.cn/_upload/article/files/ce/74/cafe2f0b4384_bb467e261c71afe2/5b170623-de28-4233-bd90-8609e02eec65.pdf (accessed: 07.07.2021).

²⁶ Xijun D. COVID-19 vaccines open new prospect for China and ASEAN cooperation // The Jakarta Post. 12.03.2021. URL: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2021/03/11/covid-19-vaccines-open-new-prospect-for-china-and-asean-cooperation.html> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

²⁷ China donates medical supplies to ASEAN Secretariat for COVID-19 prevention // ASEAN. 2020. URL: <https://asean.org/china-donates-medical-supplies-asean-secretariat-covid-19-prevention/> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

Table 1 continuation of Table 1
China's healthcare aid to ASEAN Member States

Recipient Country	Time	Numbers and Categories
Cambodia	17/3/2020	Medical supplies (test kits, clothing, surgical masks ²⁸)
	23/3/2020	7 healthcare experts along with epidemic prevention materials
	29/3/2020	1 million masks ²⁹
	21/4/2020	20,000 PT masks, 3,000 N95 masks, and 500 protection cloths ³⁰
	7/2/2021	600,000 doses of vaccine ³¹
	29/4/2021	88,000 boxes of Lianhua Qingwen Capsules ³²
Laos	18/3/2020	Testing kits ³³
	29-30/3/2020	Health experts and 2,016 sets of test kits, 5,000 sets of protection cloths, 405,000 masks ³⁴
	24/4/2020	Medical team and medical supplies ³⁵
	26/11/2020	Anti-pandemic equipment (patrol vehicles and test kits – approximately 460,000 Yuan) ³⁶
	8/2/2021	300,000 doses of Sinofarm vaccine ³⁷
	4/5/2021	25 health experts and medical supplies ³⁸
	10/5/2021	Relief package of 15.5 billion kip (including ventilators, disinfectants, masks, gloves, protection cloths, and testing equipment) ³⁹

²⁸ Fook L.L. China's COVID-19 assistance to Southeast Asia: Uninterrupted aid amid global uncertainties // ThinkChina. 10.06.2020. URL: <https://www.thinkchina.sg/chinas-aid-southeast-asia-amid-adversity-sign-deeper-cooperation-ahead> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ China donates medical supplies to Cambodia's Phnom Penh Capital Hall for COVID-19 fight // Xinhua. 22.04.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202004/22/content_WS5e9f98ecc6d0b3f0e949614d.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

³¹ The Ministry of Health received 500,000 doses of SINOPHARM's Vero-Cell vaccine // Ministry of Health of Vietnam. 2021. URL: https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-lanh-dao-bo/-/asset_publisher/TW6LTp1ZtwaN/content/tiep-nhan-500-000-lieu-vaccine-vero-cell-cua-sinopharm (accessed: 07.07.2021).

³² China donates traditional medicine to Cambodia for treating COVID-19 patients // Xinhua. 01.05.2021. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202105/01/content_WS608c8d6ac6d0df57f98d8e82.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

³³ Fook L.L. Op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ China's Yunnan donates anti-pandemic supplies to Laos, Myanmar // Xinhua. 26.05.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202011/26/content_WS5fbfb386c6d0f72576940bcf.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

³⁷ The Ministry of Health received 500,000 doses of SINOPHARM's Vero-Cell vaccine // Ministry of Health of Vietnam. 2021. URL: https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-lanh-dao-bo/-/asset_publisher/TW6LTp1ZtwaN/content/tiep-nhan-500-000-lieu-vaccine-vero-cell-cua-sinopharm (accessed: 07.07.2021).

³⁸ Chinese medical team arrives in Laos to help fight against COVID-19 // Xinhua. 05.05.2021. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202105/05/content_WS60920e5fc6d0df57f98d90ed.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

³⁹ Chinese medical team arrives in Laos to help fight COVID-19 // China International Development Cooperation Agency. 08.05.2021. URL: http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2021-05/08/c_619287.htm#:~:text=Based%20on%20the%20situation%20of,protocols%2C%20medical%20technologies%2C%20pandemic%20response (accessed: 07.07.2021).

Continuation of Table 1

Recipient Country	Time	Numbers and Categories
Philippines	3/2/2020	200,000 PT masks ⁴⁰
	16/3/2020	2,000 sets of test kits ⁴¹
	21/3/2020	100,000 sets of test kits, 100,000 PT masks, 10,000 KN95 masks, and 10,000 personal protection equipment (PPE) ⁴²
	28/3/2020	500,000 masks ⁴³
	5/4/2020	12 health experts, 30 ventilators, 5,000 sets of protection cloths, 300,000 medical masks, 30,000 N95 masks, and 5,000 face shields, along with 12 tons of other pandemic control materials ⁴⁴
	10/5/2020	Over 150,000 sets of test kits and 18,000 sets of protection cloths ⁴⁵
	10/2020	250,000 sets of test kits, 1.87 million PT masks, PPE, and other contributions ⁴⁶
	28/2 – 6/6/2021	3 batches of Sinovac vaccine ⁴⁷ (after committing to provide 300,000 doses on 1/2021) ⁴⁸
Myanmar	11/3/2020	Medical supplies including PT masks and hand dryers ⁴⁹
	17/3/2020	2,016 sets of test kits ⁵⁰
	26/3/2020	200,000 PT masks, 5,000 KN95 masks, and 5,000 protection cloths ⁵¹
	8/4/2020	Medical team and medical supplies (testing kits, 8,500 KN95 masks, 60,000 single-use masks, and 5,500 protection cloths) ⁵²
	24/4/2020	A medical team consisting of 6 people and KN95 masks ⁵³
	13/5/2020	150,000 sets of test kits and 18,000 PPE ⁵⁴
	13/5/2020	162,000 sets of testing kits, 3.95 million PT masks, 48,600 PPE, and other supplies ⁵⁵

⁴⁰ *Fook L.L.* Op. cit.⁴¹ *Ibid.*⁴² *Ibid.*⁴³ *Ibid.*⁴⁴ China sends medical expert team to Philippines // Xinhua. 05.04.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202004/05/content_WS5e896f50c6d0c201c2cc036e.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).⁴⁵ *Fook L.L.* Op. cit.⁴⁶ Chinese embassy donates medical equipment to Philippines to help combat COVID-19 // Xinhua. 21.10.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202010/21/content_WS5f90184dc6d0f7257693e339.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).⁴⁷ Additional batch of China's Sinovac vaccine arrives in Philippines // Xinhua. 06.06.2021. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202106/06/content_WS60bc5ceac6d0df57f98dac81.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).⁴⁸ The Ministry of Health received 500,000 doses of SINOPHARM's Vero-Cell vaccine // Ministry of Health of Vietnam. 2021. URL: https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-lanh-dao-bo/-/asset_publisher/TW6LTp1ZtwaN/content/tiep-nhan-500-000-lieu-vaccine-vero-cell-cua-sinopharm (accessed: 07.07.2021).⁴⁹ *Fook L.L.* Op. cit.⁵⁰ *Ibid.*⁵¹ *Ibid.*⁵² *Ibid.*⁵³ *Ibid.*⁵⁴ *Ibid.*⁵⁵ China provides medical supplies for Myanmar's COVID-19 fight. // Xinhua. 13.05.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202005/13/content_WS5ebbbc48c6d0b3f0e9497933.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

Continuation of Table 1

Recipient Country	Time	Numbers and Categories
Myanmar	11/11/2020	46,000 N95 masks, 30,000 safety goggles, 30,000 protective clothes, and 10 ventilators (approximately 8 million Yuan) ⁵⁶
	26/11/2020	Pandemic control tools including patrol vehicles and test kits (approximately 410,000 Yuan) ⁵⁷
	11/12/2020	30,000 PPE, 30,000 isolation gowns, 42,000 N95 masks, and 150,000 PT masks (approximately 2 million Yuan) ⁵⁸
	2/2021	100,000 PT masks, 29,760 N95 masks, 12,975 PPE, and 10,000 medical gloves ⁵⁹
	2/5/2021	500,000 doses of vaccine ⁶⁰
Malaysia	19/3/2020	5,000 masks and 10,000 face shields ⁶¹
	26/3/2020	20,000 masks ⁶²
	28/3/2020	500,000 PT masks, 100,000 KN95 masks, 100,000 sets of test kits, 50,000 PPE, and 200 ventilators ⁶³
	29/3/2020	166,000 masks ⁶⁴
	18/4/2020	Medical team ⁶⁵
	8/5/2020	Masks (out of a total of 600,000 for 6 countries) ⁶⁶
	29/3/2021	100,000 N95 masks, 500,000 PT masks, 50,000 sets of protective clothing, and 200 portable ventilators ⁶⁷
Indonesia	22/3/2020	9 tons of medical supplies and 17 tons of medical materials including 800,000 sets of test kits, 50,000 gloves, and other materials ⁶⁸
	27/3/2020	40 tons of medical supplies and equipment including test kit sets, masks, PPE, and ventilators ⁶⁹
	12/5/2020	Medical supplies and equipment ⁷⁰

⁵⁶ China's Yunnan donates anti-COVID-19 supplies to Myanmar // Xinhua. 11.11.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202011/11/content_WS5fabf075c6d0f7257693f789.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ China donates more medical supplies for Myanmar's fight against COVID-19 // Xinhua. 11.12.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202012/11/content_WS5fd368e2c6d0f72576941bea.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁵⁹ China donates more COVID-19 protective equipment to Myanmar // Xinhua. 2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202107/02/content_WS60deff48c6d0df57f98dc52a.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁶⁰ China-donated COVID-19 vaccines arrive in Myanmar // China International Development Cooperation Agency. 08.05.2021. URL: http://en.cidca.gov.cn/2021-05/08/c_619286.htm (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁶¹ Foak L.L. Op. cit.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ China donates more medical supplies to Nepal, Pakistan, Malaysia // The State Council of the People's Republic of China. 31.03.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/videos/202003/31/content_WS5e82b0e7c6d0c201c2cbfd86.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁶⁸ Foak L.L. Op. cit.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Continuation of Table 1

Recipient Country	Time	Numbers and Categories
Thailand	19/3 – 13/4/2020	Undetermined quantity of medical supplies ⁷¹
	8/5/2020	Masks (out of a total of 600,000 for 6 countries) ⁷²
	12/5/2020	Medical supplies including 100,000 medical masks, 15,000 PT masks, 10,500 safety goggles, 7,000 PPE, 120 boxes of gloves, 6 ventilators, 10 electrocardiograms, 30 infusion pumps, 100 infrared thermometers, and 6,000 sets of test kits ⁷³
	6/2021	1.3 million PT masks, 70,000 N95 masks, 150,000 sets of test kits, and 70,000 PPE ⁷⁴
Brunei	22/3/2020	Medical equipment and supplies ⁷⁵
	23/4/2020	Medical supplies including 100,000 KN95 masks and 1,000 isolation gowns; 42,158 USD for the COVID-19 Relief Fund in Brunei ⁷⁶
	12/5/2020	Medical supplies and equipment from PLA ⁷⁷
Singapore	5/2020	620,000 masks ⁷⁸
	8/5/2020	Masks (out of a total of 600,000 for 6 countries) ⁷⁹
Vietnam	8/5/2020	Masks (out of a total of 600,000 for 6 countries) ⁸⁰
	12/5/2020	Medical supplies (KN95 masks, PT masks, PPE, gloves, safety goggles) ⁸¹
	29/9/2020	300,000 PT masks and 20,000 medical face shields ⁸²
	20/6/2021	500,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine and 502,400 single-use injection needles ⁸³

Source: The group of authors compiled

The comprehensive data presented in Table 1 on China's healthcare aid to ASEAN nations during the COVID-19 pandemic provides valuable insights into the nature and patterns of China's health diplomacy efforts in the region. A closer examination of these data

reveals several noteworthy observations. Firstly, the aid disbursement appears to be strategically prioritized, with countries perceived as having closer ties or greater geostrategic significance to China receiving more substantial and timely assistance. For instance,

⁷¹ Fook L.L. Op. cit.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ China donates medical equipment to Thailand to stem COVID-19 // Xinhua. 30.06.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202006/30/content_WS5efa91f9c6d05a0f8970665e.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁷⁵ Fook L.L. Op. cit.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ China donates masks to Singapore to assist in COVID-19 combat // Xinhua. 06.05.2020. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202005/06/content_WS5eb1f437c6d0b3f0e9497052.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁷⁹ Fook L.L. Op. cit.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Van N. China donated 320,000 medical masks to Vietnam to prevent the COVID-19 epidemic // Ministry of Health of Vietnam. 29.09.2020. URL: <https://ncov.moh.gov.vn/web/guest/-/6851664-2> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁸³ The Ministry of Health received 500,000 doses of SINOPHARM's Vero-Cell vaccine // Ministry of Health of Vietnam. 20.06.2021. URL: https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-lanh-dao-bo/-/asset_publisher/TW6LTp1ZtwaN/content/tiep-nhan-500-000-lieu-vaccine-vero-cell-cua-sinopharm (accessed: 07.07.2021).

Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, which have committed to building a “community with a shared future” with China, were among the earliest recipients of aid, including medical teams and substantial quantities of PPE and testing kits. Secondly, there is a discernible symbolism of the aid provided. While most ASEAN nations received civilian medical teams, countries like Laos and Myanmar additionally received military medical teams, which are considered higher-ranking and potentially carry greater political significance. Thirdly, the data suggests a potential preference for bilateral aid over multilateral mechanisms, with direct country-to-country assistance being more prevalent than contributions to regional initiatives or funds, such as the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund.

Overall, an analysis of the aid timeline reveals a tendency for vaccine diplomacy to follow commercial vaccine procurement agreements, with aid often arriving later and in smaller quantities compared to commercial contracts. This pattern could potentially undermine the altruistic narrative surrounding China’s health diplomacy efforts. It is important to note that these observations are based solely on the provided data and may not represent the complete picture of China’s health diplomacy in the region. Nevertheless, they offer valuable insights into the potential underlying motivations and strategic considerations shaping China’s aid allocation decisions, which merit further investigation and analysis.

Amplifying Healthcare Capacity Across Southeast Asia

China’s health diplomacy in Southeast Asia is also evident in its efforts to assist ASEAN in enhancing its healthcare capabilities.

Exchange of Information and Experience

China facilitates the exchange of technical expertise, health information, and experiences by organizing forums and conferences involving officials and health experts at various levels. For example, the APT-SOMHD Special Teleconference on 2019-nCoV held on February 3, 2020, where China proposed exchanging experiences in dealing with COVID-19⁸⁴. China and ASEAN have also promoted the sharing of experiences through teleconferences on February 20, 2020, and March 31, 2020⁸⁵; the online conference on sharing experiences in responding to COVID-19 by the ASEAN-China Health and University Organization on May 19, 2020⁸⁶; and the Special Conference on ASEAN-China Public Health Cooperation on May 21, 2021⁸⁷.

Development of Human Resources

China has established various training programs, both short-term and long-term, in the field of health for Southeast Asia. Notable examples include the *China-ASEAN Talent Training in Public Health (2015–2017)* program and the *China-ASEAN Silk Road Health Workforce Training Program (2020–2022)* announced by President Xi Jinping on November 27, 2020, with the goal of training 1,000 administrative and specialized healthcare personnel in ASEAN countries⁸⁸. These

⁸⁴ ASEAN plus three senior health officials reaffirm cooperation stop spread 2019-ncov // ASEAN. 04.02.2020. URL: <https://asean.org/asean-plus-three-senior-health-officials-reaffirm-cooperation-to-stop-spread-of-2019-ncov/> (accessed: 06.07.2021).

⁸⁵ Fook L.L. China’s COVID-19 assistance to Southeast Asia: Uninterrupted aid amid global uncertainties // Think China 10.06.2020. URL: <https://www.thinkchina.sg/chinas-aid-southeast-asia-amid-adversity-sign-deeper-cooperation-ahead> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁸⁶ Online Conference for Experience Sharing on COVID-19 Response by ASEAN-China University Consortium on Medicine and Health Successfully Held // ASEAN-China Centre. 19.05.2020. URL: <http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2020-05/4954.html> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁸⁷ Symposium on ASEAN-China Public Health Cooperation Successfully Held in Xuzhou // ASEAN-China Centre. 21.05.2020. URL: <http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2021-05/7762.html> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁸⁸ Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China At the Opening Ceremony of the 17th China-ASEAN Expo and China-ASEAN Business and Investment Summit // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. 27.11.2020. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11341490.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

training initiatives cover various aspects of healthcare, such as public health management, disease prevention and control, traditional medicine practices, and advanced medical technologies. By investing in human resource development, China seeks to strengthen healthcare systems and improve overall health outcomes in Southeast Asian countries.

Collaboration in Medical Research and Promotion of Traditional Medicine

China encourages alliances between hospitals, research institutes, and medical schools to foster research collaboration. The establishment of the China-ASEAN University Consortium on Health and Wellness on October 14, 2019, exemplifies this effort. Collaboration in medical research between China and ASEAN through laboratories, academic organizations, government agencies, and private companies is becoming increasingly common⁸⁹. On October 27, 2020, the ASEAN-China Centre (ACC) organized an event on Friendly Cooperation on Vaccines between ASEAN and China, with the participation of officials from both sides and Sinovac Company⁹⁰. The second exchange took place on March 30, 2021⁹¹. China actively develops traditional medicine (TM) in Southeast Asia, with collaborations in various fields between China and ASEAN. Medicines for TM from China have been registered in Vietnam and Singapore⁹².

Overall, China actively engages in various healthcare cooperation mechanisms and agree-

ments in Southeast Asia. These collaborations cover a wide range of areas and are implemented rapidly during health emergencies. The improvement of healthcare capabilities in Southeast Asia is being closely monitored and implemented comprehensively.

China's Health Diplomacy in Southeast Asia: Regional Reactions and Domestic Impact
Reaction of Southeast Asian Countries

China's health diplomacy has provided substantial support to the healthcare sector in Southeast Asia, eliciting positive responses, particularly from countries with fewer conflicts with China. Conducted on a large scale and encompassing diverse fields, China's health diplomacy has engaged extensively with Southeast Asia's healthcare sector in both breadth and depth. While immediate relief efforts and mechanisms have addressed timely disease outbreaks, long-term investments in workforce training and research collaboration have the potential to enhance Southeast Asian countries' healthcare capabilities in the future. China's aid has notably contributed to the development of healthcare policies, improved healthcare infrastructure, and advancements in medical treatment technologies in recipient countries⁹³. Despite variations in the order and scale of assistance, all ASEAN Member States (AMS) have received healthcare aid from China since 2019⁹⁴. By June 2021, China had supplied or planned to supply 120 million vaccine doses to AMS, approximately 4.8 times more than the allocations from

⁸⁹ Joint statement from the founding of China – ASEAN University consortium on Medicine and Health // China – ASEAN University consortium on Medicine and Health. 27.09.2021. URL: <https://caucmh.bjmu.edu.cn/index/index/earticle.html?id=110> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹⁰ ACC Held Exchange on ASEAN-China Vaccine Friend Cooperation // ASEAN-China Centre. 27.10.2020. URL: <http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2020-10/5414.html> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹¹ 2nd Exchange on ASEAN-China Vaccine Friend Cooperation Held by ACC // ASEAN-China Centre. 30.03.2021. URL: <http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2021-03/7383.html> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹² Traditional Chinese Medicine in China // Xinhua. 06.12.2016. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/12/06/content_281475509333700.htm (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹³ China's Foreign Aid // Information Office of the State Council The People's Republic of China. 21.04.2011. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/09/09/content_281474986284620.htm (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹⁴ Rudolf M. China's health diplomacy during Covid-19 the BRI in action // SWP Comment. No. 9. 2021. URL: https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2021C09_ChinaHealthDiplomacy.pdf (accessed: 07.07.2021). 8 p.

the US and Europe through the COVAX program⁹⁵. The Philippines became the first country to receive China's COVID-19 vaccine, enabling the initiation of their vaccination program⁹⁶. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen even remarked, "If I don't rely on China, whom should I rely on?"⁹⁷

However, concerns persist regarding the quality of China's health diplomacy. Despite improvements brought about by existing health mechanisms between China and ASEAN, some opinions highlight ongoing issues. For instance, the MBDS lacks proper supervision and funding, making it challenging to fulfill its functions effectively. As noted by Zhu et al. [2019], "The current problem is that we do not have suitable leaders. Moreover, MBDS's funding capability is very limited, leading to significant difficulties in operations. It can only mobilize \$20,000–\$30,000 per year, barely enough to sustain the Secretariat. Currently, the only thing MBDS does is sending regular newsletters to its members." Similar issues are observed in healthcare support and aid activities, where delays and concerns about effectiveness have hindered China's aid from meeting expectations in Southeast Asia. For example, Cambodia and Laos received only 600,000 and 300,000 vaccine doses, respectively, in early February 2021. Thailand received 200,000 doses two weeks later, and the Philippines received over 600,000 doses at the end of the month, later than anticipated. China committed to providing 300,000 doses to Myanmar but experienced delays in delivery⁹⁸. Additionally, doubts

about vaccine quality persist, with criticisms in countries like the Philippines, where some lawmakers criticized the government for purchasing Sinovac. Opposition Senator Risa Hontiveros accused President Duterte's administration of "forcing their preference for Chinese vaccines down the public's throat without emergency use authorization or consistent data"⁹⁹. China's vaccines also faced opposition in Malaysia and Singapore, with former Singaporean Foreign Ministry official Bilahari Kausikan stating, "Right now, I won't take any vaccine from China because they don't have enough data"¹⁰⁰.

Concerns are also raised about the economic and political rationale behind China's health diplomacy activities. Although China asserts that its health diplomacy, particularly aid activities, is devoid of any accompanying political conditions, the reality suggests hidden agendas behind these activities. Economic motives are evident in China's vaccine aid, which typically arrives later and in smaller quantities compared to commercial contracts. For example, China donated 600,000 doses to the Philippines only after the country ordered 25 million doses¹⁰¹. Political motives are also evident in the differences in the scale, timing, and types of aid provided. Aid often exhibits a unilateral nature, prioritizing countries with close relationships or significant benefits to China, especially those linked to the BRI. Countries like the Philippines, Cambodia, and Myanmar received substantial material aid early on. In contrast, Vietnam and Singapore received limited support and only in the later

⁹⁵ China vaccine doses to asean top 120 million, 4.8 times UN program // Kyodo News. 21.06.2021. URL: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2021/06/21/china-vaccine-doses-to-asean-top-120-million-48-times-un-program.html> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹⁶ Additional batch of China's Sinovac vaccine arrives in Philippines // Xinhua. 06.06.2021. URL: http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international/exchanges/202106/06/content_WS60bc5ceac6d0df57f98dac81.html (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Linh H. China's vaccine diplomacy "stumbled" in Southeast Asia // Tin Tuc. 08.04.2021. URL: <https://baotintuc.vn/thegioi/ngoai-giao-vaccine-cua-trung-quoc-vap-chan-tai-dong-nam-a-20210407165813387.htm> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Yang S. Rising-Power competition: The Covid-19 vaccine diplomacy of China and India // NBR. 19.03.2021. URL: <https://www.nbr.org/publication/rising-power-competition-the-covid-19-vaccine-diplomacy-of-china-and-india/> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

stages (from April onwards). Researchers Yeremia and Raditio emphasize, “China’s vaccine diplomacy is conditional. Beijing can use vaccine supply to advance its diplomatic agenda, especially on sensitive issues, such as its claims in the South China Sea”¹⁰². The distinction in the type of medical teams sent to Southeast Asia also raises suspicions. Out of 10 AMS, 5 received civilian medical teams from China. Cambodia was the earliest recipient, with China emphasizing the aid as a response to Cambodia’s assistance and a demonstration of friendship with “Cambodia as steel.” Laos and Myanmar received additional military medical teams, which are considered higher-ranking and carry greater political significance. These three countries have also committed to building a “community with a shared future” with China¹⁰³.

While there are certain limitations, overall, the reaction from ASEAN and recipient countries to China’s aid appears relatively positive, especially among high-level leadership. Most accept China’s assistance, and there are no public reports from ASEAN or member states regarding the quality of China’s healthcare support¹⁰⁴. However, it is important to note that this positive reaction may not necessarily reflect the sentiments of the general public in these countries. There could be undercurrents of skepticism or concern about China’s motives and the potential strings attached to the aid, particularly in countries with strained relations with China. Additionally, the quality and timeliness of the aid may be viewed differently by healthcare professionals and experts on the ground compared to political leaders. As China’s health diplomacy efforts continue to evolve, ongoing monitoring and assessment from diverse stakeholders will be crucial in understanding the true impact and implications of this approach on the region’s public health landscape and geopolitical dynamics.

Impact of Health Diplomacy on China

The impact of China’s health diplomacy efforts in Southeast Asia remains a subject of considerable debate. While some view these efforts as a strategic move to enhance influence and secure economic benefits, others caution against the inherent risks of leveraging healthcare as a diplomatic tool. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this issue, it is essential to examine the various impacts of health diplomacy on China from security, economic, and regional geopolitical influence perspectives.

Firstly, regarding security, health diplomacy aids China by building healthcare capabilities in neighboring regions. When Southeast Asia effectively enhances its healthcare systems, China’s ability to prevent diseases early and from a distance also increases. This contributes to China’s efforts to defend against infectious diseases. A robust regional healthcare system acts as an early warning system and line of defense, enabling China to detect and respond to potential outbreaks before they reach its territory [Zhuravleva 2021]. This proactive approach to disease prevention not only safeguards China’s national security but also reduces the economic burden associated with managing large-scale health crises within its borders [Rogozhina 2021]. Consequently, China’s investment in Southeast Asia’s healthcare infrastructure can be seen as a strategic measure to bolster its overall security posture.

Secondly, from an economic standpoint, health diplomacy in Southeast Asia provides China with opportunities to gain economic benefits. Countries receiving assistance become markets for Chinese healthcare systems and technology. China aims to supply diagnostic and treatment equipment and pharmaceuticals to Southeast Asian countries. Health monitoring applications, electronic prescription apps, and tools for testing and statistics for relevant

¹⁰² Hoang V. China’s vaccine diplomacy encounters obstacles // VnExpress. 26.01.2021. URL: <https://vnexpress.net/ngoi-giao-vaccine-cua-trung-quoc-vuong-tro-ngai-4226451.html> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

¹⁰³ Fook L.L. China’s COVID-19 assistance to Southeast Asia: Uninterrupted aid amid global uncertainties // Think China 10.06.2020. URL: <https://www.thinkchina.sg/chinas-aid-southeast-asia-amid-adversity-sign-deeper-cooperation-ahead> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

authorities may become prevalent in these countries¹⁰⁵. Remote healthcare collaboration also opens up opportunities for Chinese telecommunications companies. Despite doubts about effectiveness, China stands to profit from technology transfer in manufacturing and selling vaccines to Southeast Asian countries. This health diplomacy strategy aligns with China's broader economic ambitions through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), facilitating greater economic integration and dependence on Chinese goods and services¹⁰⁶. Furthermore, the sharing of medical data and collaborative research projects foster knowledge transfer, allowing Chinese firms to gain valuable insights into regional healthcare needs and tailor their offerings accordingly. These economic prospects incentivize China's commitment to health diplomacy as a means of cultivating long-term trade partnerships and expanding its sphere of economic influence throughout Southeast Asia [Zhuravleva 2021].

Thirdly, in terms of influence, health diplomacy helps China to enhance its national image in Southeast Asia. According to a November 2020 survey conducted by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute of Singapore, 44.2% of respondents believed that China had "helped the most for the region in dealing with COVID-19," surpassing Japan, the EU, and the US. This perception may be attributed to China's "mask diplomacy"¹⁰⁷. Health diplomacy also provides China with a competitive advantage in the region, considering the weaknesses in the healthcare systems of developed countries observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic revealed the US's heavy reliance on China for healthcare and pharmaceutical products. Importing 50% of PPE, 70% of face masks, 57% of protective goggles and face shields, 39% of gloves, and 45% of protec-

tive clothing from China somewhat tarnished the image of the US as a superpower [Gauttam et al. 2020]. Conversely, during the initial stages of the pandemic, China's unilateral health aid marked its presence, while the US's unilateral health aid did not [Gauttam et al. 2020]. This presented an opportunity for China to fill the void and intensify competition in the healthcare sector.

Rogozhina [2021] has examined and assessed China's medical assistance to Southeast Asian countries in the fight against COVID-19, arguing that China's health diplomacy will yield four benefits for Beijing: (1) Health diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic is an indispensable part of China's foreign policy, aimed at consolidating the country's position in the region by enhancing goodwill; (2) Providing large-scale medical assistance to Southeast Asian countries helps China improve its "benevolent" image and surpass the United States in the role of the main humanitarian aid donor in the region; (3) Health diplomacy helps China promote the BRI project, develop economic trade relations with Southeast Asia, and protect its economic interests in the region; and (4) COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy is expected to further consolidate China's position in Southeast Asia if successful. Rogozhina argues that health diplomacy is an important tool for China to increase its influence and consolidate its position in Southeast Asia in strategic competition with other countries, especially the United States. However, the South China Sea dispute undermines China's positive image in the region as a "generous donor."

Despite revealing several shortcomings that affect diplomatic outcomes and China's overall interests, China's health diplomacy in Southeast Asia has achieved certain accom-

¹⁰⁵ Maude R., Fraser D. Chinese Diplomacy in Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 Pandemic // Asia Society Policy Institute. 20.06.2022. URL: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/chinese-diplomacy-southeast-asia-during-covid-19-pandemic> (accessed: 10.04.2024).

¹⁰⁶ Rogozhina N.G. China's support for Southeast Asian countries in the fight against Covid-19 // IMEMO. 14.10.2020. URL: <https://www.imemo.ru/special-rubrics/coronavirus-pandemic/text/pomoshty-kitaya-stranam-yugo-vostochnoy-azii-v-borybe-s-covid-19> (accessed: 12.04.2024).

¹⁰⁷ Lizhong Y., Dingding C. (2019). Is China's COVID-19 Diplomacy working in Southeast Asia? // The Diplomat. 20.02.2019. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/is-chinas-covid-19-diplomacy-working-in-southeast-asia/> (accessed: 07.07.2021).

pishments and positively impacted China's image in the region. China's investments in healthcare in Southeast Asia can be reasonably explained through the words of a former US Senator: "You don't pick a fight with someone who saved your child's life" [Frist 2007].

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In the contemporary globalized world, health diplomacy has emerged as a powerful instrument for nations to simultaneously safeguard public health interests and advance foreign policy objectives. This dual-purpose approach has gained significant traction, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic. From 2019 to 2021, China's health diplomacy initiatives in Southeast Asia exemplified this strategic paradigm. Aligning with the notion of "winning hearts and minds in developing nations by exporting healthcare services, expertise, and personnel" [Fauci 2007], China's activities spanned a wide array of domains and pursued multifaceted goals. These endeavors aimed to bolster the region's immediate disease response capabilities while concurrently enhancing long-term health-

care infrastructure and human resource development.

While China's health diplomacy policies initially yielded promising outcomes, facilitating an expanded political footprint as a major global player, several limitations and challenges have been exposed. Nevertheless, it is evident that health diplomacy will continue to be a crucial instrument in China's efforts to consolidate its influence within the Southeast Asian region. Despite the potential pitfalls, the strategic deployment of health diplomacy presents a promising avenue for nations to cultivate goodwill, foster international cooperation, and project soft power on the global stage.

However, it is imperative that such initiatives are implemented with transparency, accountability, and a genuine commitment to improving global public health outcomes, rather than merely pursuing narrow self-interests. As the world grapples with the enduring challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-present threat of future health emergencies, the responsible and ethical practice of health diplomacy will remain a critical imperative for all nations.

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МЕДИЦИНСКАЯ ДИПЛОМАТИЯ КИТАЯ В ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ ОПЫТ В КОНТЕКСТЕ COVID-19

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Резюме

В контексте глобализации и увеличения числа серьёзных вспышек заболеваний значительно возросло внимание мировой политики к вопросам здравоохранения. Вследствие этого здравоохранение переходит от периферийной, или реактивной, проблемы к более центральной позиции во внешнеполитических повестках дня. Крупные державы, включая Китай, всё чаще используют дипломатию в сфере здравоохранения как стратегический инструмент. Инициативы Китая

в области дипломатии здравоохранения распространяются по всему миру, с особым акцентом на Юго-Восточной Азии. В данном исследовании критически рассматриваются усилия Китая в области дипломатии здравоохранения в этом регионе. Оно начинается с аналитического обзора дипломатии здравоохранения, разъясняя контекстуальные факторы, стоящие за её появлением, и связанные с ней терминологические дебаты. Затем в исследовании категоризируются и тщательно анализируются конкретные меры дипломатии здравоохранения, предпринимаемые Китаем в Юго-Восточной Азии. Наконец, анализируются реакции стран-получателей и оценивается региональное влияние усилий Китая в области дипломатии здравоохранения. Исследование показывает, что дипломатия Китая в области здравоохранения в Юго-Восточной Азии охватывает широкий спектр деятельности, включая участие в региональных механизмах здравоохранения, предоставление медицинской помощи и материалов, а также усилия по повышению потенциала здравоохранения. Хотя эти инициативы в целом были восприняты положительно, особенно странами с более тесными связями с Китаем, сохраняются опасения относительно качества, своевременности и возможных политических мотивов за этой помощью. В исследовании делается вывод, что, несмотря на некоторые ограничения, дипломатия здравоохранения остаётся важным инструментом в стратегии Китая по укреплению своего влияния в Юго-Восточной Азии.

Ключевые слова:

Китай; Юго-Восточная Азия; АСЕАН; COVID-19; дипломатия здравоохранения