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Beijing and the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia: To Serve the People

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the contemporary dynamics between the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and draws implications for the role of the Chinese diaspora in China's foreign policy.

MAIN ARGUMENT

With a diaspora population that has grown to more than 50 million, Beijing has over the last several decades adapted its policies to the expansion of the Chinese diaspora abroad to both appeal to and protect overseas Chinese. Since 1989, China has actively pursued policies to connect culturally and politically with and harness the economic and political benefits of the Chinese diaspora, using tools that include overseas recruitment and incentive programs and government entities that deal specifically with overseas Chinese populations. China also attempts to foster a domestic environment that primes Chinese individuals to represent the country's interests abroad through commercial, cultural, and political engagement. In addition to highlighting the economic benefits of a relationship with China, Beijing has attempted to exert strategic influence on the Chinese diaspora through soft-power inducements. Despite mixed results, Beijing understands the strategic importance of the diaspora in economic and political affairs and is expected to continue consideration of the diaspora in its foreign-policy planning.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Given the historical animosity and distrust in Southeast Asia toward China, Beijing is concerned with portraying itself in a favorable light in the region and hopes that gaining the approval of Chinese diaspora communities will indirectly and positively influence China's relations with their host countries.
- While ethnic Chinese worldwide share linguistic and cultural bonds, most ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia do not possess a bond with China beyond purely economic interests and thus do not want to risk losing political and economic privileges to serve China's broader interests.
- Beijing's proclamation of its obligation to protect the Chinese diaspora presents an immense security challenge for the PRC and requires a reconsideration of the principles guiding China's foreign policy.
- Diaspora populations, which currently exert passive influence on China's foreign policy by forcing Chinese to consider their growing importance in economic and political affairs, could more actively engage China. The major obstacle is unifying disparate diaspora communities around specific demands.

The rising economic, political, and military power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) has to date been one of the most geopolitically significant events of this century. While much has been written about China's growing prosperity and rapidly expanding military might and diplomatic influence, further analysis is needed on the elements of the PRC's foreign policy that are aimed at subnational Chinese diaspora populations in Southeast Asia and how this policy affects international relations between regional countries.

After several decades of closed borders, Deng Xiaoping's 1978 policy of "reform and opening" catalyzed new trends in outward Chinese migration and sparked renewed interest in China among diaspora populations long isolated from the PRC. As the country's external presence has expanded, Beijing has sought to adapt its policies to both appeal to and potentially protect these populations. Communities of Chinese nationals, long a fixture in many American, European, and Southeast Asian cities, now appear in cities and regions beyond traditional borders, reflecting China's active engagement in a globalized world.

As China's diaspora population has grown, Beijing has actively sought to retain and build ties with both ethnic Chinese and Chinese citizens who travel abroad to capitalize on investments and receive a foreign education. Beijing aims to instill a greater sense of nationalism among these diaspora communities and to incentivize overseas Chinese to return to the mainland. The result has been the emergence of overseas Chinese as a significant economic and political force that is becoming a major factor in China's domestic politics and foreign policy.

The implications of overseas Chinese—whether they are ethnic Chinese who have assimilated into their host countries or Chinese nationals living abroad—are clearly significant but not well understood, likely due to the prominence of analysis at the nation-state level and the disregard for the influence of local populations. However, diaspora populations have become important political actors that "influence both the political processes of the country in which they reside and the relationship between their country of residence and their country of origin."¹ Overseas Chinese not only maintain strong economic and business relations with mainland China but also influence its security calculus. To better understand these dynamics will require a systematic assessment of the strategic, economic, and political issues related to Beijing's approach to Chinese diaspora communities in the Asia-Pacific.

This report examines the extent to which the diaspora influences Chinese foreign policy. While China's policymaking process is quite opaque, actions that appeal to the diaspora can provide insight into how the PRC deals with issues that resonate with the wider Chinese community and serve China's foreign-policy interests. The global reach of the Chinese diaspora underscores the importance of understanding this dynamic.

The report analyzes the broad trends in the dynamics between China and its diaspora populations in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it examines PRC nationals who live abroad (*huaqiao*) and ethnic Chinese who have assimilated into their host countries (*huayi*). First, this essay addresses recent demographic trends and provides an overview of the Chinese diaspora. The scope of this study is limited to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia due to the global implications of the complex relationships among China, Southeast Asian countries, and Chinese diaspora populations. Furthermore, the size of the diaspora in Southeast Asia—by some estimates, about 32 million of the 50 million overseas Chinese reside there—calls for an investigation of how this community exerts influence on China's foreign policy. Second, the essay explains the extent to which PRC government entities and numerous programs directed at overseas Chinese—the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office,

¹ Myron Weiner, "On International Migration and International Relations," *Population and Development Review* 11, no. 3 (1985): 450.