

## INDONESIA'S VACCINE DIPLOMACY FOR THE WORLD HEALTH

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7

### Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic and its spread continue haunting the world as the number of cases and victims continue increasing. To cope with the pandemic a number of countries launch vaccination programs and, at the same time, implements the policy of social distancing. However, when international collaboration is needed for global health, it seems that the advanced countries prioritize their interests. Instead of promoting international collaboration, developing countries apply their own ways. This paper will briefly discuss Indonesia's diplomacy to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic that threatens global health. As a president of a developing country, President Joko Widodo, in his speech at the UN General Assembly, reminded the importance of international collaboration and equal access for all countries to get vaccines. Indonesia and the Global Health and Foreign Policy Initiative (GHFPI) have promoted various resolutions related to global health, but developing countries are more concerned about their interests. In the end, Indonesia takes a diplomatic initiative to persuade various countries to get vaccines to break the spreading chain of COVID-19.*

### Introduction

The direction of a country's foreign policy must be in line with its national interests to achieve its common goals. Before the press on January 7, 2021, Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno LP Marsudi, stated Indonesia's five diplomatic priorities in 2021. The five priorities will be focusing on building national self-reliance and resilience in health care, supporting economic recovery and green development as well as sustainable development, strengthening the protection system for Indonesian citizens, contributing

to promote various regional and world issues, and safeguarding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia. Actually, those priorities did not come up without any cause. They appeared, instead, from the challenges that Indonesia faced in 2020.

Among the five priorities, the first priority, namely building national self-reliance and resilience in health care, will receive special attention because it is related to the COVID-19 pandemic which has caused a severe blow to many



countries in the world, including Indonesia. COVID-19 has damaged the world health and caused tremendous impacts on the national economies of many countries around the world. It has actually resulted in minus economic growth, increasing unemployment, and increasing number of poor people, among others.

In dealing with such bad conditions, countries in the world are competing to find a vaccine that can break the spreading chain of the pandemic. Vaccine discoveries in several countries like the US, UK and China have provided new enthusiasm for the world's economic recovery. However, as indicated by Foreign Minister Retno LP Marsudi, another problem comes to the fore, namely quality to access the vaccines as not all countries are able to get the vaccines. Speaking before the UN General Assembly in September 2020, President Joko Widodo warned about the importance of access to vaccines to end the COVID-19 pandemic.

From December 31, 2019 when the first case of this disease was reported in Wuhan, China, to January 7, 2021, there have been more than 86 million cases worldwide, claiming the death toll reaching 1.8 million (Kompas, January 5, 2021). In Indonesia, since the first case of COVID-19 was reported on March 2020 until January 20, 2021, some 939,948 people have been reported infected by the virus, more than 26,000 people of whom died (kompas.com., January 20, 2021). The number of cases and victims is expected to increase as a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, which can

spread more rapidly, is found. This situation has prompted Indonesia to close the door to foreign nationals who wish to enter the country on January 1-14, 2021. Deputy Speaker of the Indonesian Parliament Azis Samsudin props up the Government's measure because it will break the spreading chain of the new variant of COVID-19. This article will briefly analyze how Indonesia's diplomacy looks like in its efforts to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic that threatens global health?

### **Global Health and State Nationalism**

Global Health has at least three main issues as its characteristics: first, borderless pandemic; second, the need for global cooperation; and, third, justice in a sense that every country shall have equal access to health, particularly medicines. Initially, global health was considered as the domain of national policy, considering that each country has full responsibility for the health of its people. However, in its development, when the world enters a new era where sector and actor interconnection ups to another level, health turns out to be a focus of international cooperation.

New diseases caused by influenza viruses with new strains, or old diseases that re-emerge, have had more significant impacts today, given the larger and denser population and the faster and more massive mobility. When these diseases cause outbreaks, the international community must be ready to respond them with sufficient control and dissemination as well as equal distribution of accessible drugs/vaccines.

For decades, globalization has increased the intensity of international interactions and exchanges of people. Actually, rapid and massive movements of people have implications for the health condition of people around the world, especially due to the risk of spreading disease. This risk will increase if population movement is happening erratically. Refugees or asylum seekers who leave their original territory due to conflicts, for example, are particularly vulnerable to health problems like hunger and malnutrition and lack of access to adequate health care.

However, the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic that has been spreading since the last year has actually shown how the vision of state nationalism has been an obstacle to the spirit of multilateralism promoted by the UN and international organizations. A number of country leaders have weakened the authority of the World Health Organization (WHO), hindered coordinated responses launched by the UN, and applied the self-isolation policy in facing the pandemic. Under Donald Trump's leadership, the US withdrew from WHO and refused to fulfill its donation obligations to the World Health Organization. Likewise, after receiving criticism from WHO and many other countries, China finally allowed the world's health experts to visit Wuhan in order to find out how the virus first passed from animals to humans to prevent another pandemic from happening.

The weakening of international institutions has been actually coupled with the reluctance of many countries to provide accurate

information for WHO and to act in line with recommendations of WHO. A number of countries prioritize their national interests rather than the global health. International political conditions spoiled by a conflict between USA and China have made the response of each country to the pandemic uncoordinated. The spirit of protectionism for various medical devices has also strengthened in line with the attitude of countries that have closed their borders.

Finally, competition among countries in promoting COVID-19 vaccines in the international markets has actually forced poor and developing countries to wait a long time to get vaccines. Therefore, Indonesia has kept fighting for treating vaccines as global public goods. Indonesia wants all countries in the world to have equal access to safe vaccines at affordable prices. Global health will not fully recover if there are still countries that have not succeeded in defeating COVID-19.

### **Indonesian Vaccine Diplomacy**

Indonesian vaccine diplomacy aimed mainly at opening market access, paving the ways, and overcoming various obstacles is carried out through bilateral approaches involving all stakeholders. Although in various international forums Indonesia has repeatedly mentioned the importance of equality in accessing medical devices, including vaccines, Indonesia must make clever maneuvers to fight for its interests. And, thanks to the bilateral approaches, the Indonesian vaccine diplomacy in the COVID-19 case

has resulted in real and effective results.

Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has visited many countries such as China, England and Switzerland to ensure the availability of vaccines for the Indonesian people. By empowering the Indonesian Embassies, Indonesia has succeeded in joining the Advanced Market Commitment group, which means that Indonesia will enjoy 20 percent of the population provided by WHO to vaccines. Despite the principle of “all vaccine for same people in some countries”, WHO provides vaccines for only 20 percent of the total population of a country. Thanks to the bilateral approaches, Indonesia has successfully obtained vaccines for Sinovac (China), Pfizer (US), and AstraZeneca (UK). Indonesia’s main bilateral vaccine diplomacy is to ensure the availability of the 20 percent quota of the population provided by WHO.

In addition to the bilateral approach, Indonesia also takes multilateral approaches, which have actually been applied by Indonesia for a long time by integrating foreign policies in global health issues. Indonesia has entered into collaboration with South Africa, Brazil, Norway, France, Senegal, and Thailand to establish the Global Health and Foreign Policy Initiative (GHFPI) in September 2006 in New York. Subsequently, GHFPI sponsors the issuance of various resolutions of the UN in relation to infectious diseases, including: the Resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly No. 64/108

of 2009 concerning control of emerging infectious disease and health human resources; Resolution No. 65/95/2010 concerning global governance and achievement of the MDGs; Resolution No. 66/115 of 2011 concerning health, environment, and natural disasters; Resolution No. 67/81 of 2013 regarding Universal Health Coverage (UHC); and Resolution No. 68/98 of 2014 regarding global partnerships. Currently, all of these resolutions have just revealed their urgencies when the world must deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the 75th UN General Assembly in September 2020 attended by President Joko Widodo, once again, Indonesia came up with a proposal emphasizing the importance of collaboration and collective global leadership in dealing with the pandemic. Following up on this proposal, on 14 December 2020, Indonesia has succeeded in initiating another resolution of the UN General Assembly, namely “Global Health and Foreign Policy: Strengthening Health System Resilience through Affordable Healthcare for All”. Through this resolution, Indonesia highly emphasizes the importance of accessible and affordable health services to strengthen the global health resilience system. This resolution is in line with Indonesia’s position as Chairman of GHFPI, actively propping up the global efforts to overcome the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provides clear evidence of Indonesia’s active roles in fighting for international solidarity for global health, especially in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In presenting the resolution to other members of the UN, Indonesia stated that this resolution would ask members of the UN to strengthen the affordable national health services, to create innovative policies related to health care financing, and to avoid discrimination in dealing with the pandemic. The resolution also encourages the government to team up with businesses, NGOs and academics. High appreciation should be also granted to health workers during the pandemic. For Indonesia, partnerships with all stakeholders are capital to rise together from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This kind of diplomacy is important to safeguard sovereignty, stimulate the domestic economy, and show a joint commitment to tackle the pandemic.

Actually, in addition to proposing UN resolutions, Indonesia has been actively fighting for the availability of COVID-19 vaccines for all countries, instead of letting them under unfair control of developed countries. Facing such conditions, the House of Representatives can carry out parliamentary diplomacy to help the government obtain vaccines through various international parliamentary forums such as IPU, AIPA, PUIC, and APPF, among others. If possible, the House can initiate establishment a new, adhoc, multilateral vehicle as inter-parliamentary interaction medium to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Closing**

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened the global health, international cooperation to overcome it has not been well

coordinated. Each country seems to work alone to overcome the pandemic in its own way according to its own interests. International cooperation has been neglected due to the ongoing US-China conflict. Indonesia must take diplomatic initiatives to various countries to obtain vaccines that are needed to break the spreading chain of COVID-19.

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