

China's Health Silk Road in the Southeast Asia and Europe during COVID-19

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Abstract—The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportune time for China to deploy its health diplomacy around the world. This paper focused on China's health diplomacy along the path of its Health Silk Road, with particular emphasis on the Southeast Asia and Europe amid COVID-19. This paper employed a retrospective literature review, analyzed China's health diplomacy in such regions to cultivate bilateral and multilateral relationships. Findings argued that such health diplomacy is a success and China has taken the helm of international public health patronage. This research contributes to the literature in health diplomacy and suggests that amid the ever changing international order, China has exerted great effort in its health diplomacy and established itself as a responsible world power.

Keywords—China's health silk road, COVID-19, Europe, Middle East.

I. INTRODUCTION

CHINESE President Xi Jinping has shown commitment to solve the worldwide problems, such as the global health threat of COVID-19 and has demonstrated China's adherence to assist the global fight against COVID-19, to tackle the imminent health threat, revive the sustainable growth of the global business, and mitigating the burdens on less developed countries [1]. China assistance to the world to combat the pandemic illustrates its recently developed orientation to the global structure, which it considers as a coterie of commonplace fate or common joint prospects, as espoused by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other fresh undertakings as the Health Silk Road, proposes that nations should live in harmony and achieve common prosperity, which was included in a speech by President Xi Jinping at the Boao Forum for Asia in 2015 [2]. China's policy during the pandemic largely follows this approach at creating a new world order in which Chinese diplomacy gears towards the development of a global health community, which is echoed in a UN resolution calling for setting up a human community with shared destiny [3]. And in actualizing the initiative of the Health Silk Road, China acts strategically and flexibly at various levels simultaneously. The China mechanisms are models for China's cooperation, for example with countries from South East Asia, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries and Central and Eastern Europe (17+1) during the pandemic. Health has been the prominent part of China's relationship with the ASEAN and Southeast Asian countries. Since October 26, 2016, in the first China-ASEAN Health Cooperation Forum, it has focused on exchanging information, controlling infectious diseases, and

promoting traditional Chinese medicine [4]. And for the Lancang-Mekong countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam), part of the health diplomacy was on free eye surgeries. During the pandemic, China extended this mode of cooperation with ASEAN and donated millions of masks, assay cartridges, medical equipment worldwide in line with its health diplomacy.

A. Aim

This paper aims at analyzing Chinese diplomacy and assistance to Southeast Asian countries, in addition to examining China's health assistance to European countries, probing into the context, content, and impact of China's health diplomacy.

II. METHODS

This study employed a case study that integrates and compares evidence pertaining to the Chinese health assistance in Southeast Asia and European countries, in particular the context, content, and impact of Chinese diplomacy in the health silk road. With the use of retrospective review methods when assessing the available evidence, prejudice can be reduced and therefore provides dependable findings from which inference can be drawn and best practices can be identified.

III. RESULTS

A. The Context of China Health Diplomacy in the Southeast Asia and European Countries

China health diplomacy in Southeast Asia has met warm receptions from most of the Southeast Asian countries. China has included ASEAN in the COVID-19 international aid program, which costs US\$2 billion [5]. China contributed individual safeguard machinery and sorts of vital medicinal stockpile to ASEAN countries and to the association's administration in the capital of Indonesia [5]. In February 2020, the ASEAN and Chinese foreign ministers promulgated a joint announcement on COVID-19 promising to enhance partnership, facts interchange, and reciprocated help. A further announcement in May 2020 pledged for conjoint endeavor to mitigate the effect of the epidemic and foster inter-regional and world business and financing, renew faith in businesses and trading, and explore chances to attain continual durable development of global commerce and financing [5]. In the meeting, on the ASEAN-China response, it is stated that "after the virus hit ASEAN, the Chinese central and local

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governments, the military, the business communities, the private entities responded with no delay to reciprocate acts of friendship and kindness from ASEAN. The urgent medical supplies have since been flowing uninterruptedly from China to ASEAN countries. Our mutual, timely support gave each other strength and confidence to fight” [6].

In European countries, China's health diplomacy has met with warm reception from Eastern Europe such as Serbia and the Balkans (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) but ambivalence from Western Europe such as Austria and Switzerland. But China has expanded great efforts in cultivating health partnerships with European countries even before the pandemic. For example, there is a long term China-Germany health partnership. The agreement in 1980 laid the foundation of China-Germany health cooperation. In 2012, both sides issued a conjoint announcement on epidemiological crisis and emergency medicine collaboration. With France, the bilateral agreement on health cooperation was made in 1997 [6] and both sides agreed to work together in epidemiology, disaster medicine, and forestall infections, and by promoting person-to-person exchanges [6]. China and the United Kingdom signed a memorandum of understanding on health cooperation in 2007, which was renewed in 2010, 2013 and 2016 [7]. With Italy, both

sides penned a letter of intent on health collaboration in 2000 and based on this understanding, [7] the two countries cooperated in various health sectors, such as health system, medicare personnel, bioscience investigation, modern scientific invention, epidemiology, and foodstuff security [7]. During the pandemic, China and the European Union have fostered closer connection. Chinese President Xi Jinping called up the French President and German Chancellor on the epidemic, and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang communicated with the newly elected President of the European Commission. In Xi's phone call with Macron, the two leaders indicated strong desire to cooperate to combat COVID-19, and consent to consolidate their health collaboration for inter-regional and public health world safety [8].

China started sending medical assistance to Southeast Asia and European countries (see Table I) in the beginning of the outbreak, depending on various parties: main and domestic governments, state-owned enterprises and privately owned enterprises, associations, and private contributions from residents in China. The support they provided included cash, medical supplies, medical equipment, and offered medical and scientific advice as well as teaching knowledge to treat patients.

TABLE I
 MEDICAL AID OF CHINA TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AND EUROPE [9]

Country	Chinese medical aid to Southeast Asia and Europe
	Southeast Asia
Brunei	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medicinal machinery and stockpiles (Zhejiang Hengyi Group) [10] • Medicinal stockpile comprising 100,000 KN95 masks and 1,000 scrub suits; the Chinese Embassy in Brunei donated US\$42,158 to Brunei's COVID-19 Relief Fund [11] • Medicinal stockpile and machinery inclusive of masks, eyeglasses, boiler suits, quarantine dress (from the People's Liberation Army to the Brunei Army) [12] • In a phone call with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Brunei's Foreign Minister II Dato Erywan Pehin Yusof was grateful to Chinese for their contribution and aid to Brunei [13]
Cambodia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medicinal stockpile (containing observation substance, anti-radiation suits, face veils and more products - unknown volume) [14] • Medicinal group; and medicinal stockpile and machinery containing assay cartridges, KN95 masks, face veils, quarantine dress and safety suits [15]
Indonesia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 million face veils (promised by Hodo Group) [15] • Nine tonnes of medicinal stockpile arrived [12] • An additional 17 tonnes of medicinal stockpile containing 800,000 assay cartridges, 50,000 gauntlets and other materials [12] • 40 tonnes of medicinal supplies and hardware containing assay cartridges, masks, individual safeguard machinery and air ducts [12] • Medicinal stockpile and hardware containing medical masks, face veils, KN95 masks, eyeglasses, defensive shields, safety suits, waterproof quarantine scrub suits, medical gumboot covers, nitrile gauntlets, rapid infusers, portable satchel sprayers, infrared forehead thermostats and thermal imaging thermostat helmets [12]
Lao People Democratic Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assay cartridges (unspecified number) [12] • Pharmaceutical group and medicinal stockpile (Xinhua emphasized that the group landed in five days after Laos conformed its initial two coronavirus cases on March 24) [12]
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military medical team and medical supplies containing assay cartridges and KN95 masks [12] • Five Chinese companies contributed a total of 600,000 face veils to the six Southeast Asian nations, including Laos [12] • 5,000 masks and 10,000 face shields [12] • 200,000 masks and video conference on combating COVID-19 (from Fujian province according to the fellowship consensus) [16] • 500,000 face veils, 100,000 KN95 face veils, 100,000 assay cartridges, 50,000 individual safeguard machinery, and 200 air ducts [17] • 166,000 face veils to Sabah [18] • Medical team [19]
Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five Chinese companies contributed a total of 600,000 face veils to the six Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia [12] • 2,016 testing equipment [20] • 200,000 face veils, 500,000 KN95 masks, and 5,000 safeguarding clothing [20] • Two Chinese companies contributed 15,000 medical masks to two Myanmar government associations [12] • Pharmaceutical group and medicinal stockpile and machinery containing assay cartridges, 8,500 KN95 masks, 60,000 one-use masks and 5,500 safety suits [12] • Military medical team and medical supplies containing assay cartridges and KN95 masks [21] • 150,000 assay cartridges and 18,000 individual safeguard machinery [22]
The Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 200,000 face veils; exchanging of public health data and results [23] • 2,000 assay cartridges [24] • 100,000 assay cartridges, 100,000 face veils, 10,000 KN95 masks and 10,000 individual safeguard machinery [23] • 500,000 masks (Bank of China) [12]

Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pharmaceutical group, medicinal stockpile and hardware containing 300,000 medical masks, 30,000 KN95 masks, 5,000 face shields, 5,000 safety suits, and 30 air ducts [24] Over 150,000 assay cartridges and 18,000 safety suits [12] Five Chinese enterprises contributed a total of 600,000 face veils to the six Southeast Asian nations including the Philippines Five Chinese enterprises contributed a total of 600,000 face veils to the six Southeast Asian nations, including Singapore [12] 500,000 face veils and 100,000 KN95 masks [25] The branch of China Communications and Construction Company in Singapore obtained an emergency task undertaking to change the old emergency hall of the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore into an infirmary including 96 units [12]
Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medicinal stockpile containing assay cartridges, face veils, hardware and safety suits. China took the initiative to liaise with Chinese companies to donate medicinal products to treat coronavirus patients in Thailand [26] Medicinal stockpile and hardware containing face veils, assay cartridges, safeguarding garments and other products [27] Face veils, safety suits and face shield contributed by Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Foundation [27] Assay cartridges (unknown quantity contributed by the China Shenzhen Mammoth Foundation [27]) Five Chinese enterprises contributed a total of 600,000 face veils to the six Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand [12] Medical stockpile and equipment containing 100,000 medical face veils, 15,000 face veils, 10,500 pairs of eyeglasses, 7,000 sets of individual safeguard machinery and 120 boxes of gauntlets, six air ducts, 10 electrocardiograms, 30 rapid infusers, 100 infrared thermostats and 6,000 assay cartridges [28].
Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Medicinal stockpile and hardware containing masks, eyeglasses, safeguarding clothing, gauntlets and eyeglasses [12] Five Chinese enterprises contributed a total of 600,000 face veils to the six Southeast Asian nations, including Vietnam [12]
Europe	
Austria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unspecified amount of face veils [28]
Bulgaria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12,000 one-use masks and 2,000 special masks contributed by the Jiangxi Province and the China-Europe Association for Economic and Technical Cooperation [28] Unspecified number of masks, eyeglasses and gauntlets contributed by Huawei Technologies Bulgaria Limited [28] Professionals from the Bulgarian Health Ministry participated in a 17+1 video conference to share China's containment experience [28]
Czechia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unspecified number of medical supplies were arranged for Czech state-sponsored rescue stockpile, lasting for one month [28]
France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One million face veils, 1.5 million gauntlets and 10,000 protection suits. Chinese enterprises and associations dispatched extra stockpile [28]
Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three priorities in their cooperation: collaboration in investigation, vocal support for global answers, and guaranteeing the provision of medicinal and individual safeguard machinery [28]
Greece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 million safeguarding masks, half of them provided by the State Grid Corporation. Shanghai donated 20,000 masks. Bank of China contributed 22,000 masks to Athens [28] Technical assistance was a teleconference in the groundwork of the 17+1 format [28]
Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Took part in the videoconference on forestalling infection between China and its 17 Central and Eastern European countries Received 400,000 pieces of a special Chinese anti-viral medicinal product [28]
Italy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chinese foundations and private companies contributed unspecified number of medical supplies, such as the Jack Ma Foundation, the Alibaba Foundation, Xiaomi, Huawei and Lihe. The state-owned enterprises China Merchants Port Holdings, China Communication Construction Company and the Cosco Shipping Corporation donated to Trieste and Genova [28] Unspecified amount of medical donations from the central and local governments [28]
Latvia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 54,000 medical masks were given to Central and Eastern European countries, including Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia [28] 5,000 masks were donated to the Saecima Group for Interparliamentary Relations with China, one of the 40 groups setup in the national parliament for collaboration with different nations [28] 900,000 face veils and 80,000 breathing apparatus [28] 1 million face veils for National Health Service, and privately organized donation of 10,000 masks from Beijing Shengshi Huayi Industries Co., Ltd was delivered to the Children's Hospital [28] Video calls with Chinese health officials and professionals and their partners from Central and Eastern European nations of the 17+1 format [28]
Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Chinese state-owned airline companies contributed facemasks to KLM [28]
Norway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contribution of safeguarding masks and suits from its sister city Shanghai, and the Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation also offered safeguarding masks [28]
Poland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10,000 assay cartridges, 20,000 N-95 masks, 5,000 safety suits, 5,000 medical eyeglasses, 10,000 one-use medical gauntlets and 10,000 shoe covers [28] Several Polish local governments cooperated with Chinese regions and cities and asked them to offer medical supplies and to share their experience in video conferences [28]
Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Millions of masks, thousands of testing kits, surgical gauntlets, safeguarding medical ware, tempered safety glass, and hundreds of air ducts [28] The Jack Ma Foundation and the Alibaba Foundation contributed masks, screening and diagnostic tests, and safeguarding clothing [28] Shanghai and Shenyang contributed hardware to twinned Portuguese cities, Oporto and Braga [28] Chinese state-owned enterprise Meheco Guangdong Pharma Ltd contributed medical equipment [28]
Romania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's embassy in Romania arranged the joining of the Romanian authorities at the 17+1 video conference to share information on preventing and controlling the pandemic [28] 10 provinces and cities in China contributed medicinal stockpile to their twin cities in Romania [28]
Slovakia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> City of Hubei and the Sino-Czech-Slovak friendship Farm donated medical equipment [28]
Spain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's main and domestic governments such as Fujian, Gansu, and Nanning contributed some medicinal hardware [28] The central government contributed 834 distinguishing tools, 50,000 masks, and 40,000 individual safeguarding stuff [28] Alibaba and Huawei donated 500,000 and 1 million masks [28]
Sweden	No information [28]
Switzerland	No information [28]
UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 17.5 tonnes of medicinal stockpile

B. The Content

China started sending medical assistance to Southeast Asia and European countries (see Table I) in the beginning of the outbreak, depending on various parties: main and domestic

governments, state-owned enterprises and privately owned enterprises, associations, and private contributions from residents in China. The support they provided included cash, medical supplies, medical equipment, and offered medical and

scientific advice as well as teaching knowledge to treat patients.

C. Impact of China Medical Aid to Southeast Asia and Europe

Overall, ASEAN has welcomed China's provision of COVID-19 assistance. Most countries in ASEAN need such assistance from China. The quality of China's aid has not been called into question among ASEAN countries. Wang Yi highlighted China COVID-19 aid, saying "that China had already delivered 100 million vaccine doses to ASEAN nations along with other pandemic-fighting materials and technical help." [29] In response to China's aid, a joint statement from Wang Yi and Philippines Foreign Minister Teodoro Locsin Jr., said that ASEAN "greatly appreciates China's provision of vaccines, medical supplies and technical assistance," and hailed the "wisdom of close collaboration on pandemic control and socio-economic recovery" [10]. Furthermore, according to the State of Southeast Asia 2021 poll, conducted by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute on inter-regional financial and diplomatic powerful figures [30], an overwhelming majority, some 44.2% of the pollsters regarded China to have "provided the most help to the region for COVID-19," with Japan, the European Union and the United States lagging behind [11]. With China pledging more COVID-19 aid to Southeast Asian countries, China-Southeast Asia ties would likely be strengthened. Wang Yi said China would "urgently implement" the China-ASEAN Public Health Cooperation Initiative, go on with the support for the ASEAN Emergency Medical Materials Reserve and strengthen inter-regional epidemiological capacity enhancement [12].

With regard to Europe, amid the global public health emergency, China and private enterprises like Huawei and businessmen Jack Ma had offered medicinal assistance to European countries such as the Czech Republic, Spain, Italy, Belgium, France, Serbia, Hungary, etc. Several Eastern European countries like Serbia, Hungary and the Czech Republic thanked China's help during the critical time and criticized the European Union for its delayed response to the pandemic. For example, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic was grateful of President Xi Jinping for the medicinal assistance. He said that "they have proven as friends in the most difficult times when we fight for the lives of the Serbian people" [13]. And the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Oran was thankful for China and criticized the European Union for its unwillingness to combat the epidemic [13]. Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Slovakia have also been grateful to China for providing medicinal assistance [14]. Also, in Poland there was good impression of Chinese efforts in rendering assistance to Poland, for example the comments by Polish officials and medical experts [15].

The aid from China has received mixed reception in other European countries. In Austria, the Austrian government remained reticent towards China. For example, the Austrian government did not mention that there are deficiencies in the mask quality from China [35]. In Bulgaria, some anti-Chinese sentiments emerged soon after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the form of reluctance to engage with Chinese people in public

places [17]. In France, during the initial months of the crisis, the press coverage was quite positive towards China. But later debates on China's influence over the World Health Organization, coupled with misinterpretations of China's geopolitical motives behind the medical assistance contributed to a more hostile attitude toward China in France [18]. In Germany, the assistance from China raised questions of Germany's dependence on China and led German decision-makers to realize new geopolitical realities, the rise of China, and reminded the Germans that European Unity is of paramount importance amid China's rise [19]. In Greece, the societal mood is quite negative towards China, especially Greek citizens who tend to wrongly blame China for the origin of the crisis [20]. In Latvia, there were several exchanges between Latvia and China amid COVID-19 but local coverage was absent as Latvian officials did not publicize these exchanges. The Latvian government did not use Chinese aid to blame the European Union nor to underscore special friendly relations with China [21]. In the Netherlands, there was dependence on China on safeguarding materials and this triggered a debate on the importance of self-reliance of the European Union to produce essential medical consumables in Europe [22]. In Norway, public debate on China was diverse. Some were favorable towards China emphasizing the need to learn from China but others were critical of China about the reliability of information [23]. In Portugal, there was discussion of reducing reliance on imports from one nation, China for medical consumables [24]. In Romania, mass media provided a balanced view on China but the US government funded Radio Free Europe Romania has been discussing the possibility of Chinese propaganda [25]. In Sweden, the Chinese government responses to the crisis did not receive praise from media and politicians [26]. In Switzerland, there was critical portrayal of China's initiatives to frame a story around its position amid the epidemic [27]. In the United Kingdom, there were hostilities as important constituents of British policy debate after the COVID-19 on China [28].

IV. CONCLUSION

China's health diplomacy has begun long before the pandemic and it has definitively buttressed bilateral relations with the ASEAN countries in many channels. When the epidemic hit the ASEAN nations, China rushed to the rescue, donating money, medical supplies, consumables and equipment, along with sharing medical expertise in treating patients. And such altruistic efforts echoed President Xi Jinping's plan to make China act as a responsible world power. Such assistance rendered to ASEAN countries has certainly enhanced China's soft power in implementing its Health Silk Road. By virtue of its health diplomacy, China also intends to promote the use of traditional Chinese medicine to treat COVID-19 patients. Overall, China's Health Silk Road in the ASEAN countries are highly impressive and most regional governments are grateful for China's assistance. But China faces a tougher health diplomacy exercise in European countries. Overall, the Eastern European countries are generally more positive towards China but the western European countries are doubtful of Chinese assistance and underscore the

need to be self-reliant in the provision of safeguarding materials in Europe. One will see whether China can keep the good image among ASEAN countries as well as how China can emphasize the contributions of Chinese officials and citizens in assisting Europeans out of the crisis.

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