A HOBSON'S CHOICE:
The Recognition Question in Canada-China Relations, 1949-1950

by

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This paper examines events surrounding Canada’s negotiations on the question of recognizing the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and 1950, and the reasons why the negotiations failed. The focus is on the work of officials in the Canadian Embassy in Nanking and External Affairs in Ottawa, particularly External Affairs Minister Lester B. Pearson. Both Nanking and External Affairs, Ottawa, strove to promote recognition, which was approved in principal by the Canadian government but never actualized. Pearson and his department, spurred by Canadian officials on the ground in China, chiefly Ambassador T. C. Davis and his second-in-command, China specialist Chester Ronning, favoured early recognition, as a means of influencing the Communist government away from total dependence on the Soviet Union. The Canadian government weighed the desirability of recognition against what it saw as the necessity of solidarity of the North Atlantic alliance with the United Kingdom and the United States, in particular, against what they perceived as the machinations of the Soviet Union in its perceived drive for world domination. In the final analysis the Canadian government, fearful of alienating the United States, opted for solidarity of the Western Alliance on the recognition question. The focus of the essay, based in large measure on External Affairs documents and the Pearson Papers, is to look at the recognition question and how it played out, in Canadian domestic terms, rather than in terms of Great Power relationships, which is largely the preoccupation in the historiography. A brief window of opportunity occurred in late 1949 and early 1950, when Canada might have recognized without potentially serious repercussions on Canada-US relations. That moment passed quickly and the outbreak of the Korean War and China’s entry in the conflict against UN forces, essentially destroyed any opportunity for Canada and Communist China to develop normal relations.
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Hobson's choice:...the necessity of choosing between a number of unpalatable alternatives.

Introduction

On October 1, 1949, the day the People’s Republic of China was declared in Peiping,¹ Chou En-lai², Minister of Foreign Affairs of the new regime, sent a message to the Canadian Embassy in Nanking. Chou’s message, also sent to other foreign governments, consisted of three sentences. The operative one was: “I am of the opinion that it is necessary for the People’s Republic of China to establish normal diplomatic relations with various nations of the world.”³ Chester A. Ronning was the officer in charge at the embassy in the absence of Ambassador T. C. Davis, who had been recalled to Ottawa for consultations. Ronning cabled Chou’s message to Ottawa along with the text of a broadcast statement by Chairman Mao Tse-tung, made earlier in the day, that the Communist leader had decided “legally [to] announce to foreign governments that this government is the only legal government to represent people of the whole country of the

¹ Before the Communists came to power the later capital of the People’s Republic of China was called Peiping, meaning Northern Peace. It was renamed Peking (Beijing in pinyin) or Northern Capital by the Communist government. Under the Nationalists the capital was at Nanking, meaning Southern Capital.

² This essay will use the Wade-Giles system for transliterating Chinese names, as that was the style in use at the time in the People’s Republic of China. China later switched to the pinyin system, in which the name is rendered Zhou Enlai. Similarly, this essay will use Mao Tse-tung, rather than Mao Zedong, which came into use later.

People's Republic of China and that this government is prepared to enter into diplomatic
relations with all those foreign governments who will abide by the principles of equality,
mutual benefit and mutual respect to territorial sovereignty."\textsuperscript{4}

The members of the Western Alliance were now confronted with a difficult
choice: whether to continue to recognize the corrupt, venal and discredited Nationalist
government of Chiang Kai-shek, so thoroughly rejected by the Chinese people
themselves after a bloody four-year civil war following the defeat of the Japanese Empire
in 1945; or to swallow the distaste many had for the Communists—whom they saw as
pawns of the Soviet Union in its drive for world domination.

Several questions arise relating to the events of 1949--1950. How did Canadian
officials perceive the Nationalist and Communists and how did that influence thinking in
Ottawa? How was policy towards China formulated? How independent in its actions
towards China was Canada able to be? How did American actions and attitudes influence
the Canadian government?

Two major and contradictory issues plagued Canada’s policy towards China in
1949 and 1950. The first was the fact that the Communists had come to power. The
inclination of the Canadian government was to accept the \textit{fait accompli}, unpalatable
though it might be, and recognize the Communist government, as Britain was in the
process of doing. The second issue was the attitude of the United States, which was
growing increasingly bitter and hostile toward Peking. Open defiance of US wishes that
Canada not recognize China could have meant consequences the Canadian government

was unwilling to face. C. D. Howe, Minister of Trade and Industry, and others in the cabinet, feared serious repercussions in the area of Canada-US trade if Canada recognized Communist China.

Canadian officials in China also faced dilemmas. The two major players on the ground in Nanking, were Ambassador T. C. Davis and his second-in-command, Chester Ronning. They would play a major part in helping to shape Canada’s policy toward China during the crucial transition from Kuomintang (KMT)\(^5\) to Communist rule in China. Deeply sympathetic to the ordinary Chinese people, Ronning saw the Communists in sharp contrast to the corrupt Nationalists. He believed they would provide a government prepared to come to grips with the corruption and venality that was so much a part of the Nationalist system. Born in China and fluent in the language, he believed the Communists were prepared to do something for the common people, to lift their lot from the poverty and hopelessness in which they were mired. Davis was a former Canadian judge, whose views of the Nationalists evolved from one of tolerance for Nationalist ways to bitter contempt, as he observed their venality, rapaciousness and utter disregard for the circumstances of ordinary Chinese, whether peasants or soldiers. Davis, through Ronning, was afforded unique insight into the thinking of Communist officials with whom he dealt. He translated these insights for the minister and officials in Ottawa, enabling them to make their own judgments on Chinese events, which were often at variance with those of the Americans, who tended to view Communism in monolithic terms. The views of Davis and Ronning reinforced the attitudes of Lester Pearson,

\(^5\) Kuomintang is the Giles-Wade transliteration of the Chinese characters translated as Nationalist.
Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, who was very critical of Chiang Kai-shek and took a sympathetic view to recognizing the Chinese Communists after they proclaimed their government on October 1, 1949.

Canadian historiography on the recognition question is sparse compared to works by American and, to a lesser degree, British historians. As one might expect, non-Canadian historians have been more interested in the diplomacy of the major powers than in middle-powers like Canada. Canada's role on the recognition issue, to the limited degree it is dealt with, has been confined more or less exclusively to Canadian historians. Canadian policy was always a balance of trying to steer a course between Britain, trying to accommodate its large Far East responsibilities, and the increasing inclination of the US to operate on the basis that the West faced a monolithic Communist menace led by the Soviet Union.

Canadian historians have tended to deal with the recognition question in terms of larger international events. They have considered it largely in the context of international Great Power politics and Canada's diplomatic relations with the US and UK. The Canadian desire to moderate what officials saw as a dangerously pugnacious US attitude on the China question, and efforts to encourage the Americans to work through the UN rather than unilaterally, is a strong theme in much of the historiography. Attempts by Canada to influence US policy did not always pan out, however. Steven Hugh Lee points out the importance of the special relationship with the US and the need to maintain a united front towards the Soviet Union, resulted in compromises that tended to back the
Americans' more aggressive initiatives towards China. Both Canada and Britain were torn by fears of renewed American isolationism and the desire to place limits on what they saw as overly aggressive US containment policies, which might bring about a general war. Despite private concerns about America's non-recognition policy, the bipolar nature of the post-war world led Canada by and large to support US East Asian policy. Stephen Beecroft has held that Canada was only one of a number of countries following policies which led to non-recognition of China. Like Canada, Beecroft contends that Australia, New Zealand, Belgium and France, lacked sufficient interest in China to risk the major strains in relations with the US that recognition might produce.

My focus, by contrast, based to a large degree on documents in the Department of External Affairs (DEA) Archives and in the Pearson Papers, has been to look at the recognition question in domestic Canadian terms, and as it was shaped by Canadian concerns. The dispatches by Davis to Ottawa and by Ronning after he was put in charge of the embassy on Davis' return home in August, 1949, argued consistently for early recognition of Communist China as a means of influencing China away from the perceived machinations of the Soviet Union and also as a means to maintain a toe-hold in the country to further Canadian trade and diplomatic interests. The Pearson documents show that he concurred with Davis' and Ronning's appraisals of events in China and of

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the importance of engaging the PRC. Canada’s engagement with China was seen as a means of lessening China’s dependence on the Soviet Union.  

Two Ambassadors, Two Points of View

Throughout 1949, beginning well before the Communists on April 21 began their successful push to cross the Yangtze River in their final thrust to conquer the entire Chinese Mainland from the cowed and dispirited Nationalists, who had relocated their government to Canton in anticipation of the imminent fall of Nanking to Mao’s disciplined and self-confident forces, Canadian Ambassador T. C. Davis had been leaning more and more strongly toward recognition. He was supported and indeed encouraged by his Chargé d’Affaires, Chester Ronning, who had been born in central China in 1894 of missionary parents. In dispatches to the Department of External Affairs (DEA) in Ottawa, Davis had expressed increasing disillusionment and contempt for the Nationalists. He admired the discipline and lack of corruption shown by the conquering Communist forces. Indeed, Davis reported in a dispatch in mid-June, 1949, that the relatively friendly relations the Canadian embassy had developed with the Communist authorities in the first months after their occupation of Nanking had aroused suspicions among some of the members of the small diplomatic community. Davis’ cheerfulness had been noted by many members of the diplomatic corps and they could not understand it.

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8 There will undoubtedly be further insights to be gained by future research into the recognition question in the period 1949-1950, when all the documents become available. According to staff at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa, much material in the forms of memoranda, reports, and cable traffic, relating to the period, remains classified and inaccessible to scholars, simply because the National Archives has lacked staff to assess and review the material for declassification.

9 Ronning, born on Dec. 13, 1894, learned Chinese as his first language, and was subsequently taught English and Norwegian by his parents.
“The whole inference was that there was something suspicious about it. That I must have some connection with the Communists, which caused me to have this attitude.”\textsuperscript{10} He was also told that Ronning had come under suspicion. “Because Ronning has been able to get on friendly terms with some of the officials it is alleged that he is a Communist working hand in glove with them. I also learn that this whole mission has been given this flavor by some of these people. I laugh at it.”\textsuperscript{11}

Davis, who went by the nickname “Tommy”, was a former member of the Saskatchewan legislature, provincial cabinet minister, federal deputy minister, and former high court judge. He had begun his tour of duty in China in 1947 after having been Canadian High Commissioner to Australia. In the intervening time whatever sympathies he may have had for the Nationalists had been lost by what he observed of their corruption and mismanagement. He developed a cautious admiration, if not approval, of the Communists, whom he observed first-hand in both Nanking and in Shanghai after their occupation of those cities. As early as June, 1947, Davis was reporting to External Affairs Minister Pearson that conditions in China were “deteriorating daily and...I am of the opinion that [the] National Government is headed for partial or complete collapse.”\textsuperscript{12} He speculated that the situation might be salvaged by Chiang Kai-shek “swallowing his pride” publicly and without conditions offering to meet and discuss peace terms with the Communists. By the end of June, 1949, he reported his impressions of the situation in

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.} p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.} p. 5.  
Shanghai, where he made a visit to assess events. By then his contempt for the Nationalists and for Chiang was withering:

As the last days of the Nationalist government drew to an end [in Shanghai], the disgust of all with them increased. By the time they left they were despised, detested and hated. They turned out to be a band of ruffians they seemingly had always been. They looted,blackmailed, gouged and robbed. The brave words of last ditch defense melted away like snow on a summer’s day.\(^\text{13}\)

Davis noted a seriousness of purpose about the Chinese communists. “You feel that they honestly have worthy objectives and honest purposes. You no longer have the feeling of rottenness and corruption in the administration.”\(^\text{14}\) He said he was suspicious of the paranoid attitude of the Americans toward all Communists and suspected they intended somehow to try to sabotage the Communists economically. “To an American all communists are alike. They are all Russians and Russians do not rank very high in their thoughts. Any time they can block Russia it is, from [the Americans’] standpoint, a good thing to do.”\(^\text{15}\)

Davis’ predecessor had served as Canadian ambassador first in China’s war-time capital of Chungking and then in Nanking, whence he departed for Ottawa in October, 1946. He was Major-General Victor Odlum a strong believer in classical 19th Century liberalism. A military man whose war service stretched from the Boer War to World Wars I and II, he harboured hatred and contempt for communism. He perceived Chinese


\(^{14}\) Ibid p. 8

\(^{15}\) Ibid. p. 5.
communism as the extension of the Soviet Union’s drive for world domination. Writing
to External Affairs Minister Pearson from Turkey, he said, “I feel sure that there is
much concerning the Communist leaders [Davis] does not understand as well as I think I
do.” Odlum averred that Davis seemed to “fall into the error of thinking that the
Communists of China differ from the Communists of the Kremlin.” He said that in
direct conversations with himself, in intimate discussion and in replies to direct questions
Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai had answered in terms which had confirmed his
repugnance to their policies. Their words “burned into my memory”, he wrote. “Their
final objective has not changed. It was the world revolution...” Odlum said Chou and
Mao were striking personalities with whom it was a pleasure to talk. But he warned that
“behind the apparent improvements in the honesty of administration, which Mr. Davis
has reported, there exists a force and a purpose so dangerous to our whole way of life,
that in a choice between it and the inefficient Kuomintang government of China, one
cannot help but give support to the latter.” The Communists represented a conscious
revolutionary force that “intends to win mastery of the world and, furthermore, intends to
seize that mastery by cruel force.” It was part of a drumbeat of commentary on events in
China carried on by Odlum to External Affairs, virtually from the beginning of his time
in Ankara.

16 Odlum was Canadian Ambassador to Turkey from 1946 until 1952.
3.
18 Ibid. p. 1.
19 Ibid. p. 2.
20 Ibid. p. 2.
21 As early as June, 1945, Odlum had written to James Endicott, a Canadian missionary to China based in
Chengtu, the reason for his faith in Chiang Kai-shek. “I determined to accept what the Generalissimo said
to me personally as a better guide to his intentions than anything said to me by others could possibly be,”
Odlum wrote. “From his own lips and by his eyes, his hands, his mouth, his feet I have judged the
Odlum's sniping at Davis from his post in Ankara became a matter of concern to Ottawa. On January 26, 1948, A. R. Menzies, acting head of the American and Far East Division of DEA, wrote at the instigation of Escott Reid, the Deputy Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, a "Dear Tommy" letter to Davis apprising him of a dispatch to External Affairs Minister Pearson from Odlum, dated Jan. 13, 1948. Menzies remarked to Davis that most of the lengthy, five-page, single-spaced document "could be interpreted as being pretty insulting to you." He suggested Davis make no response to it.

Historian Kim Richard Nossal has called Odlum's image of Chinese events in the early and mid-1940s, and particularly his views of Chiang Kai-shek, "which differed considerably from that of other diplomatic observers in China at the time," a useful case study of the intelligence failure diplomatic astigmatism can give rise to. Odlum contended that Davis was now reporting the very stories told to himself four years earlier, "which I then discovered emanated from the group in the United States Embassy which, later on, made very difficult the course of General Pat Hurley." Odlum commented he had been struck by the generalities of some of the statement in Davis' September

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dispatch. "Indefinite assertions of this sort have long been the stock in trade of red sympathizers in China," he asserted. "Most of the stories emanated in former days from Chou En-lai's headquarters."  

Nossal has noted that Odium, who was a military man and not a trained diplomat, was prone to impart his own wishful thinking "when faced with information that unbalanced his positive view of Chiang Kai-shek." He asserts that Odium used a number of strategies to justify the positive image of Chiang in his judgments. "These strategies include discrediting [sources] of discrepant information; ceasing to think about information; thinking wishfully; re-interpreting new and discrepant information to fit pre-existing attitudes...."

Menzies "Dear Tommy" letter to Davis was a strong indication Ottawa had for some time taken Odium with a grain of salt.

Davis was concerned about the spread of Communism in China but in ways quite different from Odium. In December, 1948 in a "Dear Mike" letter to Lester B. Pearson, Davis, now totally disenchanted with the Nationalists, said that only his fears of the Soviet Union and its designs, not Chinese Communism as such, prevented him from welcoming the thought of a Communist victory in China. "I doubt if there has ever been in the history of the world a more dark and sinister influence than that of present-day Russia," he wrote. "If Russia were not Russia. I would, as one with, I hope a liberal mind, welcome the advent of the Communists. This Nationalist government is rotten and smells to high heaven. This nation must have a scourge and purge, which apparently only

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27 Ibid. p. 565.
the fanatical Communists can give.”\textsuperscript{28} The tragedy, said Davis, was that the Communist 
success in China was “another pin driven to fasten the Russian system on the world.”. 

He told the minister that except for Nationalist corruption and its reactionary methods the 
Communist victory he foresaw need not have happened, commenting: “The disease is 
bad and the cure may be worse than the disease, but I think we may as well realistically 
face the fact, that sooner or later [the Communists] are going to control all of China.... 
If this is correct we may as well approach the problem of the future realistically.”\textsuperscript{29}

By January 17, 1949, Davis was reporting to Ottawa that the degree of 
deterioration in the Nationalist’s military position “cannot be fully conveyed simply by 
saying that each Communist victory has been a government defeat.... Time and again in 
recent months the Government troops have committed just about every strategic and 
tactical error in the book.... In addition to losing battles they have been losing their best 
troops--and the best-supplied troops---at an alarming rate.”\textsuperscript{30} Before the end of the 
month he was also castigating the Communists for their war of nerves in talking peace 
and pretending to want peace with the Nationalists but coming across as “just another 
bunch of crooks like the Russians, who are great on propaganda but short on truth and 
lacking completely any real sense of moral decency.”\textsuperscript{31} In the same dispatch Davis 
reported that US Ambassador Stuart had become totally disillusioned by “the Gimo” 
[Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek]. “His changed feeling towards the Gimo is reflected I 
believe in a better feeling towards the others, tinged I think, with the knowledge that

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Despatch No. 7, from Ambassador Davis, Nanking, Jan. 17. 1949. “Prognostication of Future Events.” 
\textsuperscript{31} Despatch No. 20 from Davis, Jan. 28, 1949, p. 4. DEA File 50055-40 Part 6, Vol. 4718.
social changes must be made in China and only the Communists can bring them into being. He wants to stay here and he, I am sure, will urge the early recognition of the new government.... On the other hand the career men in his Embassy, led by Lewis Clark, his minister, have such a hatred for Communism and Russia that they cannot conceive of the United States being forced to recognize a straight or camouflaged Communist government. They are like the Generalissimo. They seem to think that, given time, something will turn up, which will finally defeat the Communists. They want to have nothing to do with the Communists and to keep their string tied to the Gimo’s kite.”

By April, Davis’ assessment of Chiang was vitriolic: “... Let me say that when the history of this period is written, ...the man who will be given the greatest credit for pulling this whole nation down about him and who has more than any other person given China over to Communism, will be the Generalissimo. Never has a man made a sorrier mess of things than he.” For Davis there was also a Hobson’s Choice between the corrupt KMT and the Soviet-leaning Communists, but all in all he chose the latter.

The question of which Chinese government to recognize became more urgent for Ottawa by early 1949 as the Nationalist government fled south to Canton and the Communists prepared to cross the Yangtze River, the great north-south divide. The Canadian government chose to retain its embassy to China in Nanking rather than depart with the Kuomintang. A number of other embassies, including those of Britain, the United States, Australia, France, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands, also stayed in Nanking. In a telegram on June 20, 1949, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth

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32 Ibid. pp. 4-5.
Relations in London, wrote that the decision by various powers to remain was described as “a definitely political gesture” which it was hoped would influence the future course of relations with the emerging authorities in China.  

Recognition, Hopefully... but not Necessarily

In late 1949 Pearson hoped Canada might be able to grant the PRC early recognition. Still, from the Canadian government’s point of view, the alternatives available were a Hobson’s Choice. The corrupt Nationalists were so thoroughly defeated and discredited that it was hardly possible to continue to do business with them. The Communists, while they seemed morally superior to the Nationalists, were lining up with Moscow and its perceived drive for world domination. While they were apparently uncorrupt and upright in running Chinese domestic affairs, one assessment of them, written by Arnold Heeney, was that they were on Moscow’s side and “in the event of war, China would [presumably] be aligned with Russia...,” Yet a Communist China with its 500 million inhabitants was a fact that had to be dealt with, if not approved, and recognizing the PRC as the country’s government, which in fact it was, seemed the least unpalatable alternative in the Canadian government’s Hobson’s Choice.

Canada’s position was that recognition of a Chinese Communist government ought to follow establishment of a government by the Communists but that the particulars and the precise timing would be guided by events. While Pearson and the

"China hands" urged early recognition of the Communist government, it seemed to have little effect in speeding up the process in Ottawa.

There was very little trade between Canada and China so Canada faced none of the commercial and trade concerns, which were important considerations for the British in seeking a continuing presence in China. Canadian exports to China fell to $13 million in 1949, from $46 million in 1946 and in terms of political and other considerations, China, and indeed the entire Pacific Region, was secondary to Atlantic considerations.

Yet trade was one area where Canada could participate in East Asia. An unsigned DEA memorandum dated April 23, 1949, suggested that when the Communists took control of China they would wish to trade with the West, which was much better positioned than Russia to sell to the Chinese what they would need to rebuild the country. "As far as Sino-Canadian economic relations are concerned, therefore, the situation would be that China on balance needs us, rather than vice versa," the author commented. "There remains to be explored the possibility of the Western countries bargaining off needed economic assistance to the Chinese Communists against concessions which might support...democratic elements within China..."  

While there was much rumination among diplomats and officials about the extent of allegiance by the Chinese Communists to the Kremlin, Davis noted in one dispatch that Chester Ronning had concluded after much study of the question, his contacts with Communist leaders, and his intimate knowledge of China, that the country would not at present nor in the future make herself a subservient satellite of Russia. "Ronning...points

37 The memo suggested trade by the West with China could be a way to keep the country from falling completely under Russian influence.
out that never once in all the outpourings of friendly feelings towards Russia, has any Communist leader acknowledged Stalin or the Kremlin as a leader of the new China.\(^{38}\)

Despite all the outward professions of friendship for Russia at the time, Davis warned that “we had better not formulate our policies on the bases that there is an indestructible link between Russia and Communist China.”\(^{39}\) He predicted Russia and China might well fall out eventually over Manchuria, as well as other questions. “I think therefore that we should hesitate before we pursue hostile policies toward the Communist government of China, and that these factors should be taken into account in deciding when and if the new regime is to be recognized.”\(^{40}\) He added that the conquest of China by the Communists had become inevitable and recognition was likewise inevitable, adding: “Do not let us delay such recognition to the point where a hostile attitude has been built up against us.”\(^{41}\)

**Canada and Recognition: October, 1949--January, 1950**

By 1949 Chiang had found a precarious refuge on Formosa. On October 1 Mao Tse-tung had declared the establishment of the People’s Republic of China from his lofty rostrum above the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Peking. Some six weeks later, on November 16, 1949, Pearson told the Nanking embassy that the cabinet had approved in principle the recognition of the new Chinese government. Pearson added that the British government would extend recognition to the PRC government before then end of the year.


\(^{39}\) *Ibid.* p. 3.

\(^{40}\) *Ibid.* p. 3.

\(^{41}\) *Ibid.* p. 3.
(it would be done on January 6, 1950, though India recognized on Dec. 30, 1949).

Similar actions were expected shortly thereafter by other governments. Pearson said
Canada’s extension of recognition should not take place, however, before the end of the
current session of the United Nations’ General Assembly, which would occur before New
Year, 1949. The cabinet, while approving the extension of recognition to the PRC
“deferred decision as to when such action might be taken”. ⁴²

Canadian government documents, which outline the events leading from the
period when it became apparent that the Communists would become the masters of China
until the beginning of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, and the intervention by Chinese
“volunteers” in October, indicate that Canadian authorities were optimistic that regular
diplomatic relations would be established—at times it seemed—within weeks, or at the
most months. In the final analysis, however, the Canadian government saw its interests in
China, as secondary to those in the Atlantic area, Europe and North America. The
Atlantic basin was, for Canada, the primary arena for containment of the Soviet Union
and of nurturing its special Anglo-American relationship, especially that with the United
States.

Canada’s position on policy towards Communist China was laid out in a top
secret document by Arnold Heeney, Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, dated
November 4, 1949. It was prepared initially for a meeting of November 16 where the
cabinet of Louis St. Laurent decided to give de jure recognition to the PRC, only six
weeks after its establishment. However, decision was deferred on just when recognition

⁴² Hector Mackenzie, ed. Documents on Canadian External Affairs. Vol 15, 1949. (Ottawa: Department of
Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 1995.) p. 1802.
was to be extended. The Canadian government’s position on recognition of Communist China was essentially that the PRC had fulfilled the conditions for recognition: it had set up a government, which gave every indication of being permanent and in control of the country. Furthermore, it was contended that as long as the Communist government agreed to abide by the norms of international relations it should be recognized. But there was considerable hesitation in the cabinet about just when to recognize. A memorandum by Heeney to Pearson on December 20, 1950 stated that “Canadian interests are not such as to demand precipitate action by us and it would not be wise for us to get too far ahead of public opinion.” Heeney also advised Pearson that “we should not act” on the recognition question before Pearson’s return from the Colombo Conference, which was scheduled for mid-January, 1950. At the same time Heeney warned Pearson that any extensive delay on the recognition question “would probably have an unfavourable effect upon Canadian interests in China.”

The November 4 cabinet memorandum, entitled “Policy Towards Communist China”, was also one of the major Canadian documents at the Colombo Conference. The paper noted that the Central Government of the People’s Republic of China was effectively controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), although other cooperating parties and individuals were represented in the government. It noted the new regime had “invited recognition” from foreign governments “on a basis of equality, friendship, respect for territorial integrity” and withdrawal of recognition from the Nationalist

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43 Canada did not recognize the PRC until 1971.
45 Ibid.
government. The document noted that some pockets of Mainland China were still under Nationalist control but that their morale was reported to be low and that the Communists were expected shortly to “pick off this island”--Formosa--as well. Heeney did not expect China to become a significant military power for many years but cautioned: “China must now be regarded as a potential enemy state and would probably side with Russia in the event of a general war breaking out at this time.”

On the likelihood of the Chinese Communists permitting close integration of China with the Soviet Union, Heeney noted arguments in favour. Alliance with the Soviet Union would offer great moral and some material support for their revolutionary program, military security and bargaining power in dealing with other nations. Secondly, there existed a tradition of close relations between the two communist parties. Thirdly, Mao Tse-tung’s close adherence domestically to an orthodox Marxist-Leninist course as laid out by Stalin, was also likely in foreign affairs. As an example Heeney cited the censure by the CCP of Tito over the Yugoslav leader’s break with Moscow in 1948. At the same time the document noted some “natural points of conflict” between the two Communist powers. “Chinese national interests are presently or potentially threatened by Soviet imperialism.” The Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1945 had given Russia a military and naval base at Dairen and joint control of the former Chinese Eastern Railways. Russian seizure of Manchuria’s industry in 1945-46 wrought great devastation on the territory, which was the first part of China to come under Chinese Communist control. A section of Sinkiang, in the far west, had already come under Soviet control. The Chinese were

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48 Ibid. p. 5.
strongly xenophobic and were presumed to resent Russian encroachments as much as those by other powers. They had fought a long, successful civil war without help from Soviet Russia, and Mao regarded himself as the absolute authority for the CCP. China’s sheer size militated against its control by Russia in the manner of its Eastern European satellites. Heeney noted the Chinese, not the Soviets, were the natural leaders of Communism in East Asia. They needed capital goods for their industrial program, which the Atlantic Pact powers could supply much more readily than the Soviet Union, and might thus open opportunities for exerting some Western influence. Heeney concluded it was impossible for the time being to gauge the degree of the relationship between the two Communist powers.

Recognition of the PRC would gain another seat for the Soviet Bloc among the five-nation permanent members of the UN Security Council, though it could not be judged, however, whether China would be a servile follower of Russia, said Heeney. He added: “...It is thought possible that, because of the strongly ingrained Chinese dislike and suspicion of foreign meddling and in view of the independent growth of the Chinese Communist Party, the degree of influence exercised upon China by Soviet Russia may be in inverse ratio to the extent of direct Soviet interference in Chinese affairs.” The possibility that China might align with the USSR was all the more reason to find ways of engaging the Chinese and wooing them away from the Soviet Union.

Therefore, Heeney suggested, the main strategic aim of Western policy should be to attempt to prevent the Chinese Communists from tipping the scales in other areas of

49 Ibid. p. 4
the Far East in favour of Communism; of imposing “a thorough-going totalitarian Communist system” on China; and, making China a satellite or an effective ally of the Soviet Union.

A major consideration for Heeney in “Policy Towards Communist China” was the potential for conflict between China and the Soviet Union and the importance, therefore, of Western powers remaining in China in order to exert any influence they could to sway China from a one-sided dependence on the Soviets. He shrewdly perceived that the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet relationship could cause it to fall apart. In this assumption he was prophetic as events in the late 1950s showed, when Nikita Khrushchev and Mao fell out. Thus, Heeney perceived the seeds of future conflict in the Soviet Union’s earlier moves in Sinkiang and Manchuria. That the Soviet presence in such Chinese areas was an irritant to Mao is evident from the records of the meetings in December, 1949, and January, 1950, between Mao, Stalin and other Soviet officials. Odd Arne Westad has pointed out that there was much resentment by Mao of the way Stalin had “humiliated” him in Moscow: “Mao loved to talk [in later years] about his ‘humiliation’ at Stalin’s hands in Moscow.”

For Heeney to have divined something of the future problems that would confront the relationship between the two “fraternal” countries, is in retrospect rather amazing.

Turning to the policies of the United Kingdom and the United States, Heeney noted that “the British line in general is to face the fact of Communist control of China and make the best of it.”

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51 “Policy Towards Communist China.” p.6.
soon as it could give evidence it effectively controlled most of the country, on the principle that “recognition is one of fait accompli and does not constitute moral approbation.” The British were inclined to the view that commercial relations with China, other than traffic in materials of strategic value, would not strengthen the country militarily, but would enable the democracies to keep a foot in the door and perhaps prevent the Soviets from becoming too influential. “The British attitude is naturally coloured by the fact that they have extensive vested commercial interests in China and by their desire to keep Hong Kong functioning as a wealthy entrepot.”52 The attitude of the United States on recognition was likely to be much more cautious and to emphasize strategic interests rather than economic ones. Heeney wrote that the US regarded Communist China as “within a hostile camp and therefore a country which should not be assisted.”

Ambassador Davis had castigated the Communists for not picking up on the major signal sent by the Americans in staying in Nanking rather than following the Nationalist government to Canton. “Unfortunately the Communist leadership did not make the most of this gesture...this evident act of friendship [by the US]. Instead the Communists by a series of pinpricks lost a great deal of the respect and friendship of the nations represented by missions in Communist China.”53 While saying that the attitude of the Americans towards Russia and Communism “seems to be verging to the stage of delusions or hallucinations,” a bit more finesse on the part of the Chinese Communist authorities would have gone far to make the diplomatic community better disposed

52 Ibid. p. 6.
towards them. “A more imaginative approach...might have enabled the Communists, by extending just a few more [diplomatic] courtesies, to maintain the fund of goodwill for them, without compromising their policy of non-recognition of consulates and embassies,” Davis commented. “The Communists seem incapable of realizing that...they have brought about unnecessarily by their own actions, this hardening of American opinion....They both seem to have gotten themselves into a vicious cycle, which may have sad consequences.”

The Cold War International History Project [CWIHP] of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, has published a number of Soviet and Chinese state documents, released only in the last decade, which throw new light on the attitudes of the two Communist powers. Particularly illuminating are those concerning a number of conversations between Stalin and Mao, and other officials, during Mao’s two-month visit to Moscow in late 1949 and early 1950. The conversations show that Mao was in no rush to be recognized by either Britain or the US. At their December 16 meeting Stalin commented that rumors should be created that Chinese troops would cross into Burma and Indo-China in order to “frighten the imperialists a bit”. Mao answered that several countries, especially Britain were actively campaigning to recognize the PRC. “However, we believe that we should not rush to be recognized. We must first bring about order to the country, strengthen our position, and then we can talk to foreign imperialists.” On the other hand it appears that Mao was open to improving

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to foreign imperialists." On the other hand it appears that Mao was open to improving trade ties with the West. Recognition, however, was something Mao wanted to put off indefinitely.

While the Sino-Soviet talks were going on, no one in the West had any inkling of their substance, nor would they for a long time afterward. Heeney had asserted in "Policy Towards Communist China" that it seemed worthwhile for Canada to accept the risk of according recognition to the Chinese Communists "before being confronted with the necessity of doing so (since recognition will probably have to be given ultimately)." He argued that such a policy could also, if successful, keep China from total dependence on the Soviets. In view of Mao's attitude on recognizing the US shown in these conversations, it may well be that he saw recognition by Britain and Canada as a way of splitting the Atlantic Alliance.

Canadian interests in China were not seen as extensive and therefore it would be inappropriate for Canada to take the initiative with regard to opening relations with Communist China. Heeney's memorandum recommended that no move towards recognition should be taken before India and the United Kingdom "but we should consider recognizing the Communist government in China shortly after the United

57 Ibid. p. 6.
60 "Policy towards Communist China." p. 11.
restrictions" on exports to China, and added “it would be necessary for Canada to evolve a policy which is not too greatly at variance from that of the United States but which allows as much scope as possible to Canadian enterprise.”

Canadian loans and property interests in China were relatively modest but Ottawa insisted on them being settled. The major one involved the $35 million non-military portion of a 1946 loan to the Chinese government of $60 million, on which China failed to pay the full principal and interest due on Dec. 31, 1949. Another was a $12.75 million loan to the former Ming Sung Co. of China to build a fleet of nine ships for traffic on the Yangtze. The other issues involved welfare of Canadian missionaries, of whom there were some 250 in China in 1949; activities of Canadian commercial concerns in China, such as the Canadian Pacific Steamships; Canadian Pacific Airways and Aluminum Co. Ltd.; Canadian private property rights in China and freedom of travel in the country for Canadians.

In a lengthy statement on foreign policy to the House of Commons on November 16, 1949, the day the cabinet decided to recognize the PRC, Pearson spent considerable effort preparing the public for such a move. He stated that a “small revolutionary party” espousing an alien (to the Chinese) philosophy and looking to the Soviet Union as the author and interpreter of that philosophy, had seized power. He noted that the new regime had invited recognition from foreign governments and asked what the attitude of Canada should be in view of the profound changes, which had occurred. He stated that

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60 Ibid. p. 13
61 M. D. Copithorne. “The Settlement of International Claims between Canada and China: Status Report.” Pacific Affairs. Vol. 48, No. 2. Summer, 1975. At the time Copithorne wrote this article there still was no settlement of these claims.
Canada should be in view of the profound changes, which had occurred. He stated that Canada rejected completely the Marxist-Leninist principles espoused by the Chinese Communists but added “we cannot reject the fact of China and its 450 million people”. He noted that there was a continuing friendship by the people of Canada for the people of China and that Canada had now been asked to recognize the new communist government:

Recognition, of course does not imply or signify moral approval, it is simply an acknowledgment of a state of affairs that exists. If the fact of communist control of China is demonstrated and an independent--I stress the word ‘independent’--Chinese government, able to discharge its international obligations, is established there, which is accepted by the Chinese people, then in due course and after consultation with other friendly governments we will have to recognize the facts which confront us. If we indicate, in the future, recognition of the Chinese government, that will not indicate approval of communism in China any more than our recognition of the communist states in eastern Europe indicated approval.64

The speech was a reflection of Pearson’s concern with the fate of his own policy on China. Pearson also took pains to deal with charges by Opposition members that the government lacked real interest in dealing with Asian problems compared to those of Europe: "I can assure those members who have expressed some concern at our alleged lack of interest in Pacific problems as compared with our absorbing interest in North Atlantic and European problems, that there is on the part of the government no such lack of interest in the Pacific."65 In an apparent reference to accusations the government was bowing to American pressure on the recognition question he assured the House that “no pressure of any kind from any quarter has been brought to bear on the Canadian

65 Ibid. p. 19.
government to recognize or not to recognize the communist government of China." But in fact, says historian John English, the decision by the Americans not to recognize had created strong pressure to maintain a common front against communism. "When the choice was between the United States and China, there was, by late 1949, no room for an independent Asian policy for Canada."  

Whether or not a communist China would be independent or a vassal of the Soviet Union in the way the communist states of eastern Europe were, was a question of high importance to the Western allies. Davis and Ronning along with others in External Affairs, argued strenuously that China would chart its own course. In a report to Ottawa on November 4, 1949, Ronning had reported to Pearson on an interview with Huang Hua, the director of the Foreign Nationals Bureau, which dealt with the various Western embassies in Nanking. Hua’s and Ronning’s relationship went back to the days of the Second World War and the Chungking embassy. After the Communist occupation of Nanking the Canadian charge d'affaires almost invariably in his dispatches reported their conversations, which were unofficial, as "very friendly". On another occasion Ronning had reported that: "[The Communist authorities] have been friendly in all contacts we have had with them and certainly have seen to it that our property and persons have been protected." Ronning stated in his Nov. 4 report that Hua had told him "fear that China would be dominated by Russia was groundless and due to American propaganda. He

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66 Ibid. p. 20.
68 When Canada recognized China in October, 1971, Huang Hua became the PRC’s first ambassador to Canada.
said with vehemence that Chinese Communists had engineered a successful revolution without foreign aid and had no intention of allowing any foreign power, no matter how friendly internationally, to interfere in Chinese internal affairs. They had been and would remain independent.  

Whether this may have been an effort by the Chinese to divide the US and its allies was not a question raised by Ronning. In the same report Ronning, who had always urged fast recognition, contended that Russian influence could be countered, at least to a degree, by recognition of the new government of China and added:  

“Measures can only be initiated after de jure recognition. At present Russians have [the] whole field to themselves. If eventual recognition is inevitable, [the] benefit to be derived there-from will be in inverse proportion of the length of the time we delay.”

Ronning was told on December 31 in a telegram from Pearson that the cabinet had “accepted the principle of Canadian recognition of the new government in Peiping without too great delay. [The] remaining question is one of timing, having regard to United States influences on Canadian public opinion and tactical advantage in having Asian states like India and Burma move first, followed by United Kingdom with its pressing commercial interests in China and Hong Kong.” Pearson said the cabinet’s intention was to re-examine the question of timing after the Colombo conference but wanted action deferred until Parliament re-assembled in late January or early February. He said he “would not object” to Ronning giving it discreetly, to the Chinese, as his personal opinion that Pearson’s statement to the House of Commons on November 16

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71 Ibid. p. 2.
“pointed to recognition,” and that the reason for the delay was probably for consultations with Commonwealth ministers at Colombo and the fact Parliament was currently in recess.\(^\text{73}\)

As Britain prepared to recognize Peking, American hostility was growing, says American historian Xiang Lanxin. On December 30 President Truman approved National Security Council resolution 48/2, which recommended, among other things, continued recognition of the Nationalist government, now based in Taiwan and “non-recognition of the Communists until it was in the US’ interest to do so.”\(^\text{74}\) Xiang asserts that by now Washington was well on the way to a collision course with Communist China. “There is little evidence that the Truman administration had actually considered recognition as a serious alternative to hostility in its efforts to induce a ‘Chinese Tito’.”\(^\text{75}\)

**Canada and Recognition: January-June, 1950**

The implications of the Communist victory in China were laid out in a memorandum prepared by External Affairs for the Colombo Conference of January, 1950. It warned that the whole strategic situation of North Atlantic and Commonwealth countries with interests in the Western Pacific, was compromised by the Communist seizure of power in China. In the event of a war with the Soviet Union, it stated, China was likely to provide bases for Soviet ground and air operations aimed at south- and south-east Asia. New Zealand and Australia would also be threatened. “The use of

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\(^{73}\) *Ibid.*


existing strategic air bases in China by the Soviet Union would extend the Soviet outer
bomber offensive circle, bringing Singapore, the Philippines and most of Indonesia
within range of Soviet planes." The memorandum concluded that the most effective
antidote to the spread of communism throughout south-east Asia "would be the
promotion of economic well-being, social and political justice and stability." 77

Now in charge of the Canadian Embassy in Nanking as a result of the recall of
Davis for consultations in the fall of 1949, Ronning sent a top secret cipher to Ottawa
complaining to external affairs that from inside China it was difficult to understand why
any Western power friendly to the Chinese people would "hesitate to face the facts of
what has happened in this country." 78 He told Ottawa that since the Communist takeover
there were "numerous indications" that China now had an honest administration. He
reported that "the greatest single evil in China--corruption in public affairs" was being
eliminated. Active supporters of the new regime "are legion and the number is
increasing". Black markets were practically eliminated; reconstruction and rehabilitation
were being undertaken and greater attention devoted to education and medicine.

Some foreigners, especially Americans, do not agree with some of these
observations but much American analysis of the situation in China has
been consistently incorrect for several years. Most Americans find it
difficult to view any Chinese problem except in the light of Soviet-
American relations. At present [the] American view is distorted by
magnification of importance of incidents which have been remarkably
few when it is remembered that China is in the midst of a major
revolution. The many Chinese friends of the Western nations, and they
still outnumber the friends of Russia, are using their influence with the
new regime to promote friendly relations. Their mouths will be

77 Ibid. p. 23.
completely stopped if the Western powers fail to recognize the new regime after time for due consideration.\(^79\)

Arthur Menzies, head of the DEA’s American and Far East Division, reported from New Delhi on January 23, 1950, that Pearson had been impressed at the just-completed Colombo Conference by the number and the force of arguments mustered by British Foreign Secretary Bevin, and by representatives of India, Ceylon and Pakistan in urging early recognition of the new government of China. Bevin had told the conference that the US government had understood both the UK’s and India’s position for early recognition, and that the actions taken by Commonwealth governments would make it easier for others to follow in due course and recognize Communist China, “as they must inevitably do”.\(^80\) Nehru had told the conference that he did not know what China’s future policies would be, but argued that the Chinese government “would remain strongly nationalistic, and that eventually the Chinese would go their own way from the Soviet Union.” Menzies concluded that: “If we [Canada] are to get any advantage out of recognition I think we should avoid being the last to do so.”\(^81\)

In the opening months of 1950 the Canadian government’s position continued to vacillate on the timing of recognition, although every indication in the documents was that it would become a reality in the very near future. After the Colombo Conference Lester Pearson told The Statesman of India, which reported his remarks on January 23, 1950, that a decision on recognizing China would be taken on his return to Ottawa. He

\(^79\) Ibid.
\(^81\) Ibid.
added that: "It would not be determined by views held in Washington." In a statement to the House of Commons on March 7, 1950, Lester Pearson enunciated four general conditions for establishment of relations with other countries: 1) The effectiveness of the authority of the government concerned; 2) Independence of the government concerned, which, he said, is not always easy to determine in the case of countries like China; 3) Ability and willingness of the government concerned to carry out its international obligations, a condition that he said cannot always be applied too rigorously and too exactly; 4) Acceptability of the new government by the people over whom it exercises authority. Pearson pointed out that 15 members of the UN General Assembly's 54 members had recognized China; that five of the 11 members of the Security Council had done so; that of the 12 members of the Atomic Energy Commission, five had recognized the Communist government, as had at a number of members of other UN agencies, including 17 in the International Labour Office and 16 in the Agricultural Organization. "The fact is that in some of these agencies we are approaching a position where a majority of the members concerned may be representatives of governments which have recognized the new government of communist China." If that were to occur, Pearson said, the non-recognizing states would find themselves in an awkward position, and asked:

If we find ourselves in the minority, should we walk out? Of course that would be absurd; but if we do not walk out and we do not recognize communist China, then the alternative is to remain there and work with

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84 Ibid. p. 2.
delegations from communist China, and by so doing give them a form of recognition. All this shows how complicated and difficult the problem is.”

In a memorandum to Pearson on March 30, 1950, Reid pointed out that the situation created in the United Nations by the failure to seat the real rulers of China was “unsatisfactory and potentially dangerous.” He said it seemed clear that the only action the Canadian government could take to create a more normal state of affairs within the United Nations, which the Soviet Union had boycotted for months, was to announce its recognition of the PRC government “in the hope that such action would be followed by other governments” and would result before many weeks in a change of Chinese representation in the UN. “Sooner or later the Canadian government will recognize the new regime in Peking. The present situation in the UN argues strongly, I would urge, for recognition sooner rather than later.”

There was strong opposition inside the Canadian cabinet to taking the final step of recognizing the Communist government in Peking. As Beecroft has pointed out, powerful cabinet ministers such as C. D. Howe, the influential minister of trade and commerce, feared relations, especially economic relations with the United States would suffer. James Gardiner, minister of agriculture, and one of the senior members of the government, argued that difficulties would arise for the government in both Parliament and the country at large if recognition went ahead. Finance Minister D. C. Abbott insisted that action should be taken to minimize Canadian government losses on the loans

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85 Ibid. p.2.
87 Ibid. p.4.
to the Nationalists before it moved to recognition. Beecroft has also pointed out that an important consideration for Quebec MPs and for the government at large, was Quebec Premier Maurice Duplessis, who criticized what he saw as Ottawa’s laxness in dealing with the communist threat to the Christian world. In Washington, Ambassador Wrong warned that the American climate had changed from October, 1949, and that by the spring of 1950, the attitude towards China had hardened. “Wrong warned that Canada would have to expect an adverse reaction from both Congress and the American press were it to accord recognition.... Given the limited nature of Canadian interests in China, cabinet preferred not to risk antagonizing the United States at that time, even if the risk was small.”

In Ottawa, the government worried that the Canadian public, brought up on the exhortations of Christian missionaries, the novels of writers like Pearl S. Buck, and the pro-Nationalist stances of the widely circulated American media, in particular Henry Luce’s *Time* and *Life* magazines, would not tolerate recognition of the Communist regime. John English has noted that in the early part of the 20th Century the prominent Canadian Methodist Newton Wesley Rowell pointed to China as the church’s greatest missionary challenge. According to Rowell, China, representing one-quarter of mankind, must be Christianized to save their souls and to ensure world peace. By Rowell’s calculation Canadian Christians had responsibility for the conversion of about 40 million Chinese.

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following that in the United States, was a force to be reckoned with. Partly it reflected concern about the seemingly unstoppable advance of Communism in Europe, Asia and elsewhere. A poll by the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion released in August, 1950, showed that 75 per cent of the sample supported the American decision to go to war in Korea, while only 12 per cent disapproved. As Canadian officials edged forward on the recognition question after the decision of the cabinet on November 16, 1949, that recognition should proceed at an early but unspecified date, public opinion on the issue was strong and could not be ignored. Heeney had written to Pearson on Dec. 20, 1949, that: “We cannot disregard the effect of the reporting of United States news agencies and of [American] radio upon Canadian public opinion.”

Canadian ambassador in Washington Hume Wrong, lamented in one dispatch that the American media, particularly the publications of Hearst, McCormick [the powerful Chicago Tribune group] and Scripps-Howard along with the Luce publications, Time and Life magazines, “are apparently dedicated to seeing that the public is not disabused” of its paranoia about Communism’s world-wide machinations.

While warning about not getting too far ahead of the Canadian public on the issue, Heeney also threw a nervous glance over his shoulder at the United States and its attitudes. “Certainly United States public opinion is not yet ready to accept the idea of recognition of the Chinese Communist regime and the United States government is

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treading very warily in the matter. We cannot disregard the effect of the reporting of United States news agencies and the radio upon Canadian public opinion." Reporting from Washington to the DEA, Wrong said Republican leaders in the US Congress had excluded the China issue from the usual bi-partisan approach to foreign policy and felt free strongly to castigate the government. Part of the Republicans’ successful political strategy against the Democratic administration of President Truman, said Wrong, had been their ability to create the perception that the administration’s failure to give required military aid to Chiang Kai-shek resulted in the fact that the Democrats “lost China”, and in “creating a public feeling of uneasiness that something has been going wrong ever since Yalta.” On the question of recognizing the PRC, Wrong said: “Public opinion is not educated to the concept of recognition as something wholly distinct from approval.” Wrong added that a recent Gallop poll across the United States showed the public opposed to recognition by a margin of two-to-one. “That the Republicans are taking full advantage of the situation is evident, and it can be assumed that they will attempt to create as much embarrassment as possible for the administration when Congress reconvenes.”

No government could afford to ignore public perceptions, though officials themselves were all too aware of the short-comings and incompetence of the Nationalists. On the same day as Heeney warned of the power of public opinion, the powerful and influential US Republican Senator from California, William F. Knowland, in chilling

96 Despatch No. 3050. Wrong to Pearson.
97 Ibid. p. 1
98 Ibid. p. 2.
tones, warned Great Britain to reconsider its intentions to recognize the Chinese Communist government. Abandoning a prepared speech Knowland thundered to a luncheon of the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco that he believed it would be difficult to make Americans understand why they should be sending aid to European countries when such countries were dealing with the Chinese Communists. "The [US] government should make clear that recognition [of the Chinese Communists] is not in the interest of peace. If that was done [Britain] might hesitate to do it."\textsuperscript{99} Knowland bitterly denounced the Truman administration's policy on China. He declared that recognition of the communist regime would be a greater mistake than the Munich Pact with Hitler in 1938. "We are far weaker in the Pacific today, ninety days after the Soviet atomic development and the Chinese debacle, than we were on the eve of the Pearl Harbour attack."\textsuperscript{100}

For Prime Minister St. Laurent the preservation of close US ties was the primary policy objective, says historian Steven Hugh Lee. "...where Anglo-Canadian strategic concepts conflicted with American policy, he was wary about causing any tensions within the Canadian-American relationship."\textsuperscript{101} Lee has noted that while the officials of Canada's External Affairs Department supported Britain's more conciliatory attitude towards the PRC, the cautious Prime Minster St. Laurent was opposed to anything that might offend the US. "External's hopes were weakened by the prime minister's fear of

\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{101} Lee. \textit{Outposts of Empire.} p. 61.
hurting the Canadian-American special relationship over a region in which Canada had few direct interests.”\textsuperscript{102}

In Nanking Ronning had continued his drumbeat urging recognition, warning that China was “falling into the embrace of Russia” more rapidly than he had anticipated.\textsuperscript{103} “The failure of Western nations to recognize the power of the revolution and the strength of the new regime and failure to grant recognition to [the] new government as soon as it was formed, coupled with the withdrawal of American representatives from China and continued direct support of Chiang Kai-shek’s blockade and air raids, have played into the hands of Russia and created a situation which will take years to rectify. The picture might have been quite different if recognition by Western powers had taken place prior to Mao’s departure for Moscow [in early December, 1949].”\textsuperscript{104}

For Ottawa a major concern on the recognition question was the foot dragging of the Chinese in their negotiations with Britain and India, which had made little progress in the four months between early January and May, 1950, on establishment of full diplomatic relations. Escort Reid told Menzies on March 20, 1950: “...What is perhaps the more important reason for the delay [in recognizing the People’s Republic of China] is the difficulties which the United Kingdom and the Indians...have got into at Peiping, and which appear to be continuing. We would certainly not recognize until these difficulties are cleared up.”\textsuperscript{105} Reid stated in his memo that “it would seem best if five or

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.} p. 69.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{105} Confidential “Memorandum for Mr. Menzies”: March 20, 1950. Escott Reid to Arthur Menzies. \textit{File 50055-B-40. Vol. 5.}
six governments recognized at the same time," presumably to create more momentum for recognition, though Reid did not explain in what way he considered a mass recognition would be helpful. The Canadian government was reluctant to expose itself to the same difficulties as the British and the Indians faced and instructed Ronning to seek assurances that there would be no undue delays from the Chinese side once Canada entered into negotiations. Ronning reported a favourable response from the Chinese after informal soundings he made in Nanking and suggested he go to Peking for preliminary discussions. These discussions, he said, might from the Canadian point of view include both procedural matters in connection with the establishment of relations, and certain other matters of particular interest to the Canadian government, such as reciprocal treatment of citizens, commercial modus vivendi and acceptance [by the Chinese] of responsibility for the non-military portion of the Sino-Canadian loan of 1945—amounting to about $35 million.

A memorandum dated May 29, 1950, prepared for Pearson by Heeney, stated that Ronning’s discussions showed Peking would welcome a Canadian representative to Peking if the Canadian government would “formally indicate its desire to recognize”. Ronning surmised it would be considered a sufficiently “formal indication” if he were authorized by the Canadian government to state orally on its behalf that “it desired to recognize the Peking government and was willing to send him to Peking for preliminary negotiations.” Heeney’s memorandum stated that Ottawa was now faced with the

106 Ibid.
109 Ibid. p. 2.
alternatives of sending Ronning to Peking to begin negotiations “or of taking no further action and playing for time”. He recommended that Ronning be authorized to state orally to the Peking authorities that the Canadian government was prepared to announce recognition of the central government of the People’s Republic of China, when agreement had been reached on the exchange of diplomatic missions.

Heeney said that in recognizing the Peking government soon, Canada would be doing its part to resolve “the dangerous deadlock existing in the United Nations over the question of Chinese representation, and added: “Independent action now by Canada would counter Chinese Communist propaganda that Canada is a satellite of the United States.” He warned that if Ottawa failed to follow up its opening moves the Communists would probably conclude that it was trying to play “cat and mouse with them”, which could well be injurious to the general welfare of Canadians in China as well as that of Canada’s official representatives. Withholding recognition until full agreement had been reached on the exchange of diplomatic missions, would avoid the embarrassment Britain had gotten into, he felt. No useful purpose, he said, would be achieved by insisting on prior discussion of various substantive questions, such as the Ming Sung loans, since Ronning’s opinion was that Peking would not agree to deal with those matters before establishment of full relations. Heeney recommended the cabinet authorize Ronning to state orally to the Peking authorities that the Canadian government was prepared to announce recognition of the PRC government when agreement had been

110 Ibid. p. 3.
reached on establishment of diplomatic relations and that Ottawa was willing to send Ronning to Peking for preliminary negotiations.

That would have seemed to put the matter on a pretty firm foundation, but another memorandum to Pearson on June 23, 1950, showed Ottawa was still not prepared to take the final step. The government wanted time to study any reply by Peking on the preliminary negotiations, and according to Heeney, Ronning would then be authorized to go to Peking but would be informed that “we [Ottawa] are not disposed to hurry matters in reaching an agreement”\textsuperscript{111} and that no agreement was to be concluded without specific authority from Ottawa. This was presumably to demonstrate to Peking that there were no particular pressures on Ottawa to move hastily on the recognition question.

The Chinese had replied to the initial move from the Canadian government in an unofficial written statement from the Foreign Nationals Bureau that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would welcome the Canadian government’s representative to Peking to discuss procedural matters for establishing diplomatic relations if the Canadian government would “formally indicate” its desire to recognize the government of the PRC. Ronning has written that it was urgent Canada take this formal action since Ottawa had taken the initiative.\textsuperscript{112} Ronning later wrote that Ottawa interpreted Peking’s reply as a failure to fully accept Canada’s proposals. “I was gradually coming to the conclusion that the time had arrived to decide whether to keep step with the United Kingdom, India and Pakistan, or with the United States. Continued indefinite postponement meant, in effect,

\textsuperscript{111} Heeney to Pearson, June 23, 1950. DEW File 50055-B-40. Vol 6.
\textsuperscript{112} Ronning. \textit{A Memoir of China in Revolution}. p. 178.
keeping step with the United States.... As time went on, Canada’s hesitation was due more to American influence than any other single factor.\footnote{Ibid. p. 178. While the Americans had by late March, 1950, essentially abandoned any notions of dealing with the PRC, historian James Chace has written that Dean Acheson, as late as March 29, 1950, testified in an executive (secret) session of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated: “If the devil himself runs China, if he is an independent devil, that is infinitely better than if he is a stooge of Moscow, or China comes under Russia.” James Chace. Acheson: The Secretary of State who Created the American World. (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1998.) p. 224.}

\section*{War Breaks out in Korea}

But outside events now imposed their own timetable. On June 25, 1950, Communist North Korea attacked across the 38th Parallel, the border with South Korea, and an entirely new situation arose. External Affairs sent a message to Ronning indicating that in view of the circumstances it would not be appropriate to open negotiations on recognition and Ronning cancelled the lease on the house in Peking he had rented in anticipation of moving there from Nanking.\footnote{Heeney to Pearson, Memorandum July 4, 1950. File 50055-B-40. Vol. 6. pp. 2-3.} Heeney suggested on July 4, 1950, it might be desirable to delay a decision on recognition of China until “the immediate crisis in Korea is over”, and Communist China’s attitude to the Korean action could be established.\footnote{“Canada and the Far East.” Address by Pearson to the Canadian Club, Victoria, B.C., Aug. 21, 1950. Pearson Papers June, 1950-Jan., 1951. MG26.. N 9. Vol. 3. p. 1.}

Indeed it became clear in Ottawa that recognition of China would no longer be possible as long as the Korean War continued. Lester B. Pearson told a meeting of the Canadian Club in Victoria, BC, in August, 1950, that the war was part of the machinations of “the dark aggressor from the East [the Soviet Union]”.\footnote{Ibid. p. 179.} The Soviet Union’s methods in Korea, Pearson said, was “open and armed attack”, in contrast to the
stealthier methods it was using in Europe. “When the North Korean army made its
cynical and aggressive attack on the Republic of Korea, it reflected the determination of
Soviet imperialism, using international communism as its spearhead, to extend its sway
over Asia and ultimately over the world.”

Until the Chinese intervention in Korea in late October there seemed still a
possibility of recognition. At a meeting on September 19, 1950 of the heads of
Commonwealth delegations in New York preparing for the opening of the 1950 session
of the UN General Assembly, Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin, head of the British
deployment, stated that his government believed the Chinese Communist government
should be seated in China’s seat in the United Nations. The official summary of the
discussion quoted Bevin as saying his government “believed that it was most unwise to
prolong the situation in which China was cut off from the rest of the world and forced
more and more into the arms of the Russians” and that the “Central People’s Government
[should] be admitted at once to the General Assembly.” The Canadian position on the
question, apparently falling somewhere between that of Britain and the US, was
encapsulated by Pearson who stated that he would not vote for the seating of the Chinese
Nationalist delegation, but that he was “not sure, however, that he would vote in favour of
seating the Chinese Communists.” Once this equivocal Canadian position had been
made public by R. G. Riddell, chairman of the Canadian delegation to the UN, there was
quick reaction from the United States. John Hickerson, the Assistant Secretary of State

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117 Ibid. p. 3.
118 “Records of Heads of Commonwealth Delegations at the United Nations Delegation Offices in New
119 Ibid. p. 3.
for United Nations Affairs of the United States, met with Riddell on November 21 and asked if Canada was changing its mind "in the direction of accepting representatives of Peking" in the United Nations. "Hickerson seemed surprised that acceptance of Peking should even be contemplated after their intervention in Korea," Riddell informed Ottawa.¹²⁰

Pearson only reluctantly supported pursuit of the North Koreans across the 38th Parallel, the border between North and South Korea, after MacArthur's victory at Inchon.¹²¹ His position was that if the Americans insisted on pursuit, the North Koreans should be at least be given a few days grace to cease fire and begin negotiating an armistice.¹²² Failing that, said Pearson, a halt should be made between the 39th and 40th Parallels at the narrow neck of the peninsula, so as not to provoke an invasion by the Chinese. He later recalled that the Americans agreed but to his "amazement and disgust,"¹²³ at a meeting the next day they asked support at a UN Assembly meeting, for immediate pursuit and destruction of North Korean forces beyond the 38th Parallel following their eviction from South Korea.¹²⁴ The previous day at the Assembly, Pearson had outlined the Canadian position in which he had called on the "aggressors to cease fire, to admit defeat".¹²⁵ Pearson continued in his Assembly address: "If they do, it may not be necessary for United Nations forces in Korean territory to advance far beyond their present position. The United Nations forces must, however, leave its forces free to

¹²⁰ Riddell to Pearson, Cypher No. 447, Nov. 21, 1950. DEA File 5475-EJ-40.
¹²² Ibid. p. 160.
¹²³ Ibid. p. 160.
¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 160.
¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 158.
do whatever is practicable to make certain that the communist aggressors of North Korea are not permitted to re-establish some new base in the peninsula from which they could sally forth again..."126 Denis Stairs has called the speech, in effect, "an ultimatum to the Communist forces in the North either to admit total defeat...or suffer a military disaster [by].....the United Nations army."127

While Pearson's speech sounded bellicose--Denis Stairs has called it "the contradictory Mr. Pearson's 28 September program"128--his aggressive attitude was short-lived and he worked hard during the fall of 1950 to sway the Americans from the pursuit of the North Koreans across the 38th Parallel, or failing that, to stop any advance far south of the Yalu. Pearson immediately began to de-emphasize the objective of a unified Korea and to try to reassure the Chinese of the need to keep the war localized, and that nothing should be done in establishing of a unified and free Korea, which would menace its neighbors in the slightest.129 He saw Korea as very much a secondary front in the world-wide conflict with the Soviet Union and certainly too unimportant over which to provoke a war with China. "The main front is Western Europe and we must resist efforts by the Soviet Union to get us committed to a theater of secondary importance," he instructed ambassadors in an outline of Canadian policy.130 Pearson, who initially had gone along with the advance into North Korea, advocated utmost restraint in view of Chinese reaction and the danger of them entering the war. "The

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126 Denis Stairs. *The Diplomacy of Constraint: Canada, the Korean War, and the United States.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) p. 120
127 Ibid. p. 121.
128 Ibid. p. 130.
129 Ibid. p. 128.
Canadian government now realized what it had half-suspected from the beginning—that the attempt [by UN forces] to unify Korea by force of arms was incompatible with Peking’s view of the requirements of Chinese security.”

In late September, after issuing several warnings to not send UN troops north of the 38th Parallel, China attacked UN forces, who had invaded North Korea in pursuit of Communist troops. Chou En-lai had warned the American government that China, fearing for the safety of power stations on the Yalu River on which industries in China were dependent, would react if UN forces invaded.

Ronning, who was in Nanking at the time, later told writer Peter Stursberg: “I was convinced as a result of previous conversations with Chou En-lai that the Chinese were sending their forces up to Yalu River to defend the power stations, because the power stations were the only power available to North China for industrial purposes and that the Chinese were gathering to protect the power stations from [US] forces...and when General MacArthur came to the area close to the Yalu River the Chinese stormed across. I had warned Ottawa that there was no doubt about the intentions of the Chinese to prevent the UN forces...taking the power stations on the Yalu River.”

By year’s end Hume Wrong, the Canadian Ambassador in Washington reported that Hickerson had told him it was impossible for the United States to agree to admission of Communist China to the United Nations: “He said he believed that if they came into the United Nations in the near future the United States would go out.”

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132 Tape recorded interview of Chester Ronning by Peter Stursberg, Sept. 6, 1978, National Archives, Ottawa.
For the next two months there was little to do at the Canadian embassy in Nanking except to close it down. Ronning and his staff were harassed by the police and frequently cross-examined. They had been told since April 23, 1949, when the Communist forces occupied Nanking that they were no more than ordinary foreigners with no special or diplomatic status. On the day of departure the Chinese authorities spent nine hours searching luggage for contraband, a process repeated in Canton. On March 7, 1951, Ronning reported to Ottawa that he had reached safety in Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{134}

\textbf{Conclusion}

The Korean War brought to a halt any immediate thoughts the St. Laurent government might have had of recognizing the PRC and of severing relations with the Nationalists, whose apparently imminent execution had been postponed by the insertion of the US Seventh Fleet in 1950 between it and the Chinese Communist forces on the Mainland.\textsuperscript{135}

Why did recognition take so long, when most saw the absurdity of asserting that those governing the 20 million souls on Taiwan, rather than the 500 million on the Mainland, were the real government of China? The case for recognition of a Communist China by Canada had been consistently and tirelessly advocated by Ambassador Davis, from the beginning of 1949, and even earlier, when it became clear the Communists would win the civil war. When Davis was recalled to Ottawa for consultations in the late summer of 1949, Ronning, who became acting head of the embassy, continued his efforts.

\textsuperscript{134} Cypher No. 7, March 7, 1951. DEA to Canadian High Commissioner in New Delhi. DEA File 50055-B-40. Vol. 6.
\textsuperscript{135} Canada would not recognize the PRC until October, 1971, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau grasped the nettle.
advocacy for recognition, the earlier the better, which he saw along with Davis as a
historic opportunity to win China away from what they considered the malign influence
of the Soviet Union in its rivalry with the Western allies. The powerful advocacy of
Davis and Ronning, based on their observations at ground zero so to speak, was a strong
influence on Pearson and senior officials in external affairs, such as Escott Reid, Arnold
Heeney and others, as material in the external affairs and the Pearson archives make clear.
Pearson, as is shown in the archives and in his public statements of the time, was a strong
advocate of recognition despite the opposition in the cabinet and St. Laurent’s fear of
alienating the US.

One of the problems facing the Canadian government was its fear that US rancor
could also be turned on Canada if it went ahead and recognized Peking. It might have
been feasible to do so if Pearson could have mustered the support of the cabinet in
December, 1949, when India recognized, or even in January when Britain did. This essay
shows that despite Pearson’s tireless advocacy of recognition, supported by the reports of
Ronning and Davis, who were sympathetic to the social goals of the Chinese communists.

Pearson was not a particular admirer of the Communist government of China, on the
contrary, but he perceived that in the confrontation with the Soviet Union there was more
to be gained by engaging China than by shutting it out of participation in the councils of
the world. There was also his abiding sense of the illogicality of refusing to deal with a
country as large and populous as the PRC. He did not see communism as necessarily
monolithic and to his mind talking to China was the way to hopefully influence it away
from the Soviet Union.
A brief window of opportunity existed from the end of 1949 to the first part of 1950, in which Canada could have recognized China without provoking the US. That window may have been closed even before the surprise attack by North Korea across the 38th Parallel. By the middle of 1950 and the start of the Korean War any Canadian recognition of Peking would have courted the disfavour of the United States. It was a risk the government was unwilling to take and the time when action could have been possible with minimal political risk passed by soon after the beginning of 1950. As Beecroft has pointed out the legal, political and strategic considerations became vastly more complicated by the war.\textsuperscript{136} Yet, Pearson continued to raise the question of recognition of Peking, as a practical matter, even while the Korean War was going on. In a speech in Vancouver in May, 1953, after a review of the Korean situation he stated: “If these political questions in regard to Korea can be satisfactorily solved—and that is a big ‘if’—then other Far Eastern questions can be considered. One of these of course---there is no use trying to deceive ourselves---is recognition of the Communist government in Peking.”\textsuperscript{137}

Britain’s action in recognizing China, while it did not please the US, drew little reaction, because of its early timing before US hostility to China had fully developed. Britain also had a long history of engagement in China and had major economic and political interests there as well as in much of the rest of Asia. The Netherlands, which recognized the Communist government in March, as well as Norway and Denmark, all

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid. p. 54.
three NATO partners with the United States, who established relations with China about the same time, without being singed by any serious reaction from the United States.

Canada was under no particular pressure before the Korean War broke out to take immediate action on the recognition question. While the government saw that recognition in due course was both desirable and inevitable, the ministers were prepared to wait until they felt the time was right. Canada had little trade or economic interests for the time being that required nurturing. And it had little in the way of emotional ties requiring hasty actions. Neither in the government nor among the public was there any real demand for action.

Canada differed from Europe in another respect. Unlike European countries Canada was bound to the United States geographically, economically and emotionally in a way none of them was. Maintaining those ties was a major concern of the government. Trade Minister Howe and other powerful ministers, opposed any actions to impair them. Cabinet division on the recognition question soon became moot, however. The opportunity for early recognition of the PRC probably perished in the crash of invasion by North Korea across the 38th Parallel and was certainly killed by the subsequent involvement of China in the war.

Ultimately the advice of Davis and Ronning to Ottawa did not persuade the government to grant recognition. Despite having helped convince External Affairs Minister Pearson and senior officials in the DEA on the question, the government had other interests against which the desirability of recognizing China had to be balanced. Davis' and Ronning's advice did not carry the day because in the scheme of things North
Atlantic affairs, concerns about the allies keeping a united front against the perceived threat of the Soviet Union, and of maintaining the "special relationship" with the United States, weighed more heavily in cabinet consideration. From one point of view one may say that Davis and Ronning succeeded at their jobs, because they persuaded their minister and the department to their views. It was someone else's job to persuade the government.
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