

## **COVID-19 AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS: UNDERSTANDING (INTER)DEPENDENCY THROUGH VACCINES PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION**

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### **Abstrak**

*Pandemi Covid-19 membuka babak baru dalam ranah Hubungan Internasional. Penyebaran virus ini dipercepat oleh kemajuan teknologi yang hanya dimungkinkan oleh globalisasi. Dari sekian banyak upaya yang dilakukan untuk menyelamatkan diri, vaksin dianggap sebagai upaya genting dan penuh kontroversi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk melihat pemahaman para pemangku kepentingan di Hubungan Internasional mengenai fenomena saling ketergantungan antara negara berkembang dan negara maju dalam sistem internasional, melalui studi kasus vaksin. Penelitian ini melihat juga dinamika yang terjadi di konteks ASEAN. Teori Neoliberalisme digunakan sebagai kerangka teoretis utama dan konsep saling ketergantungan serta kerja sama internasional yang berangkat langsung dari teori tersebut. Pendekatan penelitian ialah kualitatif yang menggunakan data primer sebagai sumber utama informasi – yang diperoleh dari wawancara dan komunikasi pribadi bersama para akademisi, peneliti, institusi pemerintah, dan para mahasiswa Hubungan Internasional – serta data sekunder. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pandemi yang tengah berlangsung ini mengarahkan negara-negara berkembang untuk bergantung pada negara maju yang telah memiliki kemampuan memproduksi vaksin, termasuk negara-negara anggota ASEAN. Penggunaan vaksin sebagai instrumen politis dianggap sangat tidak tepat. Namun, masih ada kepercayaan bahwa hubungan ketergantungan ini akan bergerak menjadi saling ketergantungan ketika negara-negara berkembang menemukan cara mitigasi yang tepat dan efektif dalam menghadapi situasi ini – dan ini dinilai sudah berjalan.*

**Kata kunci:** Covid-19, ketergantungan, saling ketergantungan, globalisasi, vaksin, politik internasional

### **Abstract**

Covid-19 pandemic has opened a new chapter in the International Relations sphere. Its spread is accelerated by the advancement of technology that only

globalization has made possible. Among several measures to survive, vaccines are perceived as critical and controversial. The objective of this research is to grasp a better understanding from different perspectives of stakeholders in International Relations, regarding interdependence between developing and developed countries in the international system, using the vaccine. In doing so, this research also analyzes the dynamics in the ASEAN context. Neoliberalism serves as the core theoretical framework alongside the concepts of interdependence and international cooperation. This research is a qualitative one, using mostly primary data that is gathered from a series of interviews and personal communication with academicians, researchers, government officials, and students – and secondary data. The results show that the ongoing pandemic has directed developing countries to depend on developed countries with capabilities in vaccines production, including ASEAN member states. The fact that vaccines are even used as a political instrument is found ill-fitted. However, there is still enough amount of confidence that this dependency will move to interdependency once developing countries have found effective strategies in coping with the situation – and it has started.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, dependency, interdependence, globalization, vaccines, international politics

## 1. Introduction

Within the International Relations framework, the world's evolution is reflected through international politics that displays interaction among states. The interaction itself could be perceived as amity such as cooperation or enmity manifested in states' rivalry, among many other forms. World events have been the main trigger of such evolution. The Post-World Wars era marks the birth of – arguably – most intensified cooperation and the establishment of most significant international organizations. Cold War is considered as the time when the world was in bipolarity. The end of the Cold War is the beginning of contemporary international politics.

Contemporary international politics is marked by an interconnected world, thanks to globalization. The term entails two main aspects: technology advancement and democratic governance. Technology advancement allows transnational activities carried out more efficiently in a more competitive sphere. International trade is now done with the most sophisticated technological tools that cut the length of the process; time and space seem to be collapsing (Baylis, Smith & Owens, 2020). Democratic governance makes more intensified political-economy actions possible. One prominent example would be Multinational Corporations (MNCs). If it was not for democracy, MNCs would not be able to have a sustainable operation within certain countries protected with rule of law and transparency (Jensen, 2006).

While serving as a steppingstone for an interconnected world that provides a massive opportunity for economic growth, globalization acts as a stumbling block that leads to an unprecedented world event that could probably alter the whole

dynamics of international politics. Take an example of the Covid-19 pandemic that has managed to crumble the planet. Starting at the end of 2019, within months, the pandemic arrived in most states. People were forced to stay at home, work/learn from home, and avoid crowds that might trigger rapid widespread. Countries had a series of lockdown and strict restrictions and essentially went to isolation. And perhaps the most challenging effect is the world's economy that suffered due to the absence of economic activities. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development records that economic losses are mounting significantly in developing countries and predicts that the global economy could lose over four trillion USD from tourism only (UNCTAD, 2021).

For almost two years after its dramatic entrance, states have been trying their best to overcome the pandemic. Some decide to help each other by sending humanitarian aid and technical assistance. This action is done by both developed and developing countries. Indonesia, for example, sent 1,400 units of oxygen cylinders to India (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2021). In return, India sent 10 liquid medical oxygen containers to Indonesia when Indonesia was faced with another wave of Covid-19 spread (Bhalla, 2021). However, some prefer to cope 'individually' and avoid cooperation in tackling the problem, probably realizing that it is too risky to interact with other countries and get even more exposed to the virus.

Lastly, an interesting and most anticipated action seems to be taken care of countries with a substantial medical asset – who are supported with World Health Organization (WHO) – developing vaccines. As much as being a huge relief, vaccines are controversial when analyzed through certain lenses. Its limited availability and doubted success are among prominent controversies along with the intellectual property rights issue. In short, the Covid-19 pandemic has been another world event that has major impacts on almost every state and potentially could change the way states interact and eventually global politics.

Urgency comes from the fact that globalization leads to interdependence among states. Interdependence is an unavoidable reality, but interdependency for developed or developing countries has different implications. The terms 'developed countries' and 'developing countries' are still vague, as every party has its interpretation of this (F. Zamzari, personal interview, December 1, 2021). A developed country is a country that considers factors other than the economics and the well-being of its citizens. They talk about values, about things that are difficult to quantify. Developed countries already have the knowledge and resources to meet their demands. On the other hand, developing countries are still developing their economies and society, interdependence can make their country a consumption-based country, drowning in products from different production countries (C. Khoe, personal interview, November 28, 2021).

Globalization provides several benefits to many countries, but it also has severe consequences for specific individuals and regions, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Each country does its risk-benefit analysis, concluding that globalization is beneficial to the country. As a result, countries are driven to halt the COVID-19 pandemic since their economy relies on others. In the struggle to

fight the virus, many countries are still researching on developing and distributing vaccines. This is where the term and phenomenon of "Vaccine Diplomacy" emerge, in which countries with a significant supply of vaccines (typically with vaccine-producing capabilities) assist countries who struggle to have enough vaccines to protect their citizens to create or preserve diplomatic relations and even influence the foreign policy of other countries. If we see Covid-19 as a war, vaccines are like military weapons (R. Prihandoko, personal communication, December 2, 2021). It is not the sole determinant for winning the war, but it determines the "direction of the war". Vaccines are not a panacea, but it is the best available option to ensure survival. Logically speaking, countries that have the latest military technology have the upper hand, and it applies to vaccines as well. In this case, as Covid-19 affects all countries, a global "alliance" is needed.

Supply chain and logistics are essential when it comes to distributing vaccines as quickly as possible on a massive scale. Developed countries have the advantage of this. Fortunately, some countries do not have technological advancement but still have the financial ability to procure from others and distribute. Therefore, to ensure vaccine equity, an international plan is needed to manage it fairly (R. Prihandoko, personal communication, December 2, 2021).

It is safe to say that among the most needed medical assistance, the vaccine remains scarce as it is only produced by developed countries that are equipped with the required capabilities. Thus, using vaccines as a study case, it is imperative to study whether developing countries will be dependent on developed countries permanently. We limited our research to ASEAN member countries to find the understanding of the countries on the significance of vaccines and to analyze interdependence within the region.

We decided to focus our scope of research on the ASEAN, knowing how the differences of the countries in this region and how they are on the rise makes it even more interesting. There is a diversity of systems in the ASEAN member countries, with monarchy, military, democracy, and federal parliament as the country's system. Having understood this, we formulated three research problems that need to be further discussed and analyzed. The first is to establish the main distinction between developed and developing countries that allow the first to produce vaccines. Second, within ASEAN, this research aims to analyze the definition of being developed and having sufficient capabilities to face an ongoing pandemic. And lastly, this research intends to predict the intensity of ASEAN's interdependence.

This research employs the key arguments from Neoliberalism. Its key arguments highlight the anarchical state of the international system that is still manageable through cooperation that involves not just states but also non-state actors and promotes the participation of international organizations and institutions. This cooperation will lead to absolute gain for all actors. Because today's international politics is more about the traditional security issue, Neoliberalism believes that the rational thing to do for states is to cooperate, rather than to compete. As this develops, interdependence is inevitable and becomes one common phenomenon among states (Dugis, 2016, pp. 111-113).

This research is a qualitative one whose data collection was conducted through a series of interviews by the students of UPH Department of International Relations. By conducting interviews with decision-makers, experts, or other relevant actors, students were able to attain primary data that were further analyzed. Knowledge gained from interviews complete perspectives so that students have comprehensive information and data. And since the interviews were done with those with understanding in International Relations – although the level of understanding varies – it allows us to later produce a compact comprehensive analysis.

Data collection was conducted with a process of interviews with multiple International Relations stakeholders, including academicians, government officials, and researchers. The interviews were conducted through Zoom Video Communication and one of them was conducted through a written answered interview due to time constraints. The six main experts that were interviewed and their categorizations are as follows:

1. Yosef Marcis Djakababa, Ph.D. – Academician (Universitas Pelita Harapan)
2. Moch Faisal Karim, Ph.D. – Academician (Universitas Bina Nusantara)
3. Calvin Khoe – Researcher (Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI) Research and Program Development Officer)
4. Lady Diandra – Researcher (Project Lead Youth Co: Lab Indonesia, Youth Empowerment Officer UNDP)
5. Reine Prihandoko – Researcher (Political Security Analyst at LAB 45)
6. Fefen Zamzari – Government Official (First Secretary, Directorate of ASEAN Political Security Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia)

In addition to that, there were also alternative data collection methods from survey form responses that were filled out by university scholars from the internal of Universitas Pelita Harapan and external universities as well. Responses were processed and filtered following the suitability and purpose of this research.

## **2. What It Takes to be Developed and Able to Produce Vaccines**

We need to grasp the understanding of how there are only a handful of countries that manage to produce vaccines. Our series of interviews state that the determining factor of a country to be developed does not lie in a country's ideology or system, as each community and society has its system that works for them. The determining factor for a country to be developed is how they can set a goal and their milestone clearly, along with consistent policies, transparency, and the importance of meritocracy (C. Khoe, personal interview, November 28, 2021). Understandably, there are some pre-requisite requirements for this. To be able to determine their state as developed or underdeveloped highly depends on a countries' capacity and national policy, as well as its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (F. Zamzari, personal interview, December 1, 2021).

When it comes to vaccine production, it corresponds to pharmaceutical investment, in which developed countries with strong infrastructure, knowledge,

and industry facilitate their ability to produce vaccines (M. F. Karim, personal interview, November 30, 2021). These countries are advanced in healthcare technology, human resources, knowledge, research budget, and have good vaccine diplomacy strategies. A country's capability of producing and distributing vaccines mainly depends on technology and the economy. Countries with more mature innovation ecosystems and developed institutional capacities can conduct research and produce their vaccine (R. Prihandoko, personal communication, December 2, 2021). Certain countries, however, are incapable of doing this, due to a lack of funding, research, and knowledge. In distribution, certain countries lack the proper infrastructure and do not have a good bureaucratic system. These countries might be low in funds resulting in low quality of research and information, as well as an inefficient government system that lacks strong diplomatic ties (L. Diandra, personal interview, December 1, 2021).

In short, it takes complete intangible and tangible measures to arrive at the level vaccines producer countries are now. One must set a clear vision that is legitimate and supported by national capabilities and policy. That must be reinforced with such a strong system that promotes transparency and rule of law. The fact clearly states that there are only a few countries that possess these whole requirements.

### **3. Why Countries are Dependent**

Nowadays interdependency is something that we cannot avoid, and it is a reality that everyone has been experiencing, enjoying, and putting in a lot of trouble. Both developed and developing countries are in the game of competition, in economy and technology and even military dimensions. For them, competition is in the state of national parties, where they need to compete to survive. Developed countries are in the upper hand as they already have their expertise and needs coming from developing countries. And that attracts more dependency from developing countries toward developed ones (C. Khoe, personal interview, November 28, 2021).

From students' perspectives, however, there are two main opinions on why developing countries depend on developed countries. First, is the already existing gap between both developing and developed countries is simply too big to fill. Developing countries find it a substantial challenge to overcome. The second is mainly about the economic gap. Seeing how contemporary security issues highlight the need for economic power – environmental issue, for instance, requires substantial economic resource – it is only logical that dependency keep weighing the interaction. Let us not forget that in terms of technological advancement, developing countries are also behind the developed.

There is also a plethora of opinions on the survival of developing countries. From one perspective, countries cannot survive without cooperation, especially with immense globalization (M. F. Karim, 2021). On the other hand, another thought believes that, in a general context, survival is possible. But during Covid-19, they cannot survive since all countries require assistance. Data shows that most vaccines come from the Western hemisphere because European countries,

the United States, plus China can produce the vaccines more efficiently. But in the future, dependency will be lower since Southeast Asia countries also develop their capabilities and regional relations are perceived as more interdependent (Y. Djakababa, personal interview, November 29, 2021).

The International Relations students have two different perspectives: the first is, they believe that it is not possible for them to survive in this pandemic without the cooperation and second, they think that it might be possible as long as they can maximize the transfer of knowledge to their advantage.

What does this mean? Even though contemporary international politics is colored with interdependency, the Covid-19 pandemic serves as solid evidence where dependency is more visible through vaccines production and distribution.

### **3.1 Will We Ever be Independent?**

Given the fact that interdependence is inevitable, will we ever be completely independent? There are different perspectives regarding this question. Djakababa (personal interview, November 29, 2021) believes that in the long run, what the world is currently facing, could be an interdependence. But right now, it is going more towards dependence, for example, countries dependent on infrastructure that will eventually accumulate. Moreover, the pandemic just widened the gap among least developing countries (LDCs), developing, and developed countries – especially in terms of vaccines that is right now making ASEAN member states more dependent on countries outside the region since they are not capable of producing vaccines.

In the long term, however, Southeast Asian countries have the potential to grow and develop so they would be capable of creating an interdependent relation rather than just being dependent. However, the depth of dependency of a country on another depends on the country itself, since every country does not have the same problems (M. F. Karim, personal interview, November 30, 2021).

### **3.2 Vaccine Diplomacy and What Comes with It**

Vaccine diplomacy is a more effective diplomatic tool compared to military or economic diplomacy during the pandemic but can be intertwined with economic diplomacy, affecting each other. Countries are giving away vaccines to pursue their national interests to eradicate the virus. For example, many ASEAN countries are concerned about Myanmar's ability to handle Covid-19, because mishandling it could spread in the Southeast Asia region. Aside from its effectiveness, it faces limitations, and not every country is interested or capable of deploying vaccines. Countries may not have the technology or infrastructure to mass-produce vaccines, and as such any vaccines they produce are only used for the domestic population (F. Zamzari, personal interview, December 1, 2021).

Moreover, vaccine diplomacy is perceived to be used by China to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to better integrate its economic hegemony. China does say that the country intends to help and provide vaccines, but it requires something in return, for example, inquire recognition in sending help by demanding receivers to publicly acknowledge China vaccine aid. Djakababa

(personal interview, November 29, 2021) reminds International Relations actors that "If you want to help, just help, [there is] no need to give requirements like that to be acknowledged."

From here, international cooperation can be seen from two perspectives. The first perspective is that cooperation is more likely to happen in a no zero-sum game condition. However, the second perspective is that even if there is no zero-sum game and politicization will hinder within. On an international level, countries might imply their enemies have ulterior motives underneath their cooperation, for instance, Trump's vaccine war against the Chinese vaccine that implied it to be promoting China's sphere of influence (M. F. Karim, personal interview, November 30, 2021).

#### **4. What ASEAN is Currently Facing**

The ASEAN community lacks meaningful close cooperation, due to its policy of non-interference and its non-promotion of a solid foundation for regional integration, unlike the European Union (EU). It is a loose organization and cooperation that manages how other global actors interact within the region (M. F. Karim, personal interview, November 30, 2021). The kind of cooperation ASEAN believes in is not trying to be more independent nor being one united front and protectionist like the EU. ASEAN is bringing more cooperation into the region and always reformulating that strategy (M. F. Karim, personal interview, November 30, 2021). Initiatives and agreements such as the BRI and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) that not only benefit ASEAN countries are at large due to diplomatic cooperation with other countries, and as an institutional hub for the region.

In ASEAN, we have the ASEAN centrality in which we could not have multipolarity despite having US-China-Japan rivalry in ASEAN to project influence on policies. However, it is the ASEAN centrality that matters and what drives them, which means when ASEAN cooperates, they are still the ones in the driver's seat (F. Zamzari, personal interview, December 1, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has served as an opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation and diplomatic ties with major superpowers, like China and the US, as they competed for influence over the region.

#### **5. Dependent of Interdependent?**

Based on the answers given by the stakeholders of this research, we can see multiple intertwining concepts of International Relations theories that are evident within the discussion. One being highlighted school of thought is the Neoliberalism theory. We notice Neoliberals' thoughts, especially through one major keyword, which is "cooperation", which dismisses the issue of dependency during these unprecedented times. This sign is seen in the answers of the scholars, where we see that even with the variety of answers, all point in the same direction. From the perspective of one academician, cooperation in the beginning Covid-19 pandemic was seen to be not evident but continually emerged as states realized that they could not survive on their own (Y. Djakababa, personal interview,



November 29, 2021). Ideas of Neoliberalism are also found in another academician's answers, on the notion that when there is no zero-sum game, then cooperation is more likely to happen. However, in a multipolar structured world, the extent of politicization of state agenda within cooperation will determine the outcome of state relations (M. F. Karim, personal interview, November 30, 2021).

Through these correlated arguments, we are also able to see the tendencies in the answers of the multiple stakeholders, where academicians and students tend to convey the reality as it is, whereas government officials and researchers are more likely to promote cooperation as a key strategy for international development on this topic of dependency. Also, several means of vaccine production and distribution, multilateral cooperation, and global movement – Gavi Vaccine Alliance for instance – are seen to be essential in handling the global pandemic (R. Prihandoko, personal communication, December 2, 2021). In the context of ASEAN, the idea of cooperation especially through the intertwining of state diplomacy, like vaccine and economic diplomacy, becomes a beneficial strategy in promoting a more effective strategy, especially in a pandemic, where vaccines are considered to be the most effective tool at the moment. In terms of diplomacy, ASEAN is combating the pandemic hand in hand through cooperation and diplomacy (F. Zamzari, personal interview, December 1, 2021).

On a side note, we can see the contrasts in the answers of the student responses. Even if cooperation will become key to the interdependency, we cannot disregard the stages of development that a country is going through. If a country is in its developing stage and global cooperation is abolished, then it will experience major crises – some responses mentioned. We find that the students are more skeptical that developing countries, especially in the scope of ASEAN, would not be able to be independent any time soon.

Furthermore, we can analyze that competition is considered to be a pressing matter in the context of interdependency. Government officials touch upon the factors in determining a country's capability in global competition, which is through the management of their capacity and national policies. For example, especially in the concept of global dependency, proper foreign aid comes as the main player in creating the opportunity of competition (F. Zamzari, personal interview, December 1, 2021). Some researchers, on the other hand, view global competition as the main determinant of whether a country can catch up with the interdependency concept of the world. Both developed and developing countries are in the game of competition, in economy and technology (C. Khoe, personal interview, November 28, 2021), in which Neoliberalism plays its role in the international society alongside the main international organizations in hopes to fulfill development, especially in the context of the pandemic. Moreover, most of the students perceive vaccine diplomacy as a more useful and effective tool for competition, as it is pursued with a common interest of states during the pandemic. However, countries within ASEAN are struggling for its production in terms of the lack of resources. Using Neoliberalism, we view that the outcome will benefit the countries that are ready for production, a level at which ASEAN has

not arrived yet. That is why they cover up that hole of competition with the notion of dependency and perhaps, interdependency.

Regardless of the multitude of perspectives this research has gathered, we have come to an understanding that in the years to come, the notion behind dependency would never be non-existent, especially in terms of the ASEAN centrality. Being the soft cooperation that it is, ASEAN will continuously seek its connections with the external and internal parties of ASEAN according to its economic efficiency (M. F. Karim, personal interview, November 30, 2021), with hopes that it may turn the tables in the long run into interdependence, even if the current infrastructure accumulation proves ASEAN to be highly dependent on more developed countries – Indonesia may prove to be a concrete example as its current tax sales will increase to manage the payment of dependency and debt, especially towards China (Y. Djakababa, personal interview, November 29, 2021).

This is one concept that is often misunderstood by the students on the essence of ASEAN – something that stakeholders with knowledge expertise explain more thoroughly – that this issue of dependency cannot be seen through the lens of Realism, but global cooperation and self-sufficient development be the core actors for the notion of interdependence. Globalization causes this inability for states to be separate and independent from one another. Despite them having more nationalistic and protectionist policies, states will still believe in the benefit of the relationships they make with other countries. With the appropriate risk-benefit analysis, globalization becomes a net positive key actor for nations in both developing and developed countries (L. Diandra, personal interview, December 1, 2021).

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has produced a plethora of new insights into the issue being discussed, especially on the dependency notion. During the Covid-19 pandemic, through the case of vaccines production and distribution, developing countries – including most of ASEAN member states – are more dependent on developed countries whose capabilities are way more advanced for vaccines. The fact that some developed countries use vaccines as a political instrument through Vaccine Diplomacy is something that most stakeholders (people, scholars, researchers, and government officials) perceive to be unfortunate. States should not use such challenging times to conduct practical exploitation. However, to some degree, optimism is still there – that from dependency, states will move towards interdependency (once again) – and it has started even during the pandemic. As our knowledge broadened and deepened in understanding Covid-19, states have started some maneuvers that are proven to be effective in rehabilitating the economy and other critical aspects, including ASEAN member states. Soon, interdependency among states will be restored although its intensity will vary. In the context of ASEAN, by comprehensively understanding ASEAN, the organization and its member states cannot be pinpointed as the weaker states when it comes to the notion of dependency and interdependency, when they become one of the

key actors for the substantial diplomatic ties with global superpowers for influence and leverage towards better global governance.

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