Overseas Chinese and Their Role in China’s Policies

Chinese diasporas are among the most numerous and well organized diasporas in the world. There is a special term “Huaqiao” (overseas Chinese) to indicate the ethnic Chinese living outside of China. There are about 50 million overseas Chinese all over the world and about 75% of them are concentrated in South-East Asia.

The Chinese themselves were not actively engaged in the colonization of the neighboring countries. The growth in the numbers of the overseas Chinese began with the arrival of Europeans in the region. The main wave of Chinese migration occurred in the 19th century, when the future overseas Chinese moved in search of a better life to the countries of their current residence, as Coolie workers for European colonies and metropolises. Usually it was the Chinese triads that supplied the cheap labor force (and controlled it later on) mainly from the coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, and that is why the current overseas Chinese speak various southern dialects of the Chinese language: Cantonese, Hakka or South Manchuria dialects.

Gradually, thanks to their innate thirst for business activities and a well-established system of mutual assistance, the Chinese began to carry on successful businesses, which gave them an opportunity to improve their wealth and social status significantly. Today, the overseas Chinese are considered the most educated part of the population in some countries and, in addition, they own most of the businesses, remaining an entirely isolated national minority at the same time. Even partially assimilated ethnic Chinese can be clearly distinguished from the local community thanks to the system of ties (guangxi), family structure and business organization.

All these facts make many researchers consider the Chinese diaspora as potential conductors of China’s foreign policy, a kind of the fifth column having huge opportunities to influence the policy of the countries that gave shelter to them. Sometimes they even express a view that China has a de facto control over some countries through their economies, which are in the hands of the overseas Chinese. Primarily this may especially apply to the Southeast Asia region, where the positions of the overseas Chinese are stronger than most other places.

In order to understand to what extent the Heavenly Empire can use the ethnic Chinese to promote its interests in other states, we should consider two important questions. First, what are the relations between China and the overseas Chinese? And second, how can the overseas Chinese actually influence the policies of their residence countries?

It would be fundamentally wrong to deny completely the existence of ties between Beijing and the Chinese diasporas around the world. However, these ties are very specific. Initially, the Communist Party of China (CPC) considered overseas Chinese as accomplices of the capitalists, and the attitude towards them was appropriate. However, after Deng Xiaoping proclaimed “the policy of reforms and openness” in the 1970s, the Heavenly Empire faced the problem of attracting investments. Under these conditions, it was the overseas Chinese, or rather their money, that played a very important role in the rise of China. Today, China pays careful attention to establishing relationships
with the overseas Chinese in its foreign policy.

This direction is supervised by the Zhigongdang of China (Zhongguo Zhigongdang), one of the eight legally recognized political parties in China, which has long established ties with the Chinese diasporas. The party was founded in 1925 in San Francisco and is a direct heir to one of the branches of the Society of Heaven and Earth (Tiandihui) – a Chinese anti-Manchu secret organization that was one of the key forces supporting Sun Yat-sen and seeking to overthrow the Qing Dynasty.

Another branch of this organization is the Three Harmonies Society (Sanhehui), better known as the Triad. Initially being a patriotic anti-Qing organization, the Triad became a common name for all secret societies and underground structures operating in the British colonies (especially in Hong Kong), and later it became a synonym for Chinese organized crime. It should be noted that it is really very difficult, sometimes even impossible, to separate the legal and criminal components in the activities of such organizations, however, not all secret societies were or are exclusively criminal organizations. Some of them became the basis of several Chinese political parties, including the Kuomintang and the already mentioned Zhigongdang. It were societies like the Tiandihui, delivering Chinese migrants from mainland China to European colonies that played a key role in spreading the overseas Chinese, organizing them into communities, Chinatowns, tongs and triads, as well as maintaining ties between them. Today, these organizations maintain the clan system of society in the Chinese diasporas, which was traditional in the pre-communist China (Liang Qichao, one of the founders of the concept of a single Chinese nation that guided Sun Yat-sen, Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek, pointed out the clan consciousness of the Chinese back in the early twentieth century). And while the PRC actively fought against the clan system in creating a single Chinese nation, the overseas Chineses have maintain this structure until the present.

And it is perhaps the main contradiction between the current Chinese government in terms of the CPC and the Chinese diasporas that, thanks to the self-isolation, these societies are well-organized inside and have close ties with each other and with Taiwan (Taipei has never lost its ties with diasporas and even provided places in the parliament of the Republic of China for them). The overseas Chinese actually are in the opposition to the PRC, as they always supported nationalist and democratic parties rather than the communists.

The Zhigongdang of China is the link between the Communist Party and the overseas Chinese. Probably it is no mere coincidence that Wan Gang, the head of this party, heads the Ministry of Science and Technology of China now, being the first non-member of the CPC as a minister since the 1950s. At this stage, China needs advanced innovative technologies, the development of which could take decades, but the access to which may be provided by former compatriots living abroad. And it is not simply a desire of the overseas Chinese to help their historic homeland. The thing is that these high-tech projects will be implemented primarily in special economic zones, and first of all it will be the overseas Chinese who will benefit from them, because they were first to invest into these capitalist enclaves. Best of all, this situation was described by Li Lanqing – the first Vice-Premier of the State Council of the PRC in 1998-2003, one of the initiators of the policy of reforms and openness, who worked at the State Foreign Investment Administrative Commission at that time. In his book entitled “Breakthrough. The Early Opening of the Door”, he quoted a senior official responsible for attracting foreign Chinese into special economic zones, who noted that “there is no need to appeal to their patriotism, just let them smell money”.

Often the fact that the overseas Chinese control much of the economies in Southeast Asian countries is misleading to many experts, who believe that this way the Chinese can influence the foreign policy in their countries of residence and Beijing could potentially use it to its advantage. However, the truth is that even in those countries where the Chinese are represented in the politics by their parties or individuals, their activities are limited solely to the protection of their own interests (primarily business), since they are a minority, and the tolerance of the local population often leaves much to be desired.

For example, in Malaysia, where the Chinese Association of Malaysia, one of the three main political forces in the country, was established with the support of the Kuomintang in 1949, the overseas Chinese just try to protect the rights and welfare of the Chinese population, whose share is being reduced, but they do not sympathize with China. Any attempts to influence the foreign policy of the country of residence are likely to result in increased anti-Chinese sentiment, which could lead to pogroms, ethnic cleansing and force the Chinese to move to other countries. Just as it happened in 1965-66 in Indonesia, where the fight against the Communists acquired a distinct ethnic component, since most overseas Chinese were considered accomplices or members of the Communist Party of Indonesia that stood for rapprochement with China. All these facts determined the nature of anti-Chinese policies of the Republic of Indonesia for three decades. In 1998, many Chinese were forced to flee to neighboring countries of Southeast Asia, primarily to Singapore, because of pogroms, taking about 80 billion U.S. dollars with them.
Thus, we should not overestimate the role of the overseas Chinese in China’s policies. The overseas Chinese have never sought to control the policy of the countries they live in. They live such an isolated life that we can speak of a state within a state in a way. This internal Chinese “state” has its own structure, hierarchy of authority, distribution of spheres of influence, and it also maintains relations with the Chinese diasporas in other countries. This policy of self-isolation, on the one hand, allows the overseas Chinese to preserve their identity, but on the other hand, it makes them an inefficient tool to influence other countries. At the same time, the relations between China and the overseas Chinese are based on business cooperation and actually have no political component. The CPC heading the Heavenly Empire now and the societies controlling Chinese diasporas were and still are political antagonists.

However, politics has never prevented the Chinese from doing business.

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