CHAPTER EIGHT

CHINA’S CONSULAR SERVICE REFORM AND
CHANGES IN DIPLOMACY

Xia Liping

Introduction

Since 1978 when the People’s Republic of China started its process of rapid integration with the world through its ‘reform and opening up’ policy, more and more Chinese citizens have travelled abroad. This creates an imperative that consular services—especially consular assistance or consular protection—become an essential part of China’s diplomacy. This chapter aims to study three new features of China’s consular service, including multi-agency partnership, standardization and proactiveness. With the increase in the number of governmental agencies involved, the consular service has to be provided through a multi-agency partnership. And, to make it efficient, the consular service has been standardized and been made more proactive. These new features are a result of the consular reform led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China—which was under pressure from a soaring consular workload—and attention given by state leaders and the media, reflecting the change in China’s diplomacy in terms of value and management. Meeting the demand of ordinary people and safeguarding citizen’s legal rights and interests has become one of the focuses of China’s diplomacy. In China’s consular reform, the trend of democratization of diplomacy can also be traced in the new era.

A Brief History

The consular system—an institution that is exotic to oriental countries—was brought to China by Western powers during the nineteenth century. The Qing Dynasty, the last feudal regime in China’s history, was forced to accept foreign consuls under the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 as a result of China’s military failure in the first Opium War (1840–1842). However, China did not accredit consuls abroad until
three decades later. The first Chinese consulate was established in Singapore in 1877 as an answer to a strong appeal from overseas Chinese nationals for the motherland’s protection, and because the Dynasty was badly in need of support from wealthy overseas Chinese businessmen in the fight against revolutionists. Moreover, by establishing consulates abroad, China could also monitor revolutionists’ involvement in rebellious activities. By the eve of its collapse in 1911, the Qing government had established more than 40 consulates abroad. However, because the government did not have sufficient financial resources, more than half of these consulates were funded by the local overseas Chinese community. Because of the government’s weak status, overseas Chinese enjoyed few consular services.

Following the Qing Dynasty, the government of the Republic of China (from January 1912 until September 1949) promulgated a series of regulations defining the classification and obligation of diplomats and consuls, and the consular system was developed slowly over time during this period. Sun Yat-Sen, ‘the father of the Republic of China’, had received substantial support from the overseas Chinese community during his revolutionary endeavour to overthrow the Qing Dynasty, so the new government attached importance to safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese populations. Developing bilateral commercial relations and safeguarding the legitimate rights of overseas Chinese nationals were declared to be the core functions of consuls.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949—and according to the policy of ‘making a fresh start’—the new government neither inherited the diplomatic and consular relations established by the former Nationalist government nor recognized the legal status of foreign diplomats and consuls in China. Foreign embassies and consulates in China were closed. As a newly born socialist country, China chose to ‘lean to one side’ by joining the socialist camp and establishing diplomatic and consular relations with socialist countries immediately after its founding ceremony. New bilateral relations with non-socialist countries had to be established on the basis of equality and mutual benefit through negotiation. At the beginning of the 1960s, there were 30 foreign consulates from thirteen different countries in China, and

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