Diplomacy and Covid-19: A Reflection

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Introduction

"When something difficult needs to be accomplished, or when a settlement or general improvement in international relations is in prospect, more and better diplomacy is often called for."[1]

Paul Sharp

As stated by Sharp, diplomacy is needed when difficult situations arise and when settlement is needed. It is usually used by states to negotiate and compromise over conflicting interests. In order to compromise, diplomats have to communicate. Therefore, communication is always considered as an important aspect in diplomacy. In terms of crisis or emergency situation, states use diplomacy to communicate with other entities to reach mutual understanding to solve an issue. In the words of Bjola and Kornprobst, communication in diplomacy is about information management, in which it might relate to produce, manage and distribute public goods by representatives.[2]

During the pandemic of covid-19, it is interesting to see how diplomacy play its part as a method of communication, and whether it supports the creation of mutual understanding between states. This article tries to reflect what is happened in regard to diplomacy from the end of December 2019, when Chinese authorities confirmed a new virus to the WHO, until the middle of April 2020. In order to give a clearer picture, this article will look on how countries respond in dealing with the pandemic of covid-19. This article argues that countries' responses so far reflect that diplomacy does not happen in a constructive manner as states are facing a new kind of challenge. As a result, diplomacy tend to have more nationalistic sentiment, and not respond as part of international society. It turns out that diplomacy needs to learn how to respond as part of international society, in timely and efficient manner, especially during a crisis or intense situation. In the last part, this article will give a short argument what can be learned by Indonesia from international response in the current issue of global pandemic of covid-19.

Diplomatic challenges and response toward covid-19

During a time of public restrictions to limit the spread of coronavirus in Germany, Chancellor

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[1] Paul Sharp. *Diplomatic Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

[2] Corneliu Bjola and Markus Kornprobst. *Understanding International Diplomacy. Theory, Practice and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 4.

Angela Merkel said that a virus knows no holidays. She said it to stress the importance to stay at home during Easter holidays in Germany.[3] Meanwhile, Chinese Ambassador to Ghana, Shi Ting Wang, stated in an interview that "COVID-19 respects no national borders, no social bounds, no political systems and no cultural values."[4] Therefore, he said that the virus is the common enemy of mankind. It is world's problem. Pointing responsibility only to one country would be irresponsible.[5] Looking into these statements, it could be underlined that a threat poses by coronavirus is something quite new. In the interview with BBC, a paramedic in the United States even said that the coronavirus outbreak in New York is worse than 9/11. The main difference is that today the paramedic could not see the real enemy.[6]

In diplomatic realm, the situation is pretty much the same. The diplomatic world sees new challenges pose by the covid-19. Diplomacy is accustomed to face-to-face meetings and personal interactions but it could not happen because of restrictions caused by the virus. Even when some countries are able to use its digital ability to conduct diplomacy,[7] there is a problem of basic access to internet,[8] and digital gap between countries and societies.[9] Besides that,

states' diplomacy usually have to deal with conflict, war or economic sanctions, but today's coronavirus is not something quite alike. The threat is not visible physically as in conflict or war, and more importantly there is only limited time available to respond with no specific time frame which usually exist in diplomatic challenges. It is a crisis situation with a fast and intense changes. Every second is worth to fight for and every day is counting for more fatalities.[10] In addition, diplomacy also faces problems regarding suspicion related to the origin of the virus and accusation against China in terms of transparency in handling the virus. The point is that modern diplomacy is facing multiple new challenges at the same time and is not ready yet for those kinds of challenges pose by covid-19.

The coronavirus starts to become a serious concern when China reported to WHO on the 31st December 2019 about new cases of pneumonia in Wuhan. Later in 7th January 2020, the virus has identified as a novel coronavirus. Following the outbreak in China, several countries starts to act by implementing screening for symptoms in airport, like in several airports in the United States.[11] Besides that, countries like Singapore also issued a guideline for a hygiene standard.[12] In the middle of January, the situations become

[3] "'A pandemic knows no holidays': Germany extends coronavirus curbs on public life," *The Local de*, April 1, 2020, https://www.thelocal.de/20200401/a-pandemic-knows-no-holidays-germany-extends-virus-curbs-on-public-life-until-april-19th.

[4] "Virus Has no Borders, Love Has no Boundaries," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, accessed on 20 April 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1760496.shtml.

[5] "Virus Has no Borders, Love Has no Boundaries."

[6] "Coronavirus in New York: A paramedic's diary," *BBC*, April 11, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52196815.

[7] See, "Video conference instead of government aircraft: diplomacy in the time of coronavirus," Federal Foreign Office, April 8, 2020, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europa/digitale-aussenpolitik-corona/2332720.

[8] Jovan Kurbalija, "Diplomacy goes virtual as the coronavirus goes viral," *Diplo*, March 6, 2020, https://www.diplomacy.edu/blog/diplomacy-goes-virtual-coronavirus-goes-viral.

[9] See, "Coronavirus reveals need to bridge the digital divide," UNCTAD, April 6, 2020, https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=2322.

[10] As of 19 April, the global cases are more than 2.4 million, and global deaths are more than 165.200, based on the data of John Hopkins University.

[11] "Coronavirus Outbreak Timeline Fast Facts," *CNN Health*, Updated April 22, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/06/health/wuhan-coronavirus-timeline-fast-facts/index.html.

[12] Dewey Sim, "China coronavirus: Singapore's seven habits for good hygiene," *South China Morning Post*, January 30, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3048267/china-coronavirus-singapores-seven-habits-good-hygiene.

worse when more patients were diagnose with same symptoms, and in January 20th it confirmed to be found in the United States. In January 23rd, the first lockdown was enforced in Wuhan as a strategy to limit the spread of the virus.[13]

On 30th January 2020, the WHO announces that the outbreak of coronavirus constitutes a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Following that announcement, on 31st January 2020, United States starts to deny entry for foreign national for 14 days.[14] In Europe, the region starts to tighten entry conditions for Chinese nationals from 29th January, especially after the virus was confirmed to spread in France and Germany.[15]

As the situation in Europe getting worse, many countries start to face difficulties in handling huge number of patients but at the same time help from international initiatives has not yet come.[16] Italy, one of the countries hardest hit by the virus, imposed a total country lockdown in 9th March 2020.[17] In 11th March 2020, the WHO announced coronavirus as a pandemic,[18] and then in 23rd March 2020 the UN Secretary General, António

Guterres asked for a global ceasefire in order to focus fighting the coronavirus.[19]

Internationally, it can be seen that countries tend to work by themselves without really coordinate each other, and based on nationalist sentiment.[20] European countries is one of the examples. The European Union itself imposed a ban for non-EU nationals to enter Schengen area for 30 days in 16th March 2020.[21] The regional bloc also continues to refrain from internal border closure, but some European countries still imposing a border check and even closing their borders.[22] Nine countries, such as the Czech Republic, Poland and Spain decide to close border to all foreigners, while countries like Germany, Austria and Hungary joined for a partial closure and imposed a border check.[23] The nationalist sentiment also comes from the United States, when it is reported that the United States is trying to buy the patent of the vaccine from Germany. This action is creating anger in the Germany.[24] Moreover, United States President, Donald Trump, also blame China for the pandemic especially when repeatedly referred the pandemic to "Chinese virus."[25] Andrew Liu in his opinion on The Guardian said that the idea of making

[13] "Coronavirus Outbreak Timeline Fast Facts."
[14] "Coronavirus Outbreak Timeline Fast Facts."
[15] "Coronavirus: EU to Restrict Entry for Chinese Nationals," *Schengen Visa Info*, January 29, 2020, https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/coronavirus-eu-to-restrict-entry-for-chinese-nationals/.
[16] Daniel Boffey, "Italy criticises EU for being slow to help over coronavirus epidemic," *The Guardian*, March 11, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/italy-criticises-eu-being-slow-help-coronavirus-epidemic.
[17] Jessie Yeung, et.al "March 9 coronavirus news," *CNN*, March 9, 2020, https://edition.cnn.com/asia/live-news/coronavirus-outbreak-03-09-20-intl-hnk/h_63ed4631f2c63f74f0135c0b43daa56c.
[18] "Coronavirus Outbreak Timeline Fast Facts."
[19] "COVID-19: UN chief calls for global ceasefire to focus on 'the true fight of our lives'," *UN News*, March 23, 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972.
[20] Ngaire Woods and Rajaie Batniji, "There's only one option for a global coronavirus exit strategy," *World Economic Forum*, April 11, 2020,

https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/there-s-only-one-option-for-a-global-coronavirus-exit-strategy/.
[21] "European Union Imposes 30-Day Entry Ban for Schengen Area," *Fragomen*, March 17, 2020, https://www.fragomen.com/insights/alerts/european-union-imposes-30-day-entry-ban-schengen-area.
[22] David M. Herszenhorn, "Coronavirus border controls imperil EU freedoms," *Politico*, March 16, 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-border-controls-imperil-eu-freedoms/.
[23] Andrew Rettman, "Nine EU states close borders due to virus," *Euobserver*, March 16, 2020, https://euobserver.com/coronavirus/147742.
[24] "Coronavirus: anger in Germany at report Trump seeking exclusive vaccine deal," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/not-for-sale-anger-in-germany-at-report-trump-seeking-exclusive-coronavirus-vaccine-deal.
[25] Paul D. Miller, "Yes, Blame China for the Virus," *Foreign Policy*, March 25, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/25/blame-china-and-xi-jinping-for-coronavirus-pandemic/.

China as a scapegoat is convenient, but nationalist perspectives have produced fatally ineffective responses.[26]

However, countries start to recognize the importance of diplomacy in dealing with the crisis. Countries like Germany and China start to help others in need. China begin with sending medical supplies to other countries, like Italy, and also their medical team to help others fight the coronavirus.[27] Meanwhile, Germany accepts patients from Italy and France as an act of solidarity.[28] In other occasion, Germany emphasizing the importance of regional solidarity to face the coronavirus. It also come up with the idea to help other countries hit hardest by the virus with some economic package.[29] Besides, on 26th March 2020, leaders from G20 countries set up a video conference meeting to discuss the situation related to the pandemic.[30]

What's next? Lesson to be learned for diplomacy

In dealing with the new challenges from coronavirus, countries response is varying from time to time. It tries to adapt to the changing situation related to the pandemic. From theoretical lenses of diplomacy, it can be seen that countries use diplomacy as merely a tool to get its interest, especially in the beginning of the

epidemy and pandemic. This treatment of diplomacy is actually in line with the view of realism and liberalism about diplomacy.[31] Diplomacy only serves as a channel of communication rather than a set of diplomatic practices or institution in international relations which can contribute in terms of crisis. In this phase, countries only communicate with others about the virus and did not act accordingly which may endanger their interest.[32] The question needs to be asked now is, what is lesson to be learned for diplomacy?

In the beginning of the pandemic, it is clear that countries have taken policies based on its interest. There is nothing wrong about it in terms of getting diplomatic objectives. However, as the crisis situation arise, diplomacy needs to response as an institution which tries to give a response towards common problem. In this regard, diplomacy needs to focus more on exchanges, be it of goods, people, information or services.[33] It is true that in the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic countries exchange information, like through the WHO joint mission that visited Wuhan.[34] But it seems too little too late for appropriate action since it did not trigger any collective action as part of international society in

[26] Andrew Liu, "Blaming China for coronavirus isn't just dangerous. It misses the point," *The Guardian*, April 10, 2020,
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/10/blaming-china-coronavirus-pandemic-capitalist-globalisation-scapegoat.

[27] Johnny Wood, "China is sending medical experts and supplies to help Italy fight coronavirus," *World Economic Forum*, March 16, 2020,
https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-italy-china-supplies/.

[28] Mark Hallam, "Coronavirus: Treating European patients in Germany," *DW*, March 27, 2020,
https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-treating-european-patients-in-germany/a-52943695.

[29] "Coronavirus: Germany urges 'European solidarity' to combat economic fallout," *DW*, April 6, 2020,
https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-germany-urges-

european-solidarity-to-combat-economic-fallout/a-53026997.

[30] Patrick Wintour, "G20 to hold emergency video summit to discuss coronavirus," *The Guardian*, March 26, 2020,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/g20-hold-emergency-video-summit-discuss-coronavirus.

[31] For an introduction about international relations theory to diplomacy, see Christer Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 15-18.

[32] See, Jochen Bittner, "Germany Has More Than Enough Ventilators. It Should Share Them," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2020,
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/coronavirus-europe-germany.html

[33] Jönsson and Martin Hall, *Essence of Diplomacy*, 26.

[34] "WHO Timeline - COVID-19," World Health Organization, last updated April 12, 2020,
https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/08-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19.

time.[35] As in the United States, it took six weeks until the central government declares coronavirus as a lethal threat.[36] It took almost a month for states to act together in the name of solidarity since the novel coronavirus is declared as a pandemic in 11ᵗʰ March 2020. The first call for resolution in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) was initiated by Indonesia and other 5 countries in 29ᵗʰ of March 2020, titled "Global Solidarity to Fight COVID-19."[37] The resolution itself was passed by the UNGA in April 3ʳᵈ 2020.[38]

Moreover, it turns out that in the early times of the coronavirus outbreak, state's diplomacy is lack of common values in regard to a sense of belonging as part of the international society. There is no global solidarity to face common health problems as countries rely on their own capability to deal with the problems.[39] Countries are focusing more with "this could not be happening in my country,"[40] "what can I do to protect my own citizens?" or "will I get help from others?"[41] rather than "what can I contribute to the situation." What missing from the very beginning are shared values of goodwill, solidarity and values to humanity. This point is important for diplomacy since virus knows no boundaries and flags, even the countries with the most sophisticated health system or superpower is not immune to it.[42]

However, countries seem to learn and adjust with the situation. In Europe, some states show a good sign of regional solidarity, especially when France and Italy are facing shortages of intensive care beds and respirators.[43] The adherence to solidarity is not only benefiting those in needs. For Germany, its policy to treat patients from Italy is also expected to give valuable experience for the state's doctor to better prepare for the virus.[44] Another example is about Chinese diplomacy to help others in need after it considered successfully to manage the situation. China donated medical supplies to several countries, like Italy, Iran, Pakistan, Japan and South Korea. China also sent medical team to help Italy.[45]

It remains to be seen whether other countries or regional organizations will follow this kind of action. From those experiences, we could underline that solidarity is important aspect in fighting the coronavirus and more coordinated

[35] "Coronavirus: Whole world 'must take action', warns WHO," *BBC*, January 29, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51299195.

[36] "The missing six weeks: how Trump failed the biggest test of his life," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/28/trump-coronavirus-politics-us-health-disaster.

[37] Dian Septiari, "Indonesia calls for support for first UN General Assembly resolution on COVID-19," *The Jakarta Post*, March 29, 2020, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/29/indonesia-calls-for-support-for-first-un-general-assembly-resolution-on-covid-19.html.

[38] Apriza Pinandita, "Indonesia calls for 'collective response' as UN passes COVID-19 resolution," *The Jakarta Post*, April 4, 2020, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/04/indonesia-calls-for-collective-response-as-un-passes-covid-19-resolution.html.

[39] Greta Privitera, "Italian doctors on coronavirus frontline face tough calls on whom to save," *Politico*, March 9, 2020, https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-italy-doctors-tough-calls-survival/.

[40] Trump once stated that "We have it totally under control. It's one person coming from China. It's going to be just fine." See, "The missing six weeks."

[41] This type of question arises when France request for help to Germany and Switzerland because of uncertainty of the situation.

[42] Sohaela Amiri, "How COVID-19 Makes International Affairs More Humanly Decent," *CPD Blog*, April 2, 2020, https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/how-covid-19-makes-international-affairs-more-humanly-decent.

[43] Hallam, "Coronavirus: Treating European patients in Germany."

[44] "Germany treats first Italians as coronavirus care crosses borders," *Reuters*, March 24, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-germany-italy/germany-treats-first-italians-as-coronavirus-care-crosses-borders-idUSKBN21B2GL.

[45] Wendy Wu, "China sends team of medical experts, gear to help Italy fight coronavirus," *South China Morning Post*, March 11, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3074682/china-sends-team-medical-experts-gear-help-italy-fight.

action is needed. So far, countries who realize the need for solidarity have to work by itself or limited in terms of region or territory. The important point is that the pandemic situation is easier to be faced together than alone. In this regard, diplomacy should work with shared values of goodwill, solidarity and humanity so that it can put aside hurdles ahead. Diplomacy should work as a method of communication for exchange of goods, people, information, services or even share best practices in a more coordinated manner to fight the virus. It turns out that these values are remain important in diplomacy to strengthen dialogue, especially when countries are in a devastated moment and need to work hand in hand.[46]

Indonesia's covid-19 diplomacy

Covid-19 poses serious challenges towards Indonesia since the beginning of the first case. As the most populous nation in the Southeast Asian region, Indonesia considered as lacking of medical supplies and doesn't have enough capacity to conduct massive rapid test to its citizen.[47] Having enough problem domestically to handle situation, Indonesia receives support from countries like China[48] and South Korea.[49] Diplomatically, Indonesia try its best to mitigate the crisis. It can be seen from Indonesia's initiative at the UNGA to promote the first resolution about coronavirus. However, Indonesia's regional diplomacy is not as promising as its role in UNGA. Considered as the leader in ASEAN, Indonesia could play an important role in mitigating the crisis regionally.

Up until now, ASEAN is still considered by many scholars as only a talk shop which could not produce a tangible result for the people in ASEAN.[50] In 14th of April 2020, in order to respond towards the pandemic, ASEAN produces a Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).[51] Even though the declaration come up with the initiative to establish Covid-19 response fund, the initiatives still lack of detail on how it will be implemented. Thus, it is an opportunity for Indonesia to play its role, especially in ASEAN. Indonesia can learn from best practices that is happened outside the region, for instance from Europe. Indonesia can support the use of the response fund for actions that give tangible impact, such as sharing medical resources, or even treating patients of ASEAN, and also preparing ASEAN medical team that can be dispatched for AEAN countries in need. Besides that, Indonesia should also play its role in other multilateral mechanism to support the multilateral initiatives to respond to the crisis. Important aspects from any initiatives that Indonesia should play are support for multilateral initiatives and produce tangible impact to the international society.

Conclusion

[46] "We need strong global cooperation and solidarity to fight COVID-19," Federal Foreign Office, Press Release on Joint Declaration of the Alliance for Multilateralism, April 16, 2020, https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/alliance-multilateralism-covid19/2333394.
[47] Ary Hermawan, "With limited testing capability, Indonesia may battle COVID-19 blindfolded," The *Jakarta Post*, April 19, 2020, https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/04/18/with-limited-testing-capability-indonesia-may-battle-covid-19-blindfolded.html.
[48] Apriza Pinandita, "Indonesia, China deepen ties through COVID-19 response," *The Jakarta Post*, March 26, 2020,

https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/03/26/indonesia-china-deepen-ties-through-covid-19-response.html.
[49] Song Sang-ho, "S. Korea puts U.S., UAE, Indonesia on priority list for quarantine supplies export," *Yonhap News Agency*, March 27, 2020, https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20200327008800325.
[50] Hoang Thi Ha, "Covid-19 challenges Asean to act as one," *The Straits Times*, March 31, 2020, https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/covid-19-challenges-asean-to-act-as-one.
[51] "Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)," ASEAN, April 14, 2020, https://asean.org/declaration-special-asean-summit-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19/.

One of core ingredients of diplomacy is communication. In terms of crisis, we do hope that diplomacy could facilitate those in needs to reach mutual understanding in solving the problem. Looking into what has been accomplished so far by diplomacy in terms of handling the situation of covid-19 pandemic, we could see that diplomacy, as a method of communication, play its part by adapt towards the needs to reach mutual understanding from nationalistic sentiment into a form of collective exchange as part of international society. It can be seen that in the early times of the pandemic, communication between states seems to be nationalistic, and it changes when the situation is developed. For Indonesia, it would be important to play its role in regional context, as ASEAN would be an important regional organization to fight the pandemic.

Coronavirus pandemic is a test for more and better diplomacy, just like Sharp once mentioned that more and better diplomacy is needed when there is a need for general improvement. It turns out that today's diplomacy is not good enough to deal with issue like virus pandemic. As countries learned from today's experience, only time will tell whether we put enough attention to prepare for a better diplomacy in the future. Moreover, as part of international society, we should use diplomacy as a method of communication that based on values of goodwill, solidarity and humanity, especially to find mutual understanding in multilateral context. Diplomacy also should be used to communicate for exchange of goods, people, information, services, and best practices in order to fight global problems.

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