

CUBAN DIPLOMACY STRATEGY IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

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Abstract

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a momentum for countries to use diplomacy. Each country pursues a different model of diplomacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic. For example, China uses mask diplomacy meanwhile other countries such as England and the US use vaccine diplomacy. While developed countries use that diplomacy to achieve their goals, developing countries have difficulty performing this kind of diplomacy. The COVID-19 pandemic also become a challenge for developing countries that use health-based diplomacy as their foreign policy, especially Cuba. Cuba faces a large number of COVID-19 patients and economic stagnation due to the US economic embargo. The US also tighten its economic embargo on Cuba while Cuba struggles to develop its tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article discusses the Cuban diplomacy strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic when facing US economic embargo pressure. The study argues that Cuba has two health-based strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cuban diplomacy strategy consists of sending medical personnel and medicine abroad as a tool to open cooperation with other countries and developing home-grown COVID-19 vaccines then selling COVID-19 vaccines, including looking for investors to develop Cuba's biotechnology.

Keywords: Cuban Diplomacy Strategy, Cuban Health Diplomacy, COVID-19 Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a disease that has become an alarm for many countries to pay more attention to the health system and the existing health insurance. Globally, the COVID-19 Pandemic has infected more than 626,843,867 people based on the world meters database from 2020 until October 11, 2022 (worldometers, 2022). A large number of deaths due to the massive COVID-19 pandemic is not the only problem that must be solved by the governments of countries around the world. Because several impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic have emerged, such as rising numbers to a decline in global manufacturing production (CCSA, 2020). This forces countries in the world to issue domestic and foreign policies to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic while reducing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The resolution of the impacts arising from the COVID-19 pandemic has become a momentum for countries in the world through foreign policy to demonstrate the ability to carry out diplomacy, especially health-based diplomacy. Some countries, for example, China are trying to promote mask diplomacy so that it is considered a "responsible big power" or a big country that assists developing countries effectively and extensively with the principle of mutual respect so that they can establish mutually beneficial cooperation (Rudolf, 2021). Meanwhile, other big countries such as Britain and the United States are involved in vaccine diplomacy competitions (Antwi-Boasiako, 2022). When big countries have an active role in implementing health-based diplomacy, developing countries tend to do the same due to limited human resources and a capable biotechnology industry.

The number of developing countries absent from conducting health-based diplomacy does not mean that developing countries cannot contribute anything. Cuba is one of the developing countries that regularly engages in health-based diplomacy. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuba was experiencing economic stagnation. Cuba's economic stagnation is the result of the United States' prolonged economic embargo on Cuba. The United States prohibits the export of products made by the United States to Cuba, in addition, the United States also prevents US citizens from doing business with Cuba and prohibits companies doing business with Cuba from operating in the United States (Seyfi et al., 2020). The embargo was tightened as long as the United States was led by President Donald Trump. As a result, the Cuban economy slumped, especially in the tourism sector, and foreign investment made it difficult to carry out economic reforms (Ting, 2019).

President Donald Trump announced a policy banning cruise ships affiliated with United States companies from anchoring their ships in Cuban territory. As a result, foreign tourists from the cruise ship were unable to visit Cuba. In the health sector, Cuba has difficulty getting generic medicines at affordable prices because the patents are owned by US pharmaceutical companies (Adler, 2022). From January to March 2018, there were 240 United States tourist groups cancelled their reservations to travel to Cuba, and 99% of the online sales of Cuban hotel group Gaviota were also affected (Ting, 2019). Two years later, in 2020, the United States Government prohibited its citizens visiting Cuba from making reservations at 430 hotels run by the Cuban Government (Mason & Spetalnick, 2020). As a result, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuba's tourism sector was at its lowest point in line with the travel ban policies imposed by many countries.

The unfavourable situation for Cuba because of the US economic embargo certainly threatens Cuba's survival as a developing country. Moreover, Cuba is also facing the COVID-19 Pandemic. This study wants to analyze what diplomatic strategies are being carried out by Cuba to survive amid the pressure of the United States' economic embargo, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic in the world.

Theoretical Background

Health-based diplomacy: Health Diplomacy vs Global Health Diplomacy

The study of the issue of high politics and hard power in the study of international relations has long been an area of discussion. However, contemporary phenomena are currently increasing public attention to the issue of soft power. This condition makes countries in the world not only focus on hard power and high political issues. This provides opportunities for the secondary sector, such as diplomacy, in foreign policy (Trihartono et al., 2020). Bjola and Kornprobst stated that there are two types of benefits that will be obtained by the state when carrying out diplomacy. At the micro level, diplomacy has the benefit of building and maintaining friendly relations between countries. Then, at the macro level, diplomacy produces what the state needs (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018).

In the practice of diplomacy carried out by the state, the determinants of its success can be traced through factors such as capability, credibility, and sincerity. The capability factor can

be interpreted as ownership of the resources used by a country to support its foreign policy and serve as a tool to influence the actions of other countries. Meanwhile, the credibility factor is the skill in managing the capabilities possessed. The final determining factor, namely sincerity, is the commitment of a country to the foreign policy it has taken (Holsti, 1987).

Various models of diplomacy along with the times have opened up diplomatic issues to become more diverse (Hara, 2011). The various models of diplomacy along with the times have opened diplomatic issues to become more varied which can be exemplified through the issue of war and peace, then economic issues, health issues, and other issues. These issues then become a reference for classifying the types of diplomacy practices (Balzacq et al., 2020). For example on the issue of defence and security, the practice of diplomacy is defence and security diplomacy to health diplomacy or medical diplomacy that is concerned with issues related to the availability of health facilities and the spread of disease outbreaks.

Health diplomacy refers to the role of the medical field to increase cooperation in solving problems related to health issues. Efforts to discuss health issues in diplomacy in a sustainable manner began with the establishment of the World Health Organization (WHO) to discuss health issues, especially global health issues (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018). Diplomacy that focuses on health issues does not only refer to health diplomacy, because of the emergence of several other terms such as health diplomacy and global health diplomacy. Although they have similarities due to focusing on discussing health issues, the terms health diplomacy and global health diplomacy have several different characteristics.

The terms health diplomacy and global health diplomacy are often debated when analyzing health issues. This is because the characteristics of the two are almost the same. Health diplomacy and global health diplomacy can be analogous to rice and corn in the taxonomic classification of plants. Both may be in the kingdom classification of the same family, but have a genus and develop into different species.

The scope of the study of health diplomacy consists of two main streams when experts examine it. The first stream emphasizes the concept that health diplomacy wants to contribute to global health issues. As can be found in the literature entitled "Global Health Diplomacy: The Need for New Perspectives, Strategic Approaches and Skills in Global Health" by Kickbush, Silberschmidt, and Buss (Kickbusch et al., 2007). The second stream focuses on health diplomacy on national interests such as Feldbaum and Michaud's literature entitled "Health Diplomacy and the Enduring Relevance of Foreign Policy Interests". Feldbaum and Michaud describe health diplomacy as health-based diplomacy that seeks to improve health to support the interests of the state (Feldbaum & Michaud, 2010). William Vanderwagen in his writings entitled "Health Diplomacy: Winning Hearts and Minds through the Use of Health Interventions" adds that health-based assistance in foreign policy can be used to win the hearts and minds of countries or people who receive aid (Vanderwagen, 2006).

Health diplomacy that adheres to the concept of global health tends to solve global public health problems by involving actors in the health sector such as doctors, professors, and other experts without paying attention to the opinions of politicians or other representatives of a

country at the beginning of its emergence. For those who focus on the national interest, intervention in the field or health issue is considered an effort to achieve the national interest to be achieved or it means that it leads to the politicization of health issues (Fazal, 2020).

The scope of global health diplomacy generally emphasizes global health issues and tries to link them to the collective foreign policy of several countries. Global health diplomacy views the importance of the role of international organizations in the health sector such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018). On the other hand, health diplomacy tends to emphasize the readiness of the state to see an issue as a health issue and try to resolve it bilaterally.

Then to use health diplomacy and global health diplomacy, they have striking differences. Health diplomacy is carried out to realize goals that are not related to the health sector (Fazal, 2020). An example is an idea of a country sending medical masks during the COVID-19 pandemic to other countries which is not only seen as a method to reduce the spread of COVID-19 but is also used to strengthen relations between countries. Health diplomacy is more focused on the use of health programs to achieve certain goals, for countries that implement them. On the other hand, global health diplomacy has goals related to producing better health security and strengthening the commitment of various actors to work together to ensure that health issues are human rights (Kickbusch et al., 2007).

From the explanation of the difference between health diplomacy and global health diplomacy, the definition of health diplomacy used in this article is diplomacy which moves to intervene on health issues to achieve certain goals that a country wants to achieve. Meanwhile, although global health diplomacy is engaged in the health sector such as health diplomacy, global health diplomacy is generally used to emphasize the country's concern for global health issues by using diplomacy at the multilateral level.

Health diplomacy has various forms, such as entering into technology transfer agreements in the health sector, sending medical devices, sending vaccines, sending medical personnel, and so on. Of the various forms of health diplomacy, sending medical personnel is a strategy that is rarely implemented. Russia is one of the countries that has adopted a health-based diplomacy strategy in the form of sending medical personnel to Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rofii, 2020). The dispatch of Russian medical personnel is a health diplomacy strategy because sending these medical personnel abroad can win the hearts and minds of the state or community that receives health assistance (Vanderwagen, 2006). These results can be achieved by the sending country for medical assistance if the medical personnel sent are successful in establishing emotional bonds with the recipient country or community.

Meanwhile, the diplomatic strategy in the form of shipping and selling vaccines has been a study of health diplomacy since the Cold War period with the development of an oral polio vaccine prototype by United States scientists. Health diplomacy that uses vaccines as a means to improve relations and influence a country over other nations is known as vaccine diplomacy (Bhattacharya et al., 2021). Since the COVID-19 Pandemic, studies on vaccine diplomacy

have received great attention, especially regarding the issue of competition to make COVID-19 vaccines in the world.

RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative approach will be used to examine the Cuban health diplomacy phenomenon during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this research is in line with a qualitative approach that seeks to build a strong understanding of a particular topic (Leavy, 2017) In qualitative research, researchers describe research problems by exploring phenomena using text data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, this study uses data from books, research articles, annual reports issued by international organizations, and newspapers published by local and international media.

DISCUSSION

The Foundation of Cuban Healthcare System

Cuba is one of the Latin countries in the Caribbean that was once a colony of Spain. While under Spanish colonial rule, Cuba held a unique geopolitical position as a frontier outpost and key to the defence of Spain and was a centre of slavery in the colonial Americas (Yaremko, 2010). In geopolitics, the territory is considered from a political standpoint (Molasy, 2015). Cuba's political standpoint changed years later, Cuba has had close relations with the United States in various sectors, especially the economic and political sectors. As a result, it is not surprising that Cuba adopts the United States' fundamental political principles. Principles of free speech, expression, and association are fundamental values in the United States (Molasy & Samsudin, 2022). However, the new government in Cuba as an outcome of the Cuban Revolution led by Fidel Castro tried to escape the influence of the United States in the economic and political sectors. As a result, relations between Cuba and the United States are increasingly tenuous. Relations between Cuba and the United States deteriorated during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The growing tension in the bilateral relations between Cuba and the United States caused the United States to impose an economic embargo on Cuba. The Cuban economic embargo imposed by the United States made it difficult for Cuba to access its needs for food, agriculture, fuel, medical medicines, the international banking system, and so on (Gordon, 2012). Whereas the Cuban Government must meet the needs of the Cuban people.

At the same time, Cuba is also facing a decline in bilateral relations with other countries due to Cuba's current socialist political direction. Countries in the world tend to be careful or even withdraw when conducting bilateral relations with Cuba (Chomsky, 2015). Cuba realizes that establishing good relations with many countries is the right choice amid the foreign policy of the United States which is still adamant about implementing the economic embargo on Cuba. Cuba certainly must take strategic steps to be able to survive during an unfavoured situation after Cuban Revolution and the United States imposed an economic embargo on Cuba. The Cuban health system is one of the sectors that underwent major changes due to the Cuban Revolution and the economic embargo (Hauge, 2007). A health system that is accessible to

all walks of life is a Cuban priority. Cuba is also designing health insurance that is integrated with economic and social development (Powell et al., 2021).

Restructuring the Cuban health system designed by the Ministry of Health divided the Cuban health system into three parts. The health system structure consists of three levels, the basic level is a clinic or polyclinic that handles minor health issues with 11,128 clinics. Uniquely, every clinic in Cuba has a doctor and two nurses living in the community (Powell et al., 2021). Then the second level deals with health issues that require health services in hospitals. The third level of the Cuban health system structure is for patients who require certain medical devices (Hauge, 2007). Categorization at the level of health services in Cuba makes it easier for the government to allocate the number of medical personnel needed and what types of health facilities should be prioritized.

The restructuring of the health system carried out by Cuba was considered positive when viewed from health indicator factors in 2004. In that year, Cuba was superior to the United States in indicators of newborn mortality, distribution or supply of medical personnel, and immunization rates. In the 2004 newborn mortality indicator, Cuba's newborn mortality rate is in the range of 5.8 per 1,000 live births. This figure is lower than the infant mortality rate in the United States which touched 7.1 per 1,000 live births (Cooper et al., 2006). Meanwhile, in terms of medical personnel supply, Cuba has 60.4 medical personnel to serve 10,000 residents. This number is higher than the supply of medical personnel in the United States which is only 27.9 per 10,000 population (Hauge, 2007). Immunization rates in Cuba range from 95% for the 13 types of vaccine given to children (MacDonald et al., 2006). This immunization rate then rose to 99% in 2004, 7% higher than the United States which recorded an immunization rate of 92% (Hauge, 2007).

COVID-19 Pandemic: A Test for Cuban Health Diplomacy

A good strategy for handling the COVID-19 Pandemic at the Cuban domestic level is followed by a diplomatic strategy that has the potential to harm Cuba's health system. Cuba is sending medical personnel and COVID-19 vaccines abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is seen as a step that is contrary to the steps of the majority of countries in the world. Many countries prioritize their domestic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sending Cuban COVID-19 medical personnel and vaccines abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the strategies that is categorized as a health diplomacy strategy. Cuba realizes that establishing good relations with many countries is the right choice amid the increasingly stringent US economic embargo under President Donald Trump (Adler, 2022).

Ultimately, the Cuban Government needs to develop a multidimensional foreign policy that will enable it to cope with the tremendous pressure of the United States' economic embargo (Lorini & Basosi, 2009). Especially with the decline in Cuba's tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, has made it more difficult for the already stagnant Cuban economy. Through health diplomacy in the form of assistance from Cuban medical personnel and COVID-19 vaccines abroad, Cuba can establish bilateral relations with other countries while at the same time garnering the trust of countries in the world to be willing to establish close

bilateral relations with Cuba, especially in the biotechnology sector, which is one of the main sources of the Cuban economy.

Cuba has been recorded to have sent medical personnel to 23 countries with more than 2,000 medical personnel since the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Augustin, 2020). The Cuban government sent its medical personnel for free to most of the countries that were experiencing the first wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The assistance is very beneficial for the countries that receive it, especially for low-income countries. Cuba also gained a lot of appreciation and aid from countries that got medical assistance from Cuba. For example, Italy as one of the members of the European Union that were helped by Cuban medical personnel wants to provide funds to pay Cuban medical personnel in Sicily. Meanwhile, Mexico and Vietnam sent aid that consist of food and medical equipment to Cuba (Hergati et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the international health protocol issued by WHO recommends the use of Interferon Alpha-2B as an initial treatment medicine for COVID-19 patients. Cuba, which has long been developing and producing Interferon Alpha-2B, has received requests for assistance from countries such as Vietnam and Nicaragua. Cuba accepted the two countries' requests while increasing the production of Interferon Alpha-2B. The medicine arrived in Vietnam on August 5, 2020, and was immediately distributed by the Vietnamese government to Danang City and Quang Nam Province (VN Express, 2020). Nicaragua received 8,000 doses of the medicine in April 2020. The delivery of Interferon Alpha-2B from Cuba to Nicaragua was assisted by Russia (Tass, 2020). The use of Interferon Alpha-2B from Cuba by other countries shows that Cuban biotechnology has made remarkable progress, despite Cuba's prolonged economic embargo from the United States.

In addition to the medicine called Interferon Alpha-2B, the Cuban biotechnology sector has also succeeded in developing two types of COVID-19 vaccines that have attracted the attention of several countries. The two vaccines are called the Abdala vaccine and SOBERANA 02 vaccine. Abdala and SOBERANA 02 are COVID-19 vaccines based on recombinant protein subunits that are highly effective in preventing severe illness and death from COVID-19 in real-life conditions. This is based on research published by The Lancet (Más-Bermejo et al., 2022). As vaccines based on protein subunits, Abdala and SOBERANA 02 are cheaper to produce and easier to store. This is because vaccines made from protein subunits can be stored in a standard refrigerator. This is certainly different from vector or mRNA-based vaccine technologies, such as BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna, which require extensive refrigeration (Scoop, 2022). Abdala and SOBERANA 02 vaccines can be a new hope for low-income countries. Moreover, the Cuban government is also willing to transfer vaccine technology to these countries. Cuba is in discussions to transfer its COVID-19 vaccine technology to 15 countries (Bardsley, 2022).

Over time, Cuban-made COVID-19 vaccines received approval for use in several countries. Abdala's vaccine has been approved for use by health authorities in Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Vietnam, and the island nations of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Meanwhile, the SOBERANA 02 vaccine has been approved for use in Iran, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (Krasilnikova, 2022). The process of producing a COVID-19 vaccine made in Cuba certainly

requires investors, considering that the Cuban economy has stagnated due to the prolonged economic embargo imposed by the United States. One of the investors willing to disburse funds for the production of a Cuban-made COVID-19 vaccine is the Central American Bank. Cuba received support from the Central American Bank which agreed to provide Cuba with a loan of USD 53.1 million (Frank, 2022).

When carrying out diplomacy, Cuba certainly has to think of the right strategy to succeed. Strategy formulation in carrying out foreign policy is considered positive if it meets the three critical success factors of diplomacy according to Holsti, which consist of capability, credibility, and sincerity. First, the capability factor can be seen from foreign policy supporting resources or resources that influence other countries when used. Second, the credibility factor is related to the skills of a country in managing its capabilities. Third, the seriousness factor refers to a country's commitment to its foreign policy (Holsti, 1987).

When Cuba sent medical personnel, medicines, and COVID-19 vaccines abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic, Cuba was considered to have met the three critical success factors of diplomacy. Cuba has an abundant number of medical personnel in the country so it can be used as an initial capital for policies to send medical personnel abroad. Having the resources to support foreign policy makes Cuba meet the capability factor.

As for the credibility factor, Cuba is known as a country whose medical personnel have the skills to deal with the Polio outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic. The handling of outbreaks and pandemics in Cuba is well controlled under the performance of Cuban medical personnel. In addition, Cuban medical personnel is also supported by the biotechnology sector which produces Interferon Alpha-2B. The medicine is in demand by many countries because it is used for initial treatment in COVID-19 patients. These advantages make Cuban medical personnel experience when it comes to treating COVID-19 patients in other countries. In terms of credibility factor, Cuba can be said to have succeeded in achieving it.

Finally, the seriousness factor in sending Cuban medical personnel abroad lies in the three actions of the Cuban Government. First, Cuba responded quickly when several countries requested assistance to send medical personnel, medicines, and vaccines for COVID-19 when there was a surge in COVID-19 patients in the recipient countries. Italy is one of the countries receiving Cuban medical assistance, which previously experienced a surge in the first wave of COVID-19 patients in March and April 2020. As one of the countries that received assistance from Cuban medical personnel for the first time, the Italian Government appreciates Cuba's decision to send medical personnel quickly to Lombardy, Italy (Radio Rebelde, 2020).

The seriousness factor can also be seen in the second action taken by Cuba for sending more than 2,000 medical personnel to 23 countries (Augustin, 2020). The number of medical personnel is quite large, indicating that the Cuban Government is making more serious efforts than the efforts of other countries that only send masks or ventilators. The presence of medical personnel to supervise the treatment of COVID-19 patients is more needed because countries in the world are facing the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This happens because people are not aware of the existence of the virus. After all, information about the

COVID-19 pandemic is still limited, and the number of COVID-19 patients has increased has a short time, so contact tracking for people who are close to COVID-19 patients is still low.

Third, the delivery of medical personnel and COVID-19 vaccines from Cuba does not burden the finances of the recipient countries. Cuba chose not to charge for sending the medical personnel. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an opportunity for Cuba to commercialize medical personnel, medicines, and COVID-19 vaccines. But Cuba did not choose the economically advantageous option. The three actions taken by Cuba in implementing health diplomacy show that Cuba has fulfilled the seriousness factor in the success factor of diplomacy. The fulfilment of the three success factors of diplomacy shows that health diplomacy meets the standards of the three success factors of diplomacy according to Holsti.

Cuba's successful health diplomacy based on the concept of diplomatic success factors, according to Holsti, is in line with the results received by Cuba, namely being able to survive the COVID-19 pandemic amidst the increasingly stringent US economic embargo. Cuba was able to survive the US economic embargo during the COVID-19 pandemic through the support of the countries it assisted, the disbursement of funds from countries that bought Cuban biotechnology products, and loan assistance from the Central American Bank.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic is a tough test for many countries, especially for developing countries. However, Cuba as a developing country has succeeded in using its preventive health system to control the spread of disease outbreaks. In addition to being able to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic at home, Cuba is also able to manage a health-based diplomacy strategy in its foreign policy well. The diplomatic strategy carried out by Cuba in the form of sending medical personnel and selling Cuban-made COVID-19 vaccines, including seeking investors to develop a COVID-19 vaccine is a health-based diplomacy that has succeeded in making Cuba able to survive even though Cuba has to face the US economic embargo which is getting tighter when this happens. COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to its health diplomacy strategy, Cuba has also succeeded in opening up opportunities to introduce its unique health diplomacy to many countries as well as assisting in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in many countries without compromising the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic at home.

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