China’s Soft Power Policy in South-East Asia

China’s "soft" diplomacy is aimed at increasing the country’s attractiveness and improving its image to increase its influence in the world and create favorable conditions for strengthening its economic positions by means of such political tools as culture, education, ideology, as well as trade and investment. According to the Chinese leadership, the country cannot become a great power without implementing the soft power policy.

However, according to the efficiency index (used to evaluate the impact of one state on other states), in 2016 China only ranked 28th in the world. However the index is much higher in South-East Asia. An opinion poll shows that most citizens (except for the Vietnamese) believe that China has a strong impact on other nations in the region, and a positive attitude prevails.

This fact is largely connected to China’s Soft Power policy, which should demonstrate its intention to secure peace and prosperity in the region by means of strengthening and expanding mutually beneficial cooperation with the neighboring states.

This is surely profitable for China. The country’s interests in South-East Asia are caused by ambitions for political and economic domination in Asia Pacific Region. The mechanisms of the soft power policy that are used for these purposes are dominated by economic tools that are aimed at increasing China's attractiveness to South-East Asian countries, as well as winning their trust. China has become their major trade partner; it is increasing the volume of its investment in the neighboring countries and becoming their major donor, gradually pushing aside Japan and the USA from the leading positions.

The South-East Asian region has a number of advantages for securing China's economic growth – it is rich in natural resources, has a large market for Chinese export products, is very profitable for investment and is well integrated into China’s New Silk Way project.

However, the South-East Asian states both enjoy benefits and suffer losses from the soft diplomacy of China. The benefits lie in the presented opportunity to gain access to the Chinese market and advanced technologies, and, most importantly, financial resources. But alongside the benefits gained from the expansion of good neighbor relations with China, the countries face certain risks.

**Economic risks.** The image of China as a generous sponsor of South-East Asian countries, as it seeks to present itself, can fade amid the loss of the countries’ competitive advantages in the conditions of China's economic domination in the region. The preferential terms of Chinese loans tie them to buying Chinese equipment supplies, and even to using Chinese labor force when implementing development projects. The economic risks for small and middle-sized national entrepreneurships are growing, and representatives of the South-East Asian states openly declare it.

According to an opinion poll, China’s development pattern is perceived as the least attractive in the region due to the above-mentioned facts.

**Political risks.** Economic rapprochement with China in the countries with authoritarian regimes such as Cambodia
and Thailand contributes to the strengthening of the positions of power structures and causes the growth of anti-Chinese sentiments that are used by the opposition in political struggles in countries with democratic forms of government, such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

At the regional level, the economic “bribery” of power structures, primarily in Cambodia and Laos, has helped China avoid forming a coordinated position of ASEAN on territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

**Cultural expansion risks.** While the use of economic tools of soft power is focused on states and private businesses, China acts differently to improve its attractiveness among the population - using mainly propaganda methods and live agitation, popularizing its culture. In this respect, the Chinese leadership relies not only on such traditional forms as mass media (radio, television, and print media), but also on Chinese tourists as bearers of Chinese culture and values.

In 2016, 18.6 million Chinese tourists visited the South-East Asian countries. Thailand is the most popular tourist destination. Tourism accounts for 11% of the country's annual GDP. The question is whether these economic benefits are transformed into a positive image of China in the way its leadership desires.

Chinese tourists have a bad reputation in the South-East Asian countries. Despite the economic benefits, the locals are experiencing a cultural shock due to the mass inflow of Chinese tourists. The tourists are accused of rude behavior, ignorance and disrespect of the traditions of the host country. Thus, Chinese tourists are unlikely to contribute to a favorable attitude towards China.

This task has also been assigned to the Confucius Institutes meant to export the Chinese culture. China's leadership believes that the country will increase its attractiveness if a greater number of people are acquainted with its culture and language. South-East Asian countries now host 41 Chinese educational institutions (most of them in Thailand: 13 Confucius Institutes and 11 Confucius classrooms), where their patrons are the royal family. Unlike Western countries, where the Confucius Institutes are often criticized by scientists and teachers, they are popular in Thailand, especially among those with Chinese roots, and these make up about 40% of the national population.

However, one should not exaggerate the importance of these educational institutions in the increase of China's attractiveness in South-East Asian countries. Young people still prefer to receive higher education abroad in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Although the opinion poll demonstrates the recognition of China's positive impact on South-East Asian states, this fact does not exclude a similar opinion about other states – the USA, Japan, and South Korea, which are the major competitors of China in the region.

Today, with the new US President calling for a revision of US foreign policy in Asia Pacific Region, China has more chances to dominate in the region by means of the soft diplomacy tools, among other things. Meanwhile, China's policy on the militarization of the South China Sea, territorial disputes with the South-East Asian states, and their own fears about the rapprochement with China, may prove an obstacle to this.

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