



## China's Foreign Aid to Countries in Southeast Asia During The Covid-19 Pandemic Massa

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### Abstract

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China is the country that has provided the most assistance during the Covid-19 pandemic to countries in the Southeast Asian Region. Some concrete efforts have been made by China such as diplomacy of masks, vaccines, and Medical Equipment and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) against all countries in the Southeast Asian region, including Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. These countries believe that China's humanitarian assistance is very much needed in this Covid-19 pandemic situation. However, in the course of this series of efforts, it gave rise to speculative assumptions from the international community. So that in the end, from this paper the author tries to answer the question of what is behind China's efforts to make foreign aid efforts to countries in the Southeast Asian Region using the concept of foreign aid from Maria Andersson. Maria explained that there are humanitarian, economic and socio-political motives in influencing a country's foreign aid. This is what the author will explain in this paper, in an effort to answer questions related to China's background in expanding its humanitarian assistance in the Southeast Asian Region. It is hoped that this paper can be used as a comparative material for similar research and as a contribution to ideas for interested parties.

**Keywords:** Foreign Aid; China; ASEAN; Covid-19

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### INTRODUCTION

Foreign aid is one of the instruments in foreign policy that has been commonly used in the practice of international relations for centuries. Foreign aid is the transfer of money, goods, or technical assistance from a donor country to a recipient country. Richard Snyder, a political expert from the United States who specializes in his studies in the field of foreign policy studies, defines foreign policy as a strategy or approach chosen by the government of a nation in achieving its interests in relation to other entities.

Foreign policy or often referred to as humanitarian aid, since global events occurred in the 21st century, has made the international world an increasingly dynamic and challenging arena. Such is the case with the current events, which are



related to the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has a global impact and has led to a humanitarian crisis situation, thus demanding the state as a traditional actor in international relations, to deal with it quickly and appropriately. One of the humanitarian aid efforts is a real effort of every state actor towards other countries in helping to solve these problems. So that this problem becomes a material for serious thought for academics, especially students of International Relations, in determining the right concepts in explaining these various changes and new phenomena. These concepts become important especially after the domination of Western countries, especially China which is increasingly difficult to beat in the international community.

The strength shown by the bamboo curtain country has become the international spotlight regarding its humanitarian assistance in the midst of a pandemic situation. China's hegemony is the most significant actor because its legitimacy of power is getting stronger in the international system. This is shown by its humanitarian assistance program for ASEAN member countries, when the world situation is being disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Of course, this is an emerging power that has the potential to become a major competitor to the United States in the future. Meanwhile for China itself, this is a great opportunity to be seized in showing its hegemonic power to the international community, especially now that the world is facing a humanitarian crisis. Of course, this will be the focus of China's efforts in embracing all countries in the Southeast Asia Region such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos.

The following is one of China's real efforts since the establishment of the Covid-19 outbreak in March 2020, namely conducting mask diplomacy. The Chinese government quickly provided medical equipment and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) assistance to countries in Southeast Asia, including Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Indonesia, which also rely heavily on Chinese aid. As of July 2020, China has also donated US\$50 million to the WHO (World Health Organization) and has distributed emergency aid to more than 150 countries and international organizations. So that it can be said that this humanitarian assistance is felt to be appropriate and has great benefits for the government and people of each Southeast Asian country.

In addition to emergency humanitarian aid, China is also involved in the plan to provide vaccine assistance which will take effect in May 2020. At the 73rd World Health Assembly forum (WHO's first forum during a pandemic), President Xi Jinping officially stated that the development of the vaccine is running and ready to make it a 'global public food'. Xi Jinping remains firm in his commitment to his fellow developing countries by pledging to prioritize developing countries in Southeast Asia to gain access to vaccines.

This is evidenced by sending Covid-19 vaccine production to countries in the Southeast Asia Region, and helping Indonesia become a center for vaccine production that can meet the needs of ASEAN countries. The following vaccines have been approved by WHO, including the Sinovac Vaccine, Sinopharm Vaccine, AstraZeneca Vaccine, and Sputnik Vaccine that have been sent to low-income countries, including in Southeast Asia, which are facing vaccine supply. This

assistance has certainly become increasingly real and solid, because of the close relationship between China and ASEAN, which have been dialogue partners for 30 years, and both have built a common concept of solidarity, mutual assistance, and equal treatment to achieve common goals and visions in the face of challenges. a brighter future. So it cannot be denied that this relationship will have an impact on the survival of countries in the ASEAN Region

Previously, China's humanitarian assistance had also been intertwined with China's Health Diplomacy program under the Health Silk Road (HSR) scheme. As part of the ambitious mega-project China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). HSR is the embodiment of the concept of cooperation and connectivity between BRI countries in the health sector which was launched by China from 2015-2017. With the Covid-19 event, this is certainly a momentum for HSR to be revitalized as a Chinese initiative in the form of its global leadership, while keeping this mechanism relevant to the international situation during the 2020-2021 pandemic.

Therefore, this humanitarian diplomacy cannot be considered small because various countries in the world, even large countries such as the United States and the European Union, are facing a shortage of PPE when the pandemic is spreading. Realistically, China's assistance will be very useful in supporting the establishment of a harmonious and strong relationship between China and ASEAN as a regional community that does not only focus on the economy, but also politics-security and socio-culture. Even China has received praise from the World Health Organization (WHO) in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, which stated "China not only protects Chinese citizens but also protects citizens of the world.

However, this appreciation is in contrast to the international world view which still thinks a lot of speculative and various other assumptions related to the Chinese aid. The international community considers this a means of re-branding the government in maintaining and maintaining the continuity of its regional relations with ASEAN, especially in economic relations. Even China's humanitarian aid is allegedly interpreted as an emerging power that has the potential to become a major competitor to the United States, as well as being the only superpower substitute for the United States that has succeeded in maintaining good relations with countries in the region, especially ASEAN.

So from there, the author is very interested in studying more deeply related to "What is the background for China to carry out humanitarian assistance efforts to countries in the Southeast Asian Region during the Covid-19 pandemic?" because as we know, that currently the world situation is increasingly being disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and China's position is increasingly aggressive in carrying out foreign aid in response to the pandemic, while other countries tend to be inward-looking, in their efforts to overcome the impact of the pandemic. to their respective domestic stability. Until now, China is still seen as the most influential political and strategic force in Southeast Asia, so this period of handling Covid-19 will certainly be a profitable momentum for China in showing its global leadership, where the leadership of the United States is weak because its economic strength is declining. For scholars of International Relations, of course, this will be much more promising

because the questions on the factors that determine each foreign policy will be much more identifiable, compared to relying on a single analysis.

The discussion in this paper will provide an overview, where the factors that influence the occurrence of humanitarian assistance can be seen from several aspects, namely the humanitarian aspect, the economic aspect, and the socio-political aspect of China towards countries in the Southeast Asia Region.

### **Theoretical Outlook on China's Humanitarian Aid Process in Southeast Asia**

To explain patterns of humanitarian aid or foreign aid requires a set of interrelated generalizations, theories and approaches. Foreign aid is one of the instruments that is often used to achieve the goals of a country's foreign policy. Foreign aid is similar to diplomacy, propaganda, or military action directed by one country against another. As stated by Weisman that foreign aid is a component of diplomacy and can be regarded as an effective controlling tool, at least to influence the actions of other countries.

Sogge tries to analyze further related to foreign aid in the international world, which is stated in his book entitled "Motives Behind The Allocation of Aid" that behind foreign aid there is always a motive, namely: the first is the humanitarian motive, where this motive expresses compassion. to victims of conflict and providing assistance to poverty with the aim of helping poor communities in developing countries as the main basis. In this humanitarian motive, there are two indicators, including: reducing poverty, which is a problem faced by every country that can be overcome so that the country gets the right to life, and showing concern, which can be seen if there is assistance to victims of conflict in poverty alleviation efforts. and show concern for other countries. This motive is related to the humanitarian assistance that is being carried out by China to Southeast Asian countries, where China is trying to strengthen its assistance by sending medical equipment and vaccines to reduce the impact of Covid-19. Of course, this is a form of compassion and concern from the Bamboo Curtain country because one of the historical factors has been around for a long time.

Then the next motive is the economic motive. The economic motive assumes that foreign aid can generate economic growth for the donor country. Economic motives are often the main reason for donor countries to provide foreign aid. With foreign aid, donor countries can secure the supply of natural resources for their interests. In addition, the economic motive speaks of expanding market access in the destination country. This refers to both exports and imports. In terms of exports, donor countries can create opportunities for their countries to increase their income from the sale of their goods in recipient countries. The recipient country becomes the economic interest of the donor country. Thus, it can be understood that there are three indicators of economic motives, including:

1. Trading. This motif talks about international trade and how to help countries enter international markets. Because of the country's non-participation in international trade that will make them survive in poverty. This motive is related to China's efforts to expand its trade cooperation with Southeast Asian

countries. This is evidenced by the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), ASEAN Plus Three (APT) programs and others.

2. Investation. This motive can be seen from the existence of foreign aid through investment, it will benefit the giving and receiving countries, and create jobs, state companies can go international, increase economic growth, and establish good relations between countries. The strategic investor for ASEAN at this time is China, where China is more advantaged because they are on the axis of the cooperation. So that the Southeast Asia Region continues to strive to improve and maintain political stability in its country because the political stability of a country can attract foreign investors to invest their capital. And of course this cooperation has its own advantages for both the recipient and the sender of capital.
3. Export. This motif is marked by the existence of export activities where foreign aid creates opportunities for the state to increase the income obtained from the exports of the assisted countries, with the hope that export activities are sustainable even though they no longer provide foreign aid.
4. Import. This motif is characterized by the existence of import activities where foreign aid creates opportunities for the country to increase the income obtained from imports for the assisted countries, with the hope that there will be continuous import activities even though they no longer provide foreign aid.

The next motive related to his analysis of foreign aid is the socio-political motive. Political motives talk about the main instruments used by donor countries to achieve national interests and political interests. Furthermore, political motives speak of the importance of maintaining long-term relationships between donors and recipients. This can be achieved by strengthening the country into a country with a good image so that later it can strengthen its diplomatic strategy. With this good stigma, donor countries can strengthen ties that can strengthen relations between the two parties so that later donor countries can be recognized internationally by other countries.

The form of this motif is marked by the existence of socio-political activities between donor countries and donor recipient countries which will affect the political situation of each country, which is marked by the presence of several indicators:

1. Bonding: the motif of ties or can be called Bonding is where the state aims to strengthen its relationship with other countries. So when viewed in terms of a country's foreign aid, the aid aims to strengthen the relationship between the country providing aid and the country receiving the aid. This motive is also related to the humanitarian motive, where the motive aims to help countries that are in need of assistance, it will create a sense of mutual help in the future

and show that the two countries can trust each other and will be ready to help if they need help.

2. Embassies. The existence of an embassies is in order to facilitate the interests of the country where the embassies are located, for example economic interests. The existence of the embasi will be very helpful in the process of obtaining the interests of the state.
3. Alliance Security. Security cooperation can include the military in order to strengthen the security of both parties. This could include providing troops for national security, training, or helping defeat groups/regimes that create anarchy within the country.
4. Peace and Security. This motive does not necessarily involve the military. However, it can be said that it is an effort to maintain national and international security. Foreign Aid can facilitate the efforts of aid-giving countries to create peace.
5. Ideology. Interpreted as a political understanding and shared values that aim to help a country that needs a more democratic authority. Thus, adherence to human rights is understood as a motivating ideology.
6. Political Aims. Foreign aid expresses a country's political goals. There are national policies and interests to be achieved.
7. International recognition. If a country gets recognition at the international level, then that country will be able to participate in the development stage or cooperation at the international level. It will also gain respect from other countries, and the power to gain the interests of that country more smoothly in expressing its domestic policies through the country's international policies.

In the end, the author concludes that in analyzing foreign aid, it refers to what is happening in the relations of several parties and also the international relations system that affects the occurrence of humanitarian aid. According to the concept put forward by Maria Andersson, these factors play a major role in the period of humanitarian assistance. No humanitarian assistance was initially not a consequence of events approaching in the international order, such as the case of this corona outbreak. So that this provides a stimulus for foreign countries to play their role in providing humanitarian assistance throughout the Southeast Asian Region. More simply, Andersson also explained that this humanitarian aid was divided into several factors, namely humanitarian, economic, and socio-political. These are factors that overall affect the occurrence of a country's foreign aid.

### **China's Humanitarian Motives Against Southeast Asian Countries**

China has emerged as one of the emerging powers that considers humanitarian diplomacy important through the provision of humanitarian assistance, including the Asian Region. In the Asian Region, the development of China's foreign aid is mostly channeled to countries in the Southeast Asia Region because this region is directly adjacent to China and is the most geopolitically

important region for China. As a region adjacent to China, Southeast Asia does have a special meaning for China. Although China's relations with several Southeast Asian countries have not always gone well, China has remained consistent in providing a large portion of foreign aid to countries in the Southeast Asian Region. For decades, China has been a donor country to Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia and the Philippines. Some Southeast Asian countries still have a high dependence on foreign aid. This is due to the low level of development in these countries. But the amount of Chinese foreign aid to Cambodia is the largest compared to other Southeast Asian countries that also receive assistance from China.

Cambodia is a country with the lowest economic development and growth in the Southeast Asia Region. Cambodia also has a high dependence on foreign aid, so that from the beginning of its independence until now Cambodia is still very dependent on foreign aid. Cambodia's foreign aid came from various sources, such as from Japan, the United States, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Australia, South Korea, France, the World Bank, the Global Fund, India, China, and the United Nations (UN). However, since 2009 China has become the largest donor to Cambodia to date. The amount of aid from China to Cambodia in the last ten years is far more than foreign aid from other donors. China's foreign aid to Cambodia is distributed to several sectors, such as agriculture, energy development, education and culture, infrastructure and other sectors, but the largest portion of China's foreign aid to Cambodia is given to infrastructure development in Cambodia, particularly the construction of transportation infrastructure such as roads. and bridges.

Basically the relationship between China and Cambodia has a close relationship, which has been built since 1956 through a foreign aid. However, this foreign aid was interrupted due to the political upheaval in Cambodia and was exacerbated by the global political situation which was in the Cold War until 1990 and again provided assistance in a new form that prioritized infrastructure development in Cambodia in the early 2000s.

In 2004, China also provided infrastructure development assistance to Cambodia for the first time after China returned to provide financial assistance for infrastructure projects with a total of 63.4 million US dollars to the Cambodian government in 2004, which was provided in the form of soft loans of Rp. 61 million US dollars and grants of 2.4 million US dollars and 29.2 million US dollars in 2005.

In 2011, the amount of aid for infrastructure development from China experienced a significant increase from previous years and increased drastically until it reached its peak in 2012 with the amount of aid for infrastructure development totaling US\$ 778 and US\$ 33.1 million in the form of soft loans.

The amount of foreign aid from China to Cambodia also indicates that the two countries have very close relations. The close relationship between China and Cambodia has strengthened in recent years, such as on 23 April 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping specifically met Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen at the Asian-African Summit in Jakarta in celebration of The 60th Anniversary of Bandung Conference. Xi Jinping stated in his special meeting with Hun Sen of the

importance of Cambodia to China and China's desire to maintain good relations with Cambodia and want to continue to support development in Cambodia. So it can be seen that China is willing to continue to support Cambodia in enhancing its country's development and show that Cambodia is an important partner of China in the Southeast Asia Region.

### **China's Economic Motives Against Southeast Asian Countries**

In 1991, China became a Consultative Member in ASEAN and in 1996, ASEAN officially made China a dialogue partner at the 29th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Jakarta. In early 1997, five dialogue frameworks were established between ASEAN and China, namely the China-ASEAN Political Consultation, the China-ASEAN Joint Committee (ACJCC), the China-ASEAN Joint Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation, and the ASEAN joint Committee. China also held consultation meetings at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), The Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) 9+1, The Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) Meeting, the ASEAN-China Senior Official Meeting (SOM) and the ASEAN-China Business Council Meeting.

The economic benefits derived from China's trade with ASEAN are classified as undergoing very fast development with an average growth rate of 20.8% from 1990 to 2003. Until 2005, ASEAN became the sixth cooperation partner for ASEAN. ASEAN investment in China increased by an average of about 28% from 1991 to 2000. Although China's investment in ASEAN was still relatively small, until 2001 the amount of investment was around 7.7% of all Chinese investments abroad. At the ASEAN-China Summit in November 2001, China proposed the idea of establishing a China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA).

The progress of interaction between China and ASEAN has been seen since November 2001 when the two formed a Free Trade Area (FTA) for a period of 10 years. Then in November 2002, at the ASEAN-China Summit in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, ASEAN leader and Chinese PM Zhu Rongji signed the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation as the basis for ASEAN-China to hold an FTA. This agreement came into effect on July 1, 2003, but the new FTA was enforced in 2010 with the former member countries of ASEAN, namely Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Meanwhile, another FTA started in 2015 between China and the new ASEAN members, namely, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. In addition, according to the notes of the ASEAN Secretariat, the progress of this cooperation was also followed by the signing of the Joint Declaration of ASEAN and China on Cooperation in the Field of Non-Traditional Security Issues at the meeting.

From this cooperation, it can be said that ASEAN and China actually have a long journey in building economic relations. This is proven by the various programs that have been carried out by both of them. So from this it is clear that China has an economic interest in maintaining the country's stable growth so that social turmoil does not occur in the country, and this is one of China's strengths in expanding its interests in the countries of the Southeast Asian Region.

### China's Social and Political Motives Against Southeast Asian Countries

Judging from the social aspect, it proves that ethnic Chinese came to the Southeast Asian Region since the beginning of history, namely in order to exchange Chinese goods such as silk, porcelain, spices, medicines and strange and rare goods from the region. Southeast Asia. The identity of China in Southeast Asia cannot be separated from the economic activities of the Chinese in Southeast Asia.

The rapid role of Chinese business in Southeast Asia in particular can affect Chinese identity. It can be assumed that the stronger the degree of integration or assimilation, the more important it will contribute to class identity in the country. If integration is weak or if the national government is perceived to discriminate against ethnic Chinese nationals, a different kind of class interest will emerge and the peranakan Chinese economic elite will be tempted to do business along ethnic lines with fellow Chinese throughout the Southeast Asia Region, and even in some parts of the world. another world at the expense of the local identity of the indigenous elite. So from here we see that China's ties and integrity with Southeast Asia are quite strong, as seen by the spread of Chinese ethnicity in the region.

Then in terms of geopolitics, at this time China is no longer in doubt as a New Superpower country with extraordinary strength, not only felt in parts of the world, but also in the countries of the Southeast Asian Region. This is evidenced by the issuance of a policy called BRI (Belt and Road Initiative), where this policy is used as the basis of China's national interest in meeting its energy needs, so that China is trying to find alternative energy supplies and secure energy import flows from its old partners. The BRI policy aims for China to balance the power of other countries, where in this case China is trying to find leadership in Asia through financing the High Speed Rail (HSR) project which is in tight competition with Japan. BRI is also used by China as an effort to increase hegemony in the security sector by trying to form a new security order by inviting countries to exclude the US from Asian security affairs.

Figure 1. BRI China Roadmap



For China, Southeast Asia is an important strategic partner in the BRI project. This region serves as the main link on the BRI Maritime Silk Road, which aims to

connect China's coast with South Asia, the Middle East and Europe via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The program started in 2017, when China and Vietnam signed an agreement to promote connectivity between BRI projects and infrastructure in Vietnam through the 'Two Corridor, One Circle' project. Then in 2018, Oxford Economics and the CIMB ASEAN Research Institute also released data that BRI projects in ASEAN countries amounted to more than \$739 billion. Indonesia is home to the highest total BRI investment of \$171 billion, followed by Vietnam (\$152 billion), Cambodia (\$104 billion), Malaysia (\$98.5 billion), Singapore (\$70.1 billion), Laos (\$48 billion), Brunei Darussalam (\$36 Billion), Myanmar (\$27.2 Billion), Thailand (\$24 Billion), and the Philippines (\$9.4 Billion).

In April 2019, China also hosted the BRI which was attended by 37 heads of state, government and international organizations. During the forum, President Xi Jinping said that the BRI would adopt multilateral rules and international best practices in carrying out its projections. In addition, China also established an international mediator panel from BRI countries to resolve cross-border disputes over BRI projects. This initiative is important, as various contracts and agreements already exist between China and ASEAN member countries.

Thus, it can be said that this BRI project is considered to have the potential to deliver long-lasting economic and political growth, and is considered an example of successful regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. Regional countries also understand China's initiative as an effort to increase influence in Southeast Asia, which will bring great benefits, because interconnectivity will bring a big boost. However, the implications of China are seen by the United States as a potential threat to stability in the Southeast Asian Region. Therefore, the author concludes that this BRI project collaboration is a tool to strengthen its political interests in the international world, especially Southeast Asia.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation above, the entire humanitarian assistance effort carried out by China in the Southeast Asia Region is none other than the influence of such a large international relations system. This influence starts with the emergence of humanitarian motives that have been born for a long time against countries in the Southeast Asian Region. Cambodia is one of the countries that has an attitude of dependence on China compared to other countries. With very low development, Cambodia is very dependent on China in the infrastructure sector. This has resulted in a close relationship between the two, because they are geographically close, and also have similarities in terms of geopolitics. Besides Cambodia, there are other countries such as Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, and the Philippines that have received humanitarian assistance from China.

Then the next factor that adds to China's foreign aid in the Southeast Asia Region is due to economic motives. This multilateral cooperation relationship has existed for a long time since the establishment of ASEAN itself. Various economic programs have been built such as CAFTA, FTA, ARF, JCC, etc. which are a series of cooperations built by China in increasing its economic power in the international arena. Of course this will be a significant motive compared to other motives due to

the many programs that China has carried out with Southeast Asian countries. This is merely to increase economic growth and its ideological influence in the international world.

Furthermore, the motives that influence the emergence of China's humanitarian aid are social and political motives. This social motive is related to the existence of ethnic Chinese relations with several countries in the Southeast Asia Region, one of which is Malaysia. There are quite a number of ethnic Chinese who have lived in Malaysia for a long time. In fact, some of them have carried out trade that is quite profitable economically for ethnic Chinese. The relationship of solidarity between them is quite strong, even this is shown by the existence of integrity in social and community life. Of course this will be a strength for China in spreading its influence in Southeast Asian countries.

In addition, from a geopolitical perspective, China seems to want to expand its ideology and political influence in the Southeast Asian Region. This is shown by the construction of the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) program which is one of the ambitious policies issued by China during the Xi Jinping administration in 2013. From this BRI policy, the author assumes that China wants to take over its role as a leader in the Asian Region, One of them is Southeast Asia. This ambition can be seen from China's efforts to spread its influence in Southeast Asia to finance infrastructure projects, especially high-speed rail projects. This is shown by China in seeing America's supremacy in the region diminishing, so right at this moment China is starting to scramble for influence to occupy a position as a leader in the near future. All of these indicators ultimately encourage China to increase its foreign aid to the Southeast Asian Region. Public trust and also the international community began to increase along with its influence in expanding its policies in several sectors. But behind this assistance, the hope is that this effort will not only provide prosperity for China, or not only for China's national interest, but also hope that it will benefit all countries in the Southeast Asian Region..

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