



UNDERSTANDING TURKISH AND RUSSIAN HEALTH DIPLOMACY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract - COVID-19 has become a global threat. The ferocity of this virus has paralyzed the health system of major countries such as the United States, Britain, Italy and Spain. When this virus entered its peak period, countries experienced a shortage of medical devices. This situation has inspired some countries to play a diplomatic role, such as Russia and Turkey who sending medical equipment assistance to countries that were previously their enemies. This article discusses the Turkish and Russian approaches to using medical devices as diplomatic instruments. Based on the soft power theory, the Turkish and Russian approaches have been very effective in changing their image in the eyes of countries that were previously hostile to them. This research is a qualitative research which utilize official statements and release from Russia and Turkish ministry of foreign affairs as well as secondary source from publication of reputable global think tank in the US, Russia, Turkey and Europe. This research explains how Turkey and Russia used the resources they owned during the Covid-19 pandemic to build an image as friendly countries and could become partners for Eastern European countries and some member states of the European Union. It can also be concluded that the Turkish and Russian approaches can be categorized as health diplomacy.

Keywords: COVID-19, Diplomacy, medical equipment assistance

I. INTRODUCTION

The Corona virus was first detected in China in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan. Initially this virus did not really worry many countries because the international world was used to dealing with similar viruses. Countries have previously faced the SARS, MERS and Ebola viruses, so that world leaders feel they are able to prevent the worst of a virus (Shears & Garavan, 2020). However, entering the beginning of 2020, the existence of the Corona virus or later known as Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a frightening specter because the number of victims it creates is very massive. Referring to data dated June 10, 2020, it shows that the number of positive patients with COVID-19 worldwide has reached 7 million (John Hopkins, 2020).

While the area that was previously the epicentre of the virus, namely the city of Wuhan, Hubei, China, shows the number of victims who died reached 3869 cases (WHO, 2020). As a reaction to this pandemic, the Chinese government decided to completely shut down the city of Wuhan. As a precaution, the Chinese government has also acted quickly to ensure that it does not spread rapidly to other regions. The strategy used is to limit the movement of citizens from the city of Wuhan to outside the city. The aim is to break the chain of distribution.

Furthermore, entering the beginning of 2020, there was a change in the epicenter of the spread of the virus, if previously the international community had focused its attention on events in China, between January and March the world's attention shifted to Italy and Spain. Italy and Spain are the countries in Europe with the most positive cases and deaths. Data for June 2020 also shows that the number of cases in Italy reached 235 thousand cases with 33 thousand deaths, while Spain had 288 thousand cases with 27 thousand cases died (John Hopkins, 2020).

This research discusses how Turkey and Russia conducted diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The policies of the two countries are interesting to be used as study material regarding diplomacy theory which emphasizes the use of non-military instruments or soft power to increase closeness and build good relations for the long term. As explained by Joseph Nye (2004), soft power is a way to attract the attention of the public or other countries without having to force or pay. Studies on diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic have not been carried out much because this pandemic has indeed occurred since the end of 2019 and took place throughout 2020. For example, previous studies described the relationship between Russia and the European Union which are in opposing positions. On the one hand, Russia is considered by the European Union as an aggressive country in spreading its influence, referring to the Crimea occupation incident and the political crisis that took place in Ukraine. While on the other hand Russia is a

country that uses its resources to send medical aid to EU member countries such as Serbia, Italy and Spain with a narrative of helping those in need. When the Covid-19 pandemic took place, Serbia criticized the European Union for being slow in providing access to health funds for members in need (European Report, 2020). Meanwhile, regarding Turkey, Ildir Lika explained how Turkey followed China and Russia's steps to send medical supplies and medical equipment to Eastern European countries or the Balkans, which have been the target of Turkish diplomacy in the last two decades (Idlir Lika, 2020). Previous research has not fully elaborated on how the European Union's response to this assistance and how the response of countries that received assistance from Russia and Turkey. This study seeks to explain the impact of sending aid by countries that have been considered rivals on changing perceptions as the target of soft power diplomacy, in this case health diplomacy.

II. METHODS

This research is a qualitative research which seeks to analyze the diplomacy patterns of Turkey and Russia which were previously involved in conflicts with the United States and Europe but when a crisis or pandemic emerged. These countries are actively providing assistance in the form of medical devices. In analyzing the health diplomacy style of Turkey and Russia, the researcher utilize public statement released by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Russia, Spain, Italia, as well as NATO secretariat. The author also uses publications from global think tank which focus its study on Turkey and Russia especially from 2019 to 2020. In the data collection process, researchers used secondary data in the form of reports from the Turkish and Russian Foreign Ministries that are directly related to the process of sending aid during the Covid-19 pandemic. The data that has been collected is then analyzed and compared with research that has been carried out related to the topic of health diplomacy during the Covid-19 pandemic season, especially related to Turkey and Russia.

III. DISCUSSION

Health diplomacy is a terminology that has emerged as a response to the existence of a pandemic that attacks poor countries, especially in Africa. The concept of health diplomacy is a derivative of the Soft Power diplomacy concept developed by Joseph Nye (2004). So far, the United States is in the forefront of dealing with the pandemic that attacks countries in the world, the role of the US in responding to the pandemic is a parameter to measure US leadership at the international level (Kavanagh, 2019). Apart from the US, Cuba is also included in the category of countries that maximize the power of its doctors to help countries in need. Although Cuba is perceived as a closed country due to the leadership of Fidel Castro and his successors, Cuba's move to use health diplomacy has won him sympathy from countries in the South American and African regions (Werlau, 2013).

3.1. The Atmosphere of Rivalry between Russia and the West

Relations between Russia and the West (United States and the European Union) in the past decade have experienced a phase of tension. This can be seen from the series of events that make their relationship distant. In March 2020 the United States decided to expel Russian diplomats from their territory. The US side said that the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats who served for diplomatic missions at the United Nations headquarters in New York as a result of their involvement in intelligence activities. Apart from expelling Russian diplomats, the US also ordered the closure of the Russian consulate in Seattle. The US attitude was conveyed directly by Nikki Haley as the US ambassador to the UN at that time (New York Times, 27/03/2018).

As for Russia's relationship with the US, one of the events that made the US impose an embargo on Russia was related to Russia's efforts to influence the presidential election in 2016. According to US President Barack Obama, who was still in office, said that there had been an attempt to influence the presidential election in the US by intelligence operations in the form of hacking of the Democratic Party election committee email. The cyber-attack activity that attacked the US was then followed by the imposition of sanctions in December 2016 against two Russian intelligence agents and related entities in the form of asset freezing and prohibition of entering US territory (Catherine A. Theohary & Cory Welt, 2017).

3.2. Trade War Between Turkey and Russia

Unlike Russia, Turkey itself has relatively good relations with the West. Turkey is currently a strategic partner of the US for the Middle East region, Turkey is also a member of the NATO defense alliance, including a candidate for EU membership. Turkey's membership in the Western community has so far

influenced Turkish-Western trading activities. However, domestic political dynamics also have an effect on Turkey's international relations with the US and the European Union. This can be seen from the policy of the President of the United States (US) Donald Trump, which places Turkey as one of the countries affected by the increase in tariffs (Lika, 2020).

Trump's economic policy, when viewed from a series of previous events, did not just emerge, this economic policy was directly related to the arrest of Pastor Andrew Brunson. According to the Turkish side, Andrew Brunson, a pastor of US nationality, was involved in the 2016 coup attempt and according to Turkish law, he must be detained. While the US government asked Turkey to release Andrew Brunson, Turkey firmly refused. The Turkish side said it would only return Andrew Brunson if Washington was willing to hand over Fetullah Gulen, who according to the Turkish government was the main actor behind the July 15 2016 coup (Zanotti & Thomas, 2020).

3.3. The Fragility of the European Union and America in Facing COVID-19

Based on the data for June 2020, it shows that the number of positive patients with COVID-19 has reached 1.4 million cases, which are spread across all EU member states including the United Kingdom (ECDC, 2020). In order to prevent transmission of the virus, the European Union authorities asked member countries to close borders and enforce border tightening. Practical border closure makes the traffic of goods and people experience obstacles. The policies taken by European Union countries from February to June 2020 include closing borders, closing schools, closing entertainment and recreation venues, stopping international flights, stopping European league matches, postponing the Euro 2020 event. has a direct impact on the economic slowdown in the European Union. The company decided to reduce the number of employees.

For countries with strong health networks such as the countries of Western Europe and Northern Europe, protective policies may not be a problem, but for countries in Southern Europe it is a disaster. The large numbers of cases and deaths in Italy and Spain show that the health systems of the two European Union member countries are overwhelmed by the Corona virus. The Italian government itself when faced with such a situation declared itself open to international assistance. Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte even made a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin to ask for the help they need to deal with COVID-19. An event which is certainly unusual for European Union member states that have been involved in feuds with Russia (Gaub, 2020).

3.4. Medical Device Diplomacy

The situation facing the US and the European Union inspires Turkey and Russia to maximize their available resources to change their negative image. Turkey, which in the last five years has had unfavorable relations with the European Union and the West, in early April 2020 decided to send packages of medical equipment assistance to Italy and Spain. The delivery of medical equipment is a direct order of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Aid packages were sent using Turkish military jets. In addition to sending aid to Italy and Spain, which are the countries with the highest number of victims, Turkey also sent aid to the United States, military cargo containing medical equipment was delivered directly by Turkish military jets at the end of April 2020. Turkish President spokesman Fahrettin Altun said that the overall Turkey has sent medical equipment assistance to 50 countries. Turkey's move to send aid received appreciation from US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who called Turkey's move proof that the two countries' strategic partnership was maintained. Turkey's contribution in sending aid also received a similar appreciation from NATO leader John Stoltenberg, who stated that Turkey's move was a form of solidarity with the NATO alliance (NATO, 2020).

A similar approach has been used by Russia by sending medical personnel and medical equipment. According to Russian media TASS reports that Russian President Vladimir Putin on March 22-25, 2020 ordered the Russian Defense Minister to send 15 military jets to Italy aimed at transporting virologists, epidemiologists and medical needs to Italy. The report also mentioned that specialist doctors stationed in cities that are the epicenter of the pandemic in Italy have experience in carrying out missions to fight viruses in the African region such as Ebola. In addition, it was also mentioned that Russia sent military experts to be stationed in the city of Bergamo (Lombardy) which is the city worst hit by the Corona outbreak (Nona Mikhelidze, 2020).

In the medical device delivery package, there is an article "From Russia with Love", this article which has been the subject of discussion by a number of international media regarding Russia's approach in responding to the spreading epidemic. Media TASS said provincial governor Pulia Michele Emilano conveyed her gratitude through social media to the Russian government for sending them a medical aid

package accompanied by a picture of the package with the words "From Russia with Love"(Nona Mikhelidze, 2020).

The existence of Russian aid sent using military vehicles to Italy is a concern of NATO, this was conveyed by one of the NATO generals Tod Wolters who said that he paid close attention to Russian military movements in Italy. When criticism emerged, Russia denied through Foreign Minister Segey Lavrov who stated at a press conference that the delivery of medical assistance was a response to Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's request (The Guardian, 2020). During the pandemic Russia was seen to be very active in providing medical equipment assistance to countries considered to be Russia's strategic partners. Russia also even sent aid to the United States, which had been a rival since the Cold War ended. It should be noted that in 2016 the United States imposed sanctions on Russia due to the annexation of Crimea and its alleged involvement in the US presidential election. Looking at the approach used by Turkey and Russia, it can be concluded that the use of soft power instruments is effective in changing the international public's perception of the self-image of a country using medical instruments to change the perception of other parties about them.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic is a situation that many countries have never imagined before. In forums attended by world leaders at the United Nations or the G20, most of them put the issues of war, nuclear, terrorism, as a direct threat to national security. However, the current situation has made the global political map change drastically. Countries with limited health facilities have had their own difficulties in dealing with the Corona outbreak. Even European countries such as Spain and Italy experienced a crisis in the health sector. In the midst of a crisis situation due to the pandemic, Turkey and Russia have emerged as two countries that can be examples of how health diplomacy works. To improve relations with previously hostile countries, sending health aid packages is a smart choice. The move by Turkey and Russia is a very smart diplomatic move because through this approach, countries that previously kept their distance, are slowly opening communication with Turkey and Russia.

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