



Original Article

Make health, not war. Investigating the worldwide relevance and sustainability of Türkiye's Health Diplomacy

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Abstract: Globalisation and the improvement of direct lines of communication worldwide have resulted in the rapid spread of diseases and epidemics; not least, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way governments and states approach health security. Consequently, international cooperation in health and medicine, also known as *Health Diplomacy*, has steadily increased since the 1970s and even more in the new millennium. In this context, Türkiye has emerged as a crucial actor involved in several Health Diplomacy activities across all the regions where Ankara's interests are stronger, including the Western Balkans, Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. These activities include the construction and modernisation of hospitals and other health-related facilities abroad; the establishment of scientific collaborations with other countries and institutions, from think tanks to universities; the export or donation of medical equipment, medicines, and know-how; and direct medical care and humanitarian activities conducted *in the field* by Turkish NGOs. While Türkiye's Health Diplomacy efforts have already achieved paramount goals in several contexts marked by violence and war, such as the Palestinian territories, Sudan, and Somalia, the long-term sustainability and self-sufficiency of these projects is yet to be understood, especially considering Ankara's stark preference of bilateral channels of communication with the countries where its Health Diplomacy is implemented, which are prone to oscillate in line with the country's domestic political and economic fluctuations.

Keywords: Health Diplomacy, Türkiye, medicine, sustainability, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency.

1. Introduction

Türkiye's name appears increasingly more often when hearing or reading about diplomatic activities in the world. Only recently, Ankara's active mediation in global conflicts has hit the headlines in three crucial, extremely complex scenarios unfolding on three different continents. In December 2024, the *Ankara Declaration*, mediated by Türkiye between Somalia and Ethiopia, laid the groundwork for reconciliation between the two countries, whose relationship had been marked by years of growing tensions over sovereignty disputes and territorial claims. Several experts also hailed the event as a crucial first step toward bringing greater political stability to the entire Horn of Africa (Sufian, 2025). In the two conflicts that, since 2022 and 2023, respectively, attracted

the world's attention, namely the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israeli-Palestinian War, Türkiye has been trying to carve out a leading role in the mediation attempts between all the actors involved.

With Russia and Ukraine, both close allies of Türkiye, Ankara has played a key role in facilitating and hosting peace talks among the parties involved in the diplomatic effort, which has achieved at least some considerable goals. The most outstanding of these is undoubtedly the *Black Sea Grain Initiative*, a deal promoted by Ankara to allow the safe and uninterrupted export of grain, food, and fertilisers from Ukraine through the Black Sea and around the world (Haznedaroğlu, 2025). In the conflict unfolding in the Gaza Strip, too, Türkiye has been very active in trying to build a guarantor system involving several countries to facilitate the reach of an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian authorities.

However, Türkiye's diplomatic efforts through humanitarian initiatives, as well as cooperation and development projects, have been consistent since the early 2000s and are now entering a phase of even greater vitality, especially in the field of *Health Diplomacy*. This article examines Turkish Health Diplomacy (HD), highlighting current initiatives such as hospital construction, medical aid, and support for health systems abroad, which have gained even more prominence since the COVID-19 pandemic altered the world's perception of health security in the early 2020s. After describing the actors and primary forms of Ankara's medical diplomacy, the article questions the long-term sustainability of these initiatives, particularly by analysing a key geographical area for Türkiye's Health Diplomacy and foreign policy interests: the African continent.

2. Introducing Health Diplomacy

Defining Health Diplomacy is challenging because *health* is a multifaceted concept encompassing various aspects of life and different sectors. It includes not only physical and mental well-being but also socio-economic and environmental factors. A helpful definition of Health Diplomacy is a multi-layered, multi-actor negotiation process operating at the intersection of health, trade, and foreign policy. It is a practice that simultaneously enables the realisation of foreign policy goals and economic interests, while upholding paramount ethical values, and addressing health-related issues (Kickbusch et al., 2007; Küçük, 2023). In its most positive and magnanimous sense, Health Diplomacy embodies a commitment to improving relations between states in the name of health promotion, poverty reduction, and equality.

For many years, health was seen as a humanitarian, technical, and inherently non-political field. In this sense, Health Diplomacy could be interpreted as a *politicisation* of health (Fidler, 2005). On the one hand, global health security has become crucial for several international organisations and government officials, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic shook the world in the early 2020s. On the other hand, health has become a tool in the hands of developed countries to achieve foreign policy (non-medical) goals, sustain national interests, and address security concerns. As Türkiye's Health Diplomacy efforts have expanded, they have become an integral part of the global health security landscape, especially in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans, demonstrating the country's strategic role in international health cooperation.

Health Diplomacy is also a pillar of *soft power*. As Fauci (2007, p. 1171) puts it, what he calls *medical diplomacy* is "the winning of hearts and minds of people in poor countries by exporting medical care, expertise and personnel to help those who need it most. In other words, it is a way for a government to legitimise its policies through a system that relies on *soft power* (e.g., cultural, religious, ideological, and humanitarian means) rather than hard power (e.g., military force). All of this also resonates with the systemic changes that occurred globally

as the twentieth century unfolded. With the end of World War II, it became increasingly complex for states to assert their interests in the international arena through military confrontation and territorial conquest, especially among Western countries. Since the end of the conflict, states have had to find new tools to expand their influence beyond their borders. At the same time, foreign policy has evolved. Health Diplomacy can also be framed as an outcome of this evolution, with countries increasingly interested in mobilising their health-related tools, infrastructure, and know-how outside their borders, in line with their foreign policy agendas and goals, while also promoting healthcare, development, and sustainability in the territories that need them the most.

By examining the countries to which Türkiye's medical aid was directed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Güngör (2021) shows that the recipients are also those with the most significant historical, cultural, and economic ties to Türkiye. Interestingly, while ethnic similarity and common historical heritage were identified as highly relevant indicators, religion does not seem as decisive in determining where Turkish aid is directed. However, it definitely plays a role, primarily when Ankara's humanitarian commitment is directed very far from the mainland, for example, in Bangladesh and Myanmar, to sustain the Rohingya population of the Muslim faith from the oppression of Naypyidaw's government. This pattern underscores Türkiye's strategic use of Health Diplomacy to strengthen its influence and foster long-term relationships, especially in regions with significant historical, cultural and economic ties. In this sense, besides the humanitarian considerations pushing the effort to expand it, Ankara's commitment to Health Diplomacy is a precursor to the establishment or strengthening of a privileged relationship with Türkiye, whether from a political, economic, military, or cultural standpoint.

3. A brief history of Health Diplomacy

The history of Health Diplomacy is deeply linked to that of the Ottoman Empire, first, and the Turkish Republic, later. In the mid-nineteenth century, several European states began collaborating to fight and eradicate infectious diseases, such as cholera and plague, which they struggled to keep at bay within their own borders, an urgent issue that profoundly damaged trade and threatened international security. Since 1831, many of these European countries have exerted pressure on the Ottoman Empire to persuade the *Sublime Porte* to take action against the spread of diseases originating in the Bengal region of South Asia, which incessantly reached the Old Continent via pilgrims travelling from one side of the world to the other. Only twenty years later, in 1851, the world's first health conference was organised in Paris to discuss concrete strategies to fight and prevent the spread of contagious diseases. Several other meetings followed, including one held in Constantinople in 1866. Eventually, in 1892, the International Sanitary Convention was adopted in Venice, an event that decisively recognised *health* as a crucial discipline within international relations and world politics (Atli, 2021). At this stage, however, the initiatives embraced by these states primarily aimed to stabilise international trade rather than improve human health *per se*.

The idea of a *medical diplomacy* to establish and maintain communication channels between states is commonly attributed to Peter Bourne, the special adviser to the United States President Jimmy Carter in the 1970s. A conceptualisation that has gained even greater relevance since the twenty-first century, when the spread of diseases such as SARS, Ebola, and COVID-19, also due to globalisation and the improvement of the communication channels throughout the globe, changed the world's perception of health, safety, and international security, turning health into a worldwide priority (Atli, 2021). This specific idea of health diplomacy, which gained momentum in the 2000s, emphasises the need to address health issues not only during unfolding crises but also during

regular times. Over the last 20 years, several countries have implemented Health Diplomacy worldwide to strengthen diplomatic ties, achieve strategic goals, or enhance their international reputation. While at the dawn of this practice, Western powers were by far the major practitioners, more recently, several other countries outside Western Europe and the United States, such as the BRICS countries and Cuba, have consistently improved their Health Diplomacy performance. Although activities in the field of health cooperation can be carried out *directly* between two states or *indirectly* through participation in multilateral gatherings and international organisations, most countries and governments starkly prefer the first option to foster bilateral ties and simultaneously improve cooperation in other sectors as well (Atılı, 2021).

4. Türkiye's Health Diplomacy

Today, Türkiye's Health Diplomacy actively builds bridges with other nations, fostering stronger ties and showcasing Türkiye's commitment to global health. Like most countries engaging in Health Diplomacy activities, Ankara's goal also includes that of strengthening diplomatic relations with recipient countries, opening or expanding trade routes to foreign markets, and fostering a positive image and strong reputation of Türkiye abroad. In other words, Health Diplomacy becomes a paramount tool in the hands of countries that invest in it to project power and prestige beyond national borders through long-term commitment (Küçük, 2023).

In the 1980s, Türkiye began to show interest in engaging in medical and health cooperation abroad. In Africa, an extremely relevant geographical area for Türkiye's interests and an epicentre of the country's Health Diplomacy efforts, the first forms of aid were delivered in 1985, when the government provided \$10 million to several countries, mainly in Western Africa (Devecioğlu, 2024), which had recently gained independence through the decolonisation processes between the 1950s and 1970s. However, the country's fragile political stability, the theatre of multiple attempted and successful coups d'état throughout the second half of the twentieth century, made it necessary to focus on and stabilise the domestic situation first. Health Diplomacy activities carried out by Türkiye really gained prominence and global attention in the 2000s and gradually increased in terms of effort and budget allocation over the years. Between 2005 and 2021, Ankara's development assistance budget skyrocketed from \$68.6 million to \$8.4 billion. More specifically, in 2021, "total aid from NGOs amounted to \$361 million. Multilateral aid amounted to \$83.16 million, while bilateral official development assistance totalled \$7.627 million" (Çam & Eke, 2024, p. 116). These numbers include a variety of activities and investments, such as the construction and management of hospitals and other health-related facilities abroad; the introduction of scientific collaborations with other countries and institutions, from think-tanks to universities; the export or donation of medical equipment, medicines, and know-how; direct medical care and humanitarian activities performed on the field by Turkish NGOs, and more.

As mentioned earlier, Türkiye's development assistance in the field of Health Diplomacy is much more substantial in the countries and regions where Ankara's interests are higher. In most cases, these also coincide with the areas where the historical, cultural, and religious ties with Türkiye are more pronounced. However, as Figure 1 shows, Ankara's HD activities are not limited to its most *obvious* partners. The countries that have benefited the most from Türkiye's Health Diplomacy are Azerbaijan, Iraq, Palestine, Somalia, and Syria. More broadly, the areas where Türkiye's Health Diplomacy activities are more pronounced include: the Western Balkans, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia; North Africa and the Horn of

Africa; the Middle East, including Yemen; and the whole of Central Asia, from the ex-Soviet Republics to Afghanistan and Pakistan, all the way to Southeast Asia in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

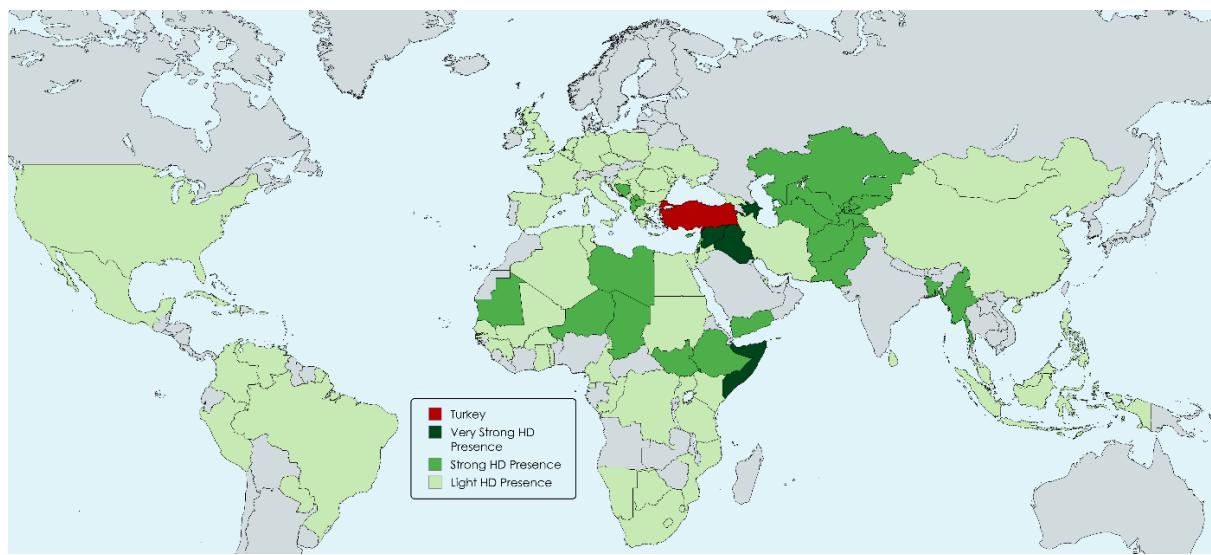


Fig. 1: Map of the countries that benefited from some form of Health Diplomacy provided by Türkiye.

Somalia is a country that, more than others, exemplifies the positive impact of Türkiye's external health investments and efforts in this field. In a territory marked by a civil war that has been ongoing since 2009 and is currently divided into different factions and self-proclaimed states, and marked by the proliferation of organised crime networks (including terrorist organisations and piracy), Türkiye's peacekeeping efforts, especially (but not limited to) its health investments, have proved vital for many people. The Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Training and Research Hospital in Mogadishu, established in 2014, is the most modern and best-equipped Hospital in the whole country. It has been a vital point of reference for more than one million people treated here between 2014 and 2019 (Yılmaz & Ketenci, 2024), thus boosting Ankara's positive image among the population in Somalia and the neighbouring countries in the Horn of Africa.

Several actors are involved on the front line of Türkiye's Health Diplomacy, at both governmental and non-governmental levels. Among the most prominent institutions and organisations are the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Turkish Ministry of Health, the Turkish Red Crescent, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), and the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. The TİKA is particularly relevant and of interest in this context. Established in 1992, when the end of the Cold War opened a plethora of new cooperation opportunities between countries previously divided by the Iron Curtain, the organisation has affirmed itself as one of the pillars of Turkish development projects abroad, aiming specifically "to develop strong collaborative ties especially in the Turkic Republics, and in the natural geography of our country, where we are historically and culturally attached" (TİKA, n.d.). It is therefore no surprise that this organisation has been deeply involved in almost all the projects presented in the next section, tracing the breadth and variety of Turkish Health Diplomacy activities abroad.

5. Türkiye's Health Diplomacy Activities

Building hospitals and other medical facilities

Clearly, one of the cornerstones of Health Diplomacy is the construction, restructuring, and modernisation of hospitals and other medical facilities, including emergency field hospitals and medical centres, especially in areas affected by war, environmental disasters, or pandemics. Inaugurated in 2014, eight years after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited the country in 2006, in the midst of the War in Darfur (2003-2020), the Nyala Sudanese-Turkish Research Hospital has been, for more than a decade now, a crucial medical hub in Sudan's Darfur region, the theatre of one of the most violent civil wars of the twenty-first century (Daily Sabah, 2023; TİKA, 2024). In Bangladesh, the Cox's Bazaar, also known as the Kutupalong Refugee Camp, is a field hospital built by Türkiye in 2018 with the specific goal of supporting the healthcare and medical needs of the Rohingya population fleeing persecution in Myanmar, where the local authorities oppress their ethnic and Muslim roots (Global Compact on Refugees, n.d.). Another example worth mentioning is the Palestinian territories, especially Gaza, where Türkiye opened the Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital in 2017, the only medical facility in the whole Strip specialised in cancer treatment. The Hospital was severely damaged and ultimately destroyed by Israeli military forces in 2023, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict triggered by the October 7th, 2023, events (Saryer, 2024). The sudden disappearance of this medical facility showed once again the invaluable importance and vital role played by some of these medical facilities in territories hit by large-scale violence.

Supplying medicines, medical equipment, and know-how

Strictly related to the construction of medical facilities is the provision of everything needed for their proper functioning and refuelling. Türkiye actively donates or sells medicines, vaccines, and medical devices and equipment, including diagnostic and therapeutic devices and consumables, to its neighbouring countries and beyond. In this regard, COVID-19 constituted a turning point for several countries seeking to enhance their soft-power appeal abroad. The sudden disruption to the health supply chain, due to the rapid spread of the pandemic worldwide, enabled countries such as China, India, Russia, and Türkiye to provide massive assistance (medical, logistical, operational, and financial) to several developing countries, where the domestic ability to keep the spread of the pandemic at bay was lower (Küçük, 2023). Despite the domestic issues Türkiye faces (political polarisation, economic and financial contraction), its advanced level of self-sufficiency in medical supplies was a significant advantage for Ankara during the pandemic years. Türkiye even developed and distributed its own vaccines, the Turkovac, to several countries. Eventually, around 140 countries worldwide benefited deeply from Turkish aid, most of which was directed towards Asian and African countries, and to a lesser extent, to Europe. In South America and in some North American nations, too, including the United States, some Turkish aid was also delivered. At the same time, thanks to its relative independence in the field of medical supplies, Türkiye received only medical assistance from China and Taiwan during the pandemic, mainly to support the millions of refugees living across the country (Çolakoğlu, 2020; Güngör, 2021).

Besides bringing expertise and equipment to foreign countries, Türkiye also provides specialised services for patients who cannot receive adequate treatment in their home countries. In specific circumstances, these patients are taken to Türkiye to receive proper care. As of 2021, agreements had been signed with 12 countries to allow and organise this special service for the patients who need it the most (Küçük, 2023).

Fostering scientific collaboration and academic exchange

Over the years, Türkiye has actively engaged in scientific collaborations with several medical institutions abroad. Exchanging personnel, conducting joint research on relevant health-related issues, and mutually enriching respective know-how have been at the core of this effort. In 2022, Ankara could count on 155 agreements with medical institutions scattered among 74 countries worldwide. These activities have also led to the establishment and management of health education units abroad and to the attraction of thousands of international students to Turkish universities specialising in health and medicine, who could also count on generous scholarship opportunities to study in the country (Küçük, 2023). Consequently, between 2014 and 2019, international students attending medical-related programs at Türkiye's state universities have steadily increased, including those in medical, dental, pharmacy, nursing, and other health personnel programs (Atlı, 2022).

A different form of Health Diplomacy: the role of health tourism

Although it is not always framed as a facet of traditional Health Diplomacy, the role of health tourism in Türkiye deserves mention. The combination of rich historical heritage and natural beauty, the strategic geographical location between Europe, Asia, and Africa, and the positive reputation of its clinics make Türkiye a very appealing destination for patients and tourists from all over the world (Küçük, 2023). The most common treatments include hair transplantation, dental treatments, ophthalmology, and cosmetic surgeries. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute, the number of people arriving in Türkiye for medical tourism has skyrocketed from around 670.000 in 2021 to 1.8 million in 2023 and is expected to continue to increase in the years to come (Elliott, 2025).

6. Sustainability Assessment of Türkiye's Health Diplomacy: The Case of Africa

Türkiye's humanitarian intervention abroad, especially in the regions where its interests are stronger, has not been limited to health and medicine. In several contexts, Ankara has contributed to the growth of cultural, educational, and research institutions, as well as to the construction and development of critical infrastructure, which is vital for the operation, refuelling, and availability of the health services described above. Türkiye's approach to Africa is fundamental in this regard.

The African continent offers Türkiye vast opportunities. Between cultural and religious affinities, shared historical heritage, and overlapping interests, Ankara has been intervening in several African countries in pursuit of mutual benefit and sustainable development, rather than imposing its own interests on apparently weaker and more vulnerable territories. The historical bond between Türkiye and various African countries and regions is key to understanding the success of Ankara's humanitarian efforts on the continent. While several European nations colonised Africa for centuries, the link with the Ottoman Empire was characterised by a centre-periphery imperial relationship. However, this relationship was influenced by significant socio-cultural, religious, and humanitarian factors, as well as political, economic, and military factors. As a result, many African peoples to this day have developed a different perception of their former Anatolian ruler, viewing the Ottoman presence more favourably. For instance, the construction of mosques and cultural centres, including libraries and Islamic schools, together with the Ottomans' support of the local populations against European colonisers, has led to Türkiye being perceived as a "brotherly country" in several African states (Devecioğlu, 2024, p. 139). These considerations have undoubtedly helped and sustained Ankara's spread of Health Diplomacy across these countries in its multiple facets.

Overall, Türkiye's Health Diplomacy initiatives in Africa have demonstrated remarkable sustainability through integration of humanitarian assistance, capacity-building, and long-term institutional cooperation. Rather than just providing medical aid, Türkiye has emphasised the construction and continuous improvement of hospitals, the direct training of local health professionals, and the transfer of medical expertise through bilateral agreements and partnerships with African governments and institutions. As a result of this multi-actor, development-oriented approach, the likelihood that health gains persist beyond the immediate intervention is well established. At the same time, one of the main limitations of Türkiye's Health Diplomacy actions in Africa and other regions is its emphasis on bilateral relations. This narrow focus significantly restricts opportunities for broader partnerships with international organisations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Despite the country's apparent embrace of a win-win approach, by focusing too much on the side effects and interests associated with Health Diplomacy, the risk is that these efforts will undermine their impact, compromise long-term sustainability, and obstruct or significantly slow down the positive outcomes they deliver to local populations where they are implemented. Moreover, the long-term sustainability and replication of Türkiye's Health Diplomacy also depend on sustained financial commitments, political stability in partner countries, and alignment of Türkiye's interests with African states' health priorities. At the same time, the domestic situation in Türkiye is crucial to the continuation of this (more than) two-decade-long commitment under the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (the Justice and Development Party), the ruling Party in the country since 2002.

7. Conclusion

With climate change and environmental resilience acquiring increasingly more relevance on the policymakers' agendas all over the world, and given the tight relationship between the environment, health, and well-being, a *climate change health diplomacy model* is emerging (Tunaligil, 2024). This specific branch of Health Diplomacy proposes to bring countries and organisations together to resist and adapt to climate change and, even more, to improve joint disaster resilience. Once again, Türkiye serves as a paramount example of how countries with "otherwise conflicting interests" (Tunaligil, 2024, p. 33) can stand together in solidarity in the face of natural disasters. Considering the longstanding historical, geopolitical, and strategic quarrel between Türkiye and Greece, the operational support provided by Ankara in the last few years to support Greece's struggle against wildfires, especially during the hot summer months, but also Athens' rapid support directed to Türkiye after the devastating earthquake that hit the country in February 2023, all testify what rival countries are capable of when facing environmental struggles. External support in the field of ecological and environmental security and disaster risk reduction will become increasingly relevant in Africa as well, one of the world's regions most affected by climate change. The already vast presence and operational efficiency of Türkiye in several African countries could expand Ankara's Health Diplomacy efforts in this area to the climate change health diplomacy model mentioned above.

To conclude, since the early 2000s, Türkiye has displayed profound interest and made enormous efforts in the field of Health Diplomacy. This commitment will likely continue in the future, and some of the already established projects, including the hospitals, medical training and research centres, and health personnel trained abroad over the years, will increasingly stand on their own two feet, thus achieving sustainability goals and the necessary independence. To further increase the effectiveness of these projects, however, greater Turkish involvement at the multilateral level, both internationally and regionally, would *shield* the results achieved on the ground from domestic political fluctuations, thereby bringing even greater benefits to local populations. At the same time, since

Health Diplomacy and foreign policy go hand in hand, changes in Türkiye's foreign policy priorities and grand strategy will inevitably shape the trajectory and volume of the country's investments in medical diplomacy abroad.

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