

The Chinese Communist Party and the diaspora: Beijing's extraterritorial authoritarian rule.

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In recent years, worried voices have been raised against China's growing influence in other states. Part of this influence involves mobilising overseas Chinese in the host countries. The Chinese Communist Party extends its authoritarian rule to its population abroad as a way to gain support for its policies and control its opponents. A crucial aspect, with profound security consequences, is the question of whom the Chinese party-state regards as Chinese and thus a legitimate target for its influence.

The Chinese diaspora is diverse and includes citizens abroad as well as foreign nationals of Chinese descent. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regards the diaspora as important actors for China's development and the so-called 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' launched under Xi Jinping's leadership. Xi's ambition is that China should take centre stage in global politics.

However, the Chinese government's efforts to mobilise overseas Chinese in support of CCP policies as well as to pressure and threaten those who oppose the CCP have led to negative reactions from foreign governments. In addition, not all members of the Chinese diaspora appreciate Beijing's efforts to include them in the CCP-led rejuvenation project. The Chinese regime's efforts to influence and control the Chinese diaspora abroad constitute extraterritorial activities that in many cases violate international law. One such case involves the abduction of Swedish national, Gui Minhai, in Thailand. In order to understand Chinese foreign policy ambitions and extraterritorial activities, it is important to investigate the underlying views of the CCP leadership.

This briefing studies the CCP's policy towards the Chinese diaspora by exploring the following questions: How does China's current leadership view Chinese nationality? How has this perspective been reflected in changes in policy towards overseas Chinese under

Xi Jinping's rule? What are the security consequences of this policy changes for overseas Chinese and the countries in which they reside?

The CCPs view of Chinese nationality

China does not recognise dual nationality. Consequently, Chinese who acquire foreign citizenship are no longer Chinese nationals. However, the Chinese leadership simultaneously uses ethnic and racial references when talking about the Chinese people and continuously emphasises the importance of bloodline and heritage. According to this view, all foreign nationals with Chinese heritage, no matter how many generations back, can potentially be included in the Chinese nation. This perspective obscures the distinction between Chinese nationals abroad (*huaqiao*) and foreign nationals of Chinese heritage (*huaren*).

The authoritarian nature of the regime allows little or no space for any other views than the official one, nor for opposition to the Party. This intolerance towards dissenting views also includes the Chinese diaspora. From Beijing's perspective, support for China equals support for the Party. While the combination of ethnic nationalism and an authoritarian system is not unique to China, China's global influence, the size of the Chinese diaspora, and the level of organization of the CCP's propaganda apparatus towards overseas Chinese make China stand out in comparison to other states.

Diaspora relations under Xi Jinping

Under Xi Jinping's reign, China has moved towards a more assertive foreign policy. The Chinese diaspora has been declared an important part of the process of rejuvenating the Chinese nation. The overseas Chinese affairs work, led by the United Front Department, has intensified its efforts to mobilize the Chinese diaspora, regardless of citizenship, for the CCP's cause. There are several examples of how the Chinese government engages

in extraterritorial activities with the aim of extending its rule to the Chinese diaspora.

Those members of the diaspora who the Party considers to be loyal are sometimes used as brokers in order to influence a host country's politics in favour of China's national interests. Chinese actors with different degrees of involvement with the CCP have been active in influencing politics in Western democracies such as Australia. In Malaysia, where the Chinese diaspora constitutes a substantial part of the population, Chinese ambassadors have on several occasions been criticized for interfering in internal Malaysian affairs through their statements in support of the Chinese community. In contrast, members of the diaspora that the Party perceives as its opponents risk being threatened or even abducted. The case of the abduction of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai in 2015 is an example of a new form of extraterritorial act performed by the Chinese state in clear violation of international law. Similarly, since 2016, Taiwanese citizens suspected of telecom fraud in countries such as Kenya, Cambodia and Spain have been extradited to China. The extraditions constitute a break from previous practice and have sparked strong reactions from the Taiwanese government, who see them as extrajudicial abductions.

Security consequences

The extraterritorial activities directed at the Chinese diaspora and analysed in the study may have the following security consequences for other countries:

- (1) The CCP can directly influence domestic politics and policymakers in other countries. In the event that the CCP's interest contradicts the national interest of the host country, such policymakers may undermine the country's national security.
- (2) States cannot guarantee that citizens of Chinese descent are secure from being sanctioned by the CCP. These individuals cannot trust that their citizenship will give them the same protection as other citizens of the same state enjoy.
- (3) Citizens of Chinese descent can fall prey to anti-Chinese sentiments in society. Recent history, especially in Southeast Asia, shows that this can turn into deadly violence.

(4) Other citizens can be sanctioned by the Chinese Party-state as a consequence of deteriorating bilateral relations. One example is the hostage diplomacy China has used against Canada.

(5) Every extraterritorial act the Chinese government performs in violation of international law calls its commitment to it, and to the respect of principles of nationality, into question. When ethnicity and heritage are allowed to override principles of civic nationality based on legal citizenship, China's extraterritorial activities threaten to undermine international law.

(6) The abduction of British citizen Lee Bo in Hong Kong and the extradition of Taiwanese citizens from third countries show Beijing's lack of respect for the judicial independence of Hong Kong and Taiwan. Such extraterritorial activities are manifestations of the Party's aim to increase its control over these territories.

Countermeasures

It is important that the international community refuses to accept the CCP narrative of the Party's representing all Chinese. On the contrary, other states should make clear that the CCP's efforts to use and pressure the Chinese diaspora are at the core of the problem.

Careful examination and mapping of the CCP's relationship with the Chinese diaspora, including the United Front's activities abroad, are important, not least in order to remove any suspicion against the majority of the Chinese diaspora, who are not working for the Party.

States affected by Chinese extraterritorial activities, such as Sweden, would do well to share their experiences and coordinate action with other countries. To deal with Chinese extraterritorial activities, the EU could coordinate its policy among the member states. Attention may be given to examples of different possible countermeasures, such as Australia's 2018 Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Bill.¹

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¹This briefing is a summary of a research report with the same title. It is based on open access academic and media sources, in English, Swedish, and Chinese, and textual analysis of Chinese documents and speeches.