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AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT COMMUNIST CHINA —
DO AMERICANS WANT TO IMPROVE OUR RELATIONS WITH PEKING?

by Martin Patchen *

It is now more than fifteen years since Communist armies swept across China and a Communist government began its rule over the entire Chinese mainland. During this decade and a half, the United States has refused to treat the Communists as the real government of China, has refused to trade with China, and has, in general, helped to keep contacts between Communist China and ourselves to a bare minimum.

The explosion of a nuclear bomb by Communist China has given urgency to the question of what our future policy toward China shall be. Recently a few prominent Americans have questioned the wisdom of continuing our present policy of isolation from Communist China. Among those who have spoken out in this vein are Senator William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mrs. Clare Booth Luce, Dr. O. Frederick Holde of the National Council of Churches of Christ in America, and the General Conference of the Methodist Church. These persons and a few others have argued that there are dangers in ignoring a country as big and potentially powerful as Communist China and that there are possible advantages in trying to improve relations with her.

Are these lonely and isolated voices at odds with the opinions of the great majority of Americans? Or is there substantial support in the public as a whole for greater contact, and perhaps accommodation, with Communist China?

There is now a considerable amount of evidence about public views concerning Communist China. Some of the most recent and comprehensive data comes from a national survey done in May and June of this year by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan. Also, many questions concerning China have been asked over the years by national survey organizations, especially by the American Institute of Public Opinion (the "Gallup Poll") and by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. One needs to be somewhat cautious in interpreting the answers by a sample of Americans to any single question. It is often hard to judge how strongly and how firmly people hold the opinions they express. Sometimes also the wording of a question can have considerable effect on the answers. However, it does seem possible to draw some general conclusions on the basis of the large number of questions which have been asked of Americans over the years.

In general, the surveys show that the public has a "tough" side to its views — as shown by a frequent willingness to defend small countries in Asia against attack by Communist China, by willingness to carry any war with China to the mainland, and by consistent opposition to admitting Communist China to the U.N. But there are also consistent signs of public willingness to seek accommodation with the Communist Chinese — as shown by recent opposition to helping any Nationalist attack on Communist China, by support of various proposals to nego-

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tiate with Communist China, by support of trade and aid to China, and by
support even of dealing with the Communists as the real government of China.

Information About China

When trying to understand opinions of the American public concerning
China, it is important first to realize that a large number of Americans are
not aware of even the most elementary facts about China. For example, in May
of this year, over one out of every four Americans did not know "if there is
any Communist government in China now." In March 1955, at a time when the
United States came close to going to war over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu,
only one in ten Americans could clearly tell "which side holds the islands of
Quemoy and Matsu at the present time." In 1954, four years after the Communist
government had taken power in China, only a little more than one American in
two said that he had "heard of" the Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung. And while
about ninety percent of Americans have heard of Chiang Kai-shek, fewer than one
out of every two Americans was able, in May of this year, to think of "another
Chinese government besides the Communist one."

On Threat From China

While the information which many Americans have about China is very
limited, a large number of Americans have some fairly clear images of Communist
China and of what impact she might have on the United States. Asked in May 1964
whether "there is any reason for the United States to be concerned about Commun­
ist China", almost three out of ten Americans spontaneously mentioned the bigness
or strength of China. For example, a landscape maintenance man in California
commented, "They are the biggest country in the world, by weight of numbers;
they can over-run any single nation." A clerk in a small town in Iowa said,
"They're making progress and are very bitter toward us. They're making bombs —
that threatens our safety." Since the Chinese exploded their first nuclear
device in October, such perceptions of China's strength must certainly have be­
come more widespread.

Another common and related image of Communist China is that she has ag­
gressive intentions. In May 1964, about four out of ten Americans spontaneously
mentioned this as a reason for concern about China. Only a few thought of
possible attack on such neighbors of China as India and Viet Nnm. A much larger
number of Americans were afraid that China might want to attack the U.S. or to
rule the whole world, or pictured Communist China as warlike in general. For
example, a housewife in Chicago said, "I think they are one of our most potent
enemies and even more dangerous than Russia. They seem bent on annihilating
this country." A man in San Diego explained his concern by saying "Communist
China is out to run the whole world if it can."

On Resisting Chinese Expansion

Concerning U.S. resistance to expansion by Communist China, prior to the
Korean War the American people were not eager to defend territory on Chinese
borders. In January 1950, a large majority of those with opinions approved
of President Truman's decision not to give military assistance to Chiang Kai-shek
on Formosa. In March 1950, three months before South Korea was invaded, a clear
majority of Americans who expressed an opinion opposed the idea that we "back up"
countries "near China" with our own Army and Air Force if they were attacked.

Since the outbreak of war in Korea, there has generally been greater
willingness among Americans to defend Asian territory against Chinese attack.
The clearest expression of such sentiment came in March of 1955 when almost three out of every four Americans approved of the Congressional resolution authorizing President Eisenhower to use U.S. armed forces to defend Formosa.

But while Americans were willing to follow the judgment of a popular President that war with China is necessary, there are signs that the public has been reluctant to become involved in a big war with China. At the time of a crisis in the Formosa straits in September 1958, when official American policy was not clearly drawn, a sample of Americans was asked "whether this country should get into an all-out war with Red China over the Quemoy and Matsu islands and over Formosa itself ... Should the U.S. go to war for Quemoy and Matsu ... for Formosa itself?" Of those expressing an opinion on this subject, a majority opposed going to war over these issues — especially over Quemoy and Matsu. More than two out of three Americans were opposed to our fighting over these small islands off the China coast.

More recently, in May 1964, Americans were asked "How about using American forces in Viet Nam if the Communist rebels are winning, even if this means risking war with Communist China?" About an equal proportion of Americans (four out of every ten) opposed this proposal as favored it, and those opposed to using American forces were likely to say they felt "strongly" about this.

**Limited or All-out War With China**

When actually faced with the reality (or possibility) of war with China, there appear to be two strong but somewhat conflicting, currents of opinion within the American public. First, a substantial majority of Americans have consistently approved of fighting any war with China in an offensive, rather than purely defensive, fashion. Several times during the Korean War, a majority of Americans favored the proposal that we "bomb Communist supply bases inside China." Such action would, of course, have gone beyond the Administration policy of limiting the war to the Korean peninsula. A similar sentiment by the public of willingness to carry any war to the Chinese mainland was evident at the time of a crisis in Indochina in June 1954. The question asked was "If the government did decide to fight, would it be better to send troops to the country invaded, like we did in Korea, or would it be better to carry the attack to China itself?" A large majority of those with an opinion about this felt that we should carry such a fight to China itself.

But while there has been a consistent willingness to fight a war aggressively if we are in it, there is evidence also of a general desire to avoid a big war with China if possible. For example, among the same sample of Americans who in April 1951 were willing to endorse the bombing of supply bases inside China, about two out of three felt that we "should try as hard as we can to stay out of a big war with the Chinese" rather than "take strong steps against China, even at the risk of all-out war with the Chinese." The apparent contradiction between a willingness to bomb China and a desire to avoid all-out war with China was not due to a widespread belief that such bombing would not bring all-out war. In fact, when asked directly about this in a number of surveys, the majority of Americans predicted that attacks on China itself would not only bring all-out war with China but would bring Russia into the war.

The reasons for this inconsistency are not completely clear. Probably some Americans who generally wanted to avoid provoking China nevertheless thought that bombing Communist supply bases was worth the risk. Also, the majority in favor of bombing China probably included both those who did not shy from a big war with
China and those who felt that bombing would not bring all-out war.

Besides being willing to bomb China during the Korean War, on several occasions around this time a majority of Americans approved the idea that we give "the Chinese Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek all the help it needs to attack the Communists on the mainland." However, public attitudes on this issue appear to have shifted sharply over the past decade. In May, 1964, a sample of Americans was asked whether "we should give the Nationalists all the help they need to attack the Communists on the mainland of China" or whether instead "we should protect the Nationalists from a Communist attack but should not help them to attack the Communists." Over six out of every ten Americans opposed helping a Nationalist attack while only one out of every ten favored aid for such a project. The most common reason given for opposing such aid is that it might involve the United States itself in war. While differences in question wording may account for some of the shift in opinion, the magnitude of the shift indicates that genuine change on this issue has occurred.

Willingness to Deal With Communist China

Up to this point, I have been talking mainly about the willingness of the American people to fight against Communist China under various circumstances. How about the other side of the coin? How willing are Americans to deal with Communist China — to have China in the United Nations, to have diplomatic relations, trade, exchange of newsmen, and so on.

China and the U.N.

Concerning Communist China and the U.N., there has been a very consistent opposition to the idea of admitting Communist China to the world organization. This opposition reached a peak in 1954, shortly after the Korean War, when eight out of every ten Americans opposed Communist Chinese admission while only one in ten favored it. Support for Chinese admission has increased somewhat by 1961, but still only a relatively small minority (two in every ten Americans) favored admission. It seems certain that the continued public opposition of our government to Communist Chinese admission has had some effect on public opinion on this question — though it is impossible to judge how much. Regardless of the government's possible role in helping to shape this opposition, there is some evidence that this opposition cannot now be quickly dissolved by a switch in our government's policy. In the May 1964 study, a sample of Americans was asked how they would feel "if the President suggested that we let Communist China join the United Nations." Over five out of every ten Americans said they would oppose following such a Presidential suggestion, while three out of ten favored following such a suggestion.

There has been, however, a consistent willingness by the American public to accept the verdict of a majority of U.N. members if the majority decides to admit China. For example, in September 1951, when almost two out of every three Americans opposed giving Red China "a seat on the U.N. Security Council if the Chinese agree to stop fighting in Korea," a comparable majority of Americans was willing for the U.S. to "go along" with a decision to make such a deal if the majority of U.N. members decided to do this.

More recently, in May 1964, Americans indicated clearly that, if Communist China gets into the U.N., they want the U.S. to stay in with her. Only one American in every twenty — many of them opponents of the U.N. in any case — favored our getting out of the U.N. if Communist China gets in. Among the great majority
of Americans who favor our staying in the U.N., many gave as reasons the importance of our retaining a voice in the U.N. A large number of people also voiced support for the U.N. as an organization, regardless of whether Communist China is in it or not. Said a middle-aged automation serviceman in Massachusetts, "If the U.S. got out of the U.N., that would be the end of the U.N. We are the main support and as bad as it is, it is the best we have."

Though most Americans still prefer to keep Communist China out of the U.N. at present, there is a surprising willingness to deal with the Communist government and to do political and economic business with China.

Dealing with the Communist Government

In May of this year, those Americans who are aware of the existence of two Chinese governments were asked about their preference between two alternative policies: 1) "We should deal with Chiang Kai-shek's government on Formosa as the government of all China and have nothing to do with Communist China;" or 2) "We should support the Nationalists as the government of Formosa, but should deal with the Communists as the government of the rest of China." Of those asked this question, one third clearly favored the latter policy of dealing with the Communists as well as with the Nationalists, while a smaller proportion — one fourth — clearly favored dealing with the Nationalists only. Most of the rest had no opinion and some gave answers which did not clearly favor one of these alternatives.

Among the largest proportion, who favor dealing with the Communist government, the most common reasons given center on the idea that such a policy would fit the reality of the situation we face. For example, the wife of a government employee said, "You can't deal with Chiang Kai-shek as if he were representing China. I think it is being unrealistic." A teacher in Massachusetts commented, "It's too unrealistic to ignore Communist China. 800 million people are too many to ignore."

In the same survey this year, a larger number of people (all those who knew that China has a Communist government) were asked how they would feel if "the President suggested that we exchange ambassadors with Communist China the way we do with other countries." About four Americans out of every ten said they would favor following such a Presidential suggestion, while only three in ten said they would oppose it. Support for dealing with the Communist government is especially strong among the better educated and among the younger people in our society.

Negotiating with China

There has been, also, a strong and consistent willingness by the American public to meet and negotiate with Communist China to seek agreements on Asian problems. For example, in August 1955, a national sample of Americans were asked "How do you feel about the idea of United States representatives meeting with Chinese Communist officials, to try to reach an agreement on some of the problems in Asia — do you think this is a good idea, or a bad idea?" Almost eight out of ten Americans favored such a meeting while less than two in ten opposed it. When asked in May of this year about their probable reaction if "the President suggested that we talk over our problems in Asia with Communist China and try to come to some agreements with them," over seven out of ten Americans said they would favor following this suggestion while fewer than two in ten said they would oppose it. This general willingness to negotiate extends to the current situation in Viet Nam. In May 1964, Americans were asked their reaction to the idea of "trying to make some compromise agreement with Communist China on (Viet Nam) — like making all Viet Nam neutral." Almost five out of every ten Americans favored the idea while only about three out of ten opposed it.
Trade with China

With regard to trade with Communist China, in January 1950 a majority of Americans favored continuing trade with China despite the take-over there by the Communists. Shortly after the Korean War, in July 1954, majority opinion had swung against trade with Communist China. But by June 1957, a substantial majority of Americans with an opinion on this subject favored a proposal that the United States "work out" the same kind of trade agreement with Red China as we now have with Russia. Again in February 1961 a substantial majority of those with opinions approved of the idea that the U.S. and Communist China "work out a business arrangement to buy and sell goods to each other." A survey in May 1964 showed somewhat less support for trade with China — with slightly less than half of those with opinions saying they would favor following a possible suggestion by the President that we sell "things like wheat to Communist China" — but this survey also showed considerable support for such trade.

Also when in February 1961 and in May 1962, Communist China faced the possibility of famine, Americans were asked whether the United States should be willing to send food. On both occasions, a majority of those with opinions favored such aid.

Visits by Newsmen

Another kind of possible contact with China that brings an even more favorable response from Americans is the idea of having American newsmen visit China. In June 1957, two out of three Americans with an opinion about this favored such visits by our newsmen. Again, in May 1964, Americans were asked how they would feel about "visits between Americans and people from Communist China — like newspapermen from each country visiting the other" if the President suggested this action. More than eight out of ten with an opinion said they would favor following such a Presidential suggestion.

All of the specific ways in which the American public is now willing to have contact with Communist China appear to reflect increased willingness to improve relations with Communist China. There is some direct evidence that this is so. Whereas in Sept. 1954, a clear majority of Americans opposed the idea that we "try to improve our relations with Communist China," by 1961 over sixty percent of those with opinions had come to approve the general idea that we try to improve these relations. In general point of view, then, as well as on some of the specific issues like trade with China, public opinion appears to have moved toward greater willingness to seek harmonious, even if not cordial, relations with Communist China. The American people are prepared to be firm if necessary but they do not appear to be inflexible.

Up to now, the policy of the American government has generally been to have as little as possible to do with Communist China and to encourage our allies to act in the same way. Earlier this year, France showed by her recognition of Communist China that she considers this policy outmoded. Britain has already recognized Communist China and other western nations may soon follow suit. The evidence reviewed here indicates that a large part of the American public is also now quietly doubtful of the wisdom of our present policy toward China. If our government decides that it wishes to move toward more contact and improved relations with Communist China, the available evidence is that it will find the majority of the public quite willing to follow.