

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

ANGELA ROMANO

Department of History and Civilization, EUI – Italy
Email: angela.romano@eui.eu

Abstract

This article focuses on France's policy towards Socialist China in the decade preceding the spectacular and well-studied decision by President Charles de Gaulle to officially recognise the People's Republic, and argues that since the mid-1950s successive French governments discreetly orchestrated a process of rapprochement with the communist authorities in Beijing. The article demonstrates that, at the time when the international juncture discouraged steps towards official relations, the French government used commercial diplomacy as a means to open unofficial diplomatic channels with the Chinese and prepare the ground for future recognition. Relying mostly on French archival sources, this article brings evidence of the evolution of French diplomacy's thinking about Socialist China and assesses the rationales behind the French government's growing determination to normalise relations with it. It is argued that the intensifying contest among European countries to reach out to Beijing, concerns about the PRC's appeal on developing countries, and an early appraisal of the Sino-Soviet rivalry prompted French authorities to work for the Sino-French rapprochement, while at the same time annoyance at the White House's obstinate refusal to revise its reading of the Cold War dynamics weakened French disposition to fall into line with U.S. demands for maintaining a harsh stance on the PRC.

Introduction

Most historiography on the subject of France's recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) deals with two main periods: the years of neglect (1949-1954), when new-born Socialist China was not only a Cold War enemy but also a major antagonist to France in Indochina¹, and the years of General Charles de Gaulle's spectacular move to establish official relations (1962-64). The latter has received the lion's share of historians' attention, with several works focusing primarily on

¹ Hao Yufan and Zhao Zhihai (1990). 'China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited', *China Quarterly*, no. 121, pp. 94–115; Jian Chen (1994). *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation*, Columbia University Press, New York; Shu Guang Zhang (1995). *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence; Grosser, P. (2003). 'La guerre d'Indochine et les relations entre la France – RPC (1950-1954)', in Césari, L. and Varaschin, D. (eds.), *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents*, Artois Presses Université, Arras.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

de Gaulle's strategic vision and interpretation of international relations and the Cold War, and on the role he claimed for France in the world. Occasionally, authors go back to de Gaulle's arrival to power in 1958 to detect his approach to the Chinese question and find hints of his future action.²

By contrast, the period 1954-1962 is largely untreated.³ Moreover, most scholars have focused on the political and strategic aspects of France's Chinese policy, overlooking the economic and trade component, the role of French industrialists, and their relationship with diplomacy in the development of relations with the PRC. In his article on the reasons, timing, and tactics of de Gaulle's opening to China, Garret Martin concedes that the General was not alone in the matter: '[a]lthough the President was the driving force behind France's policy toward China, the influence of other actors in fostering the Sino-French rapprochement is also crucial to understand'.⁴ Martin claims that his article 'demonstrates that economic contacts between Chinese officials and French businessmen proved a useful forum for contacts between the two states'.⁵ Yet he devotes only one page to economic relations, he limits his focus to the period 1962-63, and reports but some

² Vaïsse, M. (1998). *La grandeur: Politique étrangère du Général de Gaulle 1958-1969*, Fayard, Paris, pp. 515-520; Suri, J. (2003). *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, especially ch. 3; Thi Minh-Hoang Ngo (1998). 'De Gaulle et l'unité de la Chine', *Revue d'histoire diplomatique*, vol. 112, no. 4, pp. 391-412; Martin, G. (2008). 'Playing the China Card? Revisiting France's Recognition of Communist China, 1963-1964', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 52-80; Zhai Qiang (2010). 'Seeking a Multipolar World: China and de Gaulle's France', in Nuenlist, C., Locher, A. and Martin, G. (eds.). *Globalizing de Gaulle: International perspectives on French foreign policies 1958-1969*, Lexington Books, Lanham, pp. 181-202; Krouck, B. (2012). *De Gaulle et la Chine: La politique française à l'égard de la République Populaire de Chine (1958-1969)*, Les Indes savantes, Paris.

³ There are brief references to the relations between the two countries in the years 1955-1960 in Zhai Qiang, 'Seeking a Multipolar World'.

⁴ Martin, 'Playing the China Card?', p. 53.

⁵ Ibid.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

initiatives from the Chinese side.⁶ We learn nothing about the role of French businessmen or the influence that these contacts had either on the development of relations between the two countries or on the formulation of French foreign policy.

This question is partially treated by historian Laurence Badel in her book *Diplomatie et Grands Contrats*. The book deals mostly with France's relations with the Soviet bloc, but devotes about twenty pages (4,4% of the book) to Sino-French trade relations before recognition.⁷ Badel's analysis, though incidental and brief, is rich in detail, and offers a precise argument. French diplomacy, she claims, remained behind the scene until the establishment of official diplomatic relations, and limited its task to monitoring entrepreneurs' activities in the commercial field. Also in this case, however, the author focuses just on the early 1960s.

To date, Thierry Robin's *Le coq face au dragon* represents the historiographical exception on the subject, both in terms of time scope and approach.⁸ Using a variety of sources from public and private archives, Robin draws a thorough picture of Sino-French trade and economic cooperation from 1944 to 1964. He also scrutinises the French government's action towards national entrepreneurs engaged in business with China. He claims that successive governments in France did encourage and promote the initiatives of individuals in the commercial sector, but, at the same time, prohibited and prevented them in order to closely contain Sino-French trade within the limits of the U.S.-led policy of embargo and hostility towards Socialist China.⁹ Robin argues that there is great continuity in France's Chinese policy, which, though not devoid of a certain amount of economic and commercial opportunism, was basically characterized by a 'strong degree of alignment [...] on

⁶ Martin, 'Playing the China Card?', p. 57.

⁷ Badel, L. (2010). *Diplomatie et grands contrats. L'État français et les marchés extérieurs au XX^e siècle*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, pp. 295–99 and 305–19.

⁸ Robin, T. (2013). *Le Coq face au Dragon, 1944-1964. Deux décennies de relations économiques franco-chinoises*, Droz, Geneva.

⁹ Robin, *Le Coq face au Dragon*, p. 556. Translation from French by the author of this article.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

the policy of the United States'¹⁰ and guided primarily by the concern to 'not upset the American ally'.¹¹ Robin considers French opposition to the maintenance of a strict embargo as the mere display of vain ambitions to dispute U.S. intransigence and assert French political autonomy. Any change of policy, he concludes, would depend on external political factors, while it would be hard to claim that the political decision of recognising the PRC has been a consequence of progress in economic relations. Robin admits that, in promoting economic relations with mainland China, the French leaders hoped that such contacts would allow to achieve the dual objective of serving the economic and commercial interest of the country and create the conditions that would, at the right time, lead to political recognition and diplomatic relations. However, he does not believe that this convergence did take place.¹²

Although agreeing that the concern to maintain Atlantic solidarity has been a constant feature of French policy for a long time, this article will demonstrate that the French government increasingly showed more than vain ambitions to autonomy from the U.S. guidelines. While postponing political and diplomatic recognition, the French administration took concrete steps to clearly show a new and more forthcoming approach to communist authorities in Beijing, acting at both bilateral and international level. Relying mostly on French archival documents, this article argues that de Gaulle's spectacular decision to recognise the PRC was preceded by a decade-long process of rapprochement with Socialist China, in which the French government, and particularly the French Foreign Ministry, played the role of director behind the scenes.

The argument unfolds in four steps. First, the article shows that in the mid-1950s the French government understood that economic exchanges (as well as cultural ones, which are not discussed here) had the potential to facilitate a gradual normalisation of relations with Socialist China. At

¹⁰ Robin, *Le Coq face au Dragon*, p. 561.

¹¹ Robin, *Le Coq face au Dragon*, p. 554.

¹² Robin, *Le Coq face au Dragon*, pp. 559–560.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

first, French businessmen and MPs pro-active in pursuing contacts with the PRC were key players in stimulating a gradual change of France's China policy. The government also grew concerned about the emerging competition at European level to reach out to Beijing, and moved from a mere policy of control on private activities to discreet support of entrepreneurs' contacts with the Chinese. In other words, the Quai d'Orsay took up commercial diplomacy, which was born in the private sector milieu, as a means to prepare the ground for the political recognition of Mao's regime in the long run. The second section of the article focuses on the 1956 French economic mission to China led by Senator Emile Rochereau in order to analyse the relationship between the actions of private economic actors and French diplomacy and show the latter's high degree of commitment and involvement. The preparation and unfolding of the Rochereau Mission also allows delving into the development of contacts between French and Chinese diplomats through unofficial channels. In the third section, the focus shifts to the international level, and specifically to transatlantic discussions about Western embargo towards the PRC. This part demonstrates France's determination and action to bring the embargo to an end, as well as a quite significant change of mind occurring in French political and diplomatic milieus as for the reading of the international and Asian situations. Although still keen to maintain Western solidarity, the French government did not hesitate to take a pro-active stance to demolish the discriminatory trade rules specifically designed for Socialist China – which the U.S. administration vehemently insisted to maintain – and proved indifferent to U.S. pressure and veiled threats. The last section follows the development of Sino-French contacts up to the early 1960s, starting with the organisation and unfolding of the second Rochereau Mission, in the light of the increasing competition among European allies and amidst international crises such as Berlin, Cuba, and Algeria. It shows a more conspicuous engagement of the French government behind the scenes and a growing determination to normalise relations with the PRC. The analysis of the French government's considerations about the international scenario at the turn of the decade allows to assess the weight of economic interests and to reveal powerful

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

political rationales for recognising Socialist China before the actual and spectacular move by President de Gaulle.

From control to discreet support: the French government and early private initiatives

In the early 1950s France was entangled in both decolonisation conflicts and Cold War tensions: It was engaged in Indochina, a loyal Western ally in the Korean War, and a founding member of Cocom, the committee that decided embargo on strategic products to the Soviet bloc. On 28 July 1952, France agreed with the United States, Canada, Japan, and Britain to establish a China Committee in Paris, i.e. Chincom, which would adopt even more stringent special procedures for trade with the PRC.¹³ In this context, the French government envisaged no diplomatic initiative with regard to Socialist China, although the recognition of Mao's regime had been admitted in principle in 1949.

Nonetheless, private business initiatives were neither banned nor impossible. In particular, French industrialists who were close to communist milieus were particularly active, and could count on international channels to get in touch with the Chinese. One such channel was the Moscow Economic Conference of April 1952, an allegedly non-governmental convention that aimed to foster east-west trade and led to the formation of national committees for the promotion of international trade in several countries. The Moscow Conference allowed French entrepreneurs to get in contact with Chinese government's delegates and then do business with them; the most famous and conspicuous case was that of a billion franc contract for the supply of goods signed by

¹³ Cain, F. (1995). 'The US-led trade embargo on China: the origins of CHINCOM, 1947-1952', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 33-54.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

Jean-Baptiste Doumeng, president of *Interagra*,¹⁴ and the representative of the China National Import Export Corporation (CNIEC).¹⁵

Yet private initiatives could not completely escape the control of the government, which held the keys to export licenses. Before accepting large orders, French entrepreneurs were supposed to check in with the Directorate of External Economic Relations (DREE) of the Ministry of Finance and Economic affairs and make sure to obtain the necessary export licenses.¹⁶ Doumeng, who had wisely followed the procedure, had no problems in bringing his business to a successful ending. This was not the case for the first trade mission to China that French entrepreneurs organised in 1953. At the beginning of the year, Nan Hanchen, chairman of the Chinese Committee for the promotion of international trade (and also president of the People's Bank of China), invited his French counterpart, Bernard de Plas, to go to China with a delegation of French entrepreneurs. As the international situation was still very tense, the National Council of French Employers (Conseil National du Patronat Français, CNPF) prohibited employers' representatives from participating in the mission. In any case, several industrialists spontaneously preferred not to engage with the mission for fear of commercial reprisals on the part of the United States. In the end, unsurprisingly, the delegation visiting China only counted the usual suspects, i.e. those entrepreneurs who had participated in the Moscow Conference and were well known for their ties and business with the Soviet bloc (*Interagra*, *Berim*¹⁷, the marketing company *Sorice*, and *Comptoir européen*).¹⁸ The

¹⁴ HE was a member of the PCF (French Communist Party) at the age of 16 years and later nicknamed 'Red Billionaire'. See: Lamalle, J. (1980). *Le milliardaire rouge: Jean-Baptiste Doumeng*, J. C. Lattès, Paris.

¹⁵ Badel, *Diplomatie et grands contrats*, p. 296.

¹⁶ Badel, *Diplomatie et grands contrats*, pp. 336–7.

¹⁷ Bureau d'études et de recherches pour l'industrie moderne (research centre for modern industry). Founded by four communist or close to PCF people, among whom Aubrac. From 1953, still under BERIM, Aubrac established contacts with China. In August 1955, he organizes the Edgar Faure travel in this country. BERIM specialized increasingly in trade rather than in research and study activities.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

commercial mission took place between May and June 1953 and ended with success only on paper. Although many contracts were signed, they related to products under Chincom lists; as the entrepreneurs had failed to secure the preliminary governmental authorisation, the orders had to be cancelled.¹⁹ Evidently, French entrepreneurs would be better off with assistance and/or coordination with the administration. As will be shown, the French government's Chinese policy would benefit from coordinating with French business as well.

The Geneva Conference in 1954 and the subsequent release of tension on Indochina certainly opened up opportunities to review France's policy towards the PRC. Economic competition at European level gave an incentive in this direction: Already in January 1954 the Quai d'Orsay's Asian Department signalled that the British Board of Trade actively encouraged the development of trade with Socialist China.²⁰ The impulse to start changing French diplomacy's attitude towards the PRC came particularly from the business community and from some MPs.

During 1955, the French business community manifested a clear interest in the Chinese market. First, a Chinese delegation was invited to Lyon's fair; then a Chinese technical mission visited the premises of *Schneider*²¹ and of *Société française radio-électrique* (SFR, *Radioelectric French Company*). Interested in not losing these contacts, French industrialists envisaged the envoy of an economic mission to China.²² Although recognising the value of such project, the government

¹⁸ Badel, *Diplomatie et grands contrats*, pp. 296–7.

¹⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, DG Affaires Politiques, Note, secret, 'De nos rapports avec la Chine populaire durant l'année 1955', 31 Janvier 1956.

²⁰ Badel, *Diplomatie et grands contrats*, p. 298.

²¹ A late XIX century's armament specialist, after WW I the Schneider Group enlarged its activity to manufacturing electrical motors, electrical equipment for power stations and electric locomotives. After WW II it gradually abandoned armaments and turned to construction, iron and steel works and electricity.

<http://www2.schneider-electric.com/sites/corporate/en/group/profile/history/schneider-electric-history.page>

²² AMAE, AO, Chine 483, MAE, DAEF, Circulaire, 'Mission Chine', 25 janvier 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

deemed it impossible to assume the patronage or even take care of the organization of the mission. Yet it acknowledged that leaving it entirely to private initiative could lead to the formation of a quite partial representation of French interests or, even worse, to a politically marked mission.²³ Some sort of governmental involvement was thought necessary. Badel is right to note that the French government's concern was to avoid the French communists' monopoly on informal relations with the new regime in Beijing.²⁴ Yet the French government's engagement in the organisation of the mission goes beyond the necessity to keep a close eye on the activities of the French communists. As will be demonstrated, the French administration undertook to facilitate and promote economic contacts with the Chinese in order to start preparing the road for future official relations, which would occur when the international situation would allow for it. The Quai d'Orsay, in particular, engaged directly and with the intention to check and guide contacts with the Chinese.

The first step was taken in the summer of 1955, when the French Foreign Ministry established an unofficial channel with Chinese diplomats in Geneva. On 22 August, and then again on 28, the director of the Asian Department met with the Chinese ambassador to Poland, Wang Bingnan. Wang had been the Secretary-General of the Chinese delegation to the Geneva Conference on Indochina the previous year, and was therefore the PRC diplomat entrusted with (continuing) contacts with Western governments.²⁵ He was in Geneva during the summer of 1955 for a series of bilateral talks with US Ambassador to Czechoslovakia on the question of the repatriation of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Badel, *Diplomatie et grands contrats*, p. 296.

²⁵ Zhai Qiang (1992). 'China and the Geneva Conference of 1954', *The China Quarterly*, no. 129, pp. 103–122.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

nationals in either country, and to address any “other practical matters of concern to both sides.”²⁶ These conversations led to an understanding on how to handle various current affairs of common interest. It was agreed to entrust the work to the respective embassies in London or Berne as appropriate; it was also implicitly assumed that issues of more political nature, should they arise, would be addressed again with Wang in Geneva. The French suggested that the PRC government could restore the French consular office in Beijing, though they did not mention reciprocity. The Chinese government refused the request on the grounds that it would imply an unacceptable “two Chinas” solution, as the French Republic still maintained diplomatic relations with Taiwan.²⁷

Having established a promising contact, the French government took a second step in its evolving China policy, this time at transatlantic level, where it started to work for a change of Chincom rules. Since the suspension of hostilities in Korea and the Geneva Conference on Indochina, France, Britain, and other Western countries considered that the embargo against China was no longer justified. In September 1955, the French government informed the American ally of its desire to see the embargo removed; in December Britain did likewise.²⁸ The British, who were keen to see the Chincom problem solved quickly, also intended to address the issue during the imminent round of top-level Anglo-American talks in Washington.²⁹ The French government,

²⁶ In late 1954 and early 1955, the PRC and the United States had been close to confrontation, due to the PRC bombing the offshore islands in the Taiwan Strait. The crisis ended when the Chinese Foreign Minister suggested that the PRC would be willing to meet with the United States for a series of bilateral talks. The United States proposed that the two nations send individuals of ambassadorial rank to meet in Geneva. See US Department of State, Office of the Historian, ‘Milestones: 1953–1960 U.S.-China Ambassadorial Talks, 1955–1970’, at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/china-talks>.

²⁷ AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, MAE, DG Affaires Politiques, Note, ‘de nos rapports avec la RPC durant 1955’, 31 janvier 1956.

²⁸ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, DAEF, Note pour le Président – secret – urgent, 19 mars 1956.

²⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, Tél. à l’arrivée de Londres (Chauvel), 10 Janvier 1956. See also the public statement made by the UK ambassador on the eve of Eden’s visit to Canada: AMAE, Chine 520, Tél. à l’arrivée de Ottawa (Lacoste),

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

through its ambassador in London, insisted that no decision be taken bilaterally between Britain and the United States, the appropriate forum being the Chincom and the praxis that of trilateral consultations in preparation for the Committee's meetings.³⁰ Confronted with U.S. categorical opposition to the idea of withdrawing the embargo, the French and British governments undertook to seek the agreement of the other Chincom members on, at least, the relaxation of the rules; in particular, they would push for alignment of Chincom prescripts to the rules applicable to exports of strategic goods to the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries.³¹

In the meantime, the French continued to forge contacts with the Chinese government. Having excluded for the time being the possibility to hold political talks with the Chinese, the Quai d'Orsay did not ignore the benefits of using unofficial yet political contacts beside business and trade. It thus got interested in French Parliament's initiatives. Between September and October 1955, a delegation of the French Senate led by Senator Léo Hamon went to Beijing. The trip, quite improvised and not orchestrated with the Foreign Ministry, was ephemeral and devoid of results. On the contrary, the trip to China of a delegation of the National Assembly's Committee on Foreign Affairs, taking place in October-November of the same year, was prepared over a long time in concert with the Quai d'Orsay, and proved fecund. Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou En Lai received French MPs in person for quite detailed conversations. On occasion, Zhou reiterated his government's opposition to the policy of two Chinas, 'France must recognize one China, as China recognizes only one France.' However, he acknowledged that a change of policy arose difficulties for the French government, and proposed to develop commercial and cultural relations between the

reçu 3 février 1956; Ibid., Bordereau d'envoi Amb. de France au Canada, 'Conférence de Presse de Sir Anthony Eden et de M. Selwyn Lloyd à Ottawa le 7 février 1956', 8 février 1956.

³⁰ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, DG Affaires économiques et financières, Tél. au départ pour AmbaFrance Londres, 6 janvier 1956.

³¹ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, AO, Note, 17 janvier 1956 ; AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, MAE, DG Affaires Politiques, Note, 'de nos rapports avec la RPC durant 1955', 31 janvier 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

two countries in the meantime; he mentioned the possibility to organise Chinese MPs' visits to France, establish cultural relations, and even start semi-official trade relations for economic cooperation. 'We can have relationships in all areas and it is the interest of our two countries to. What we do not want is that you recognize at the same time the Government of the PRC and the government of Chiang Kai-shek', said the Chinese leader.³²

From the Quai d'Orsay's point of view, the choice to supervise the MPs mission to China had been wise in the light of communicating with the Chinese authorities in Beijing. Now the French government was aware of the position of the Chinese government as expressed by its second in command. Having appraised Chinese consensus to the use of trade contacts to start and develop relations between the two countries, there could be but benefits in getting involved in the organization of the French economic mission to China. Although the French Foreign Ministry would neither officially sponsor the mission nor accompany it with any direct diplomatic action, it is difficult to state that French diplomacy remained passive. The following section will show that it actually had the role of a patient director behind the scenes.

Launching economic contacts as parallel diplomacy: The first Rochereau Mission

Having excluded all patronage, the French government entrusted the CNPF with selecting the delegation to China, with particular care of assuring a balanced and fair representation of French interests.³³ Yet the French administration did not withdraw in the corner, but actually guided and

³² AMAE, AO, Chine 522, MAE, 'Extrait du compte-rendu de l'audience accordée le 1er novembre 1955 par Chou Enlai, Ministre des Affaires étrangères de la République Populaire chinoise, aux membres du Bureau de la Commission des Affaires étrangères de l'Assemblée Nationale Française', 17 Janvier 1956.

³³ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, MAE, DAEF, Circulaire, 'Mission Chine', 25 janvier 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

supported the CNPF in its endeavour. The Secretary of State for Economic affairs and the Ministry of Industry and Commerce provided technical assistance and governmental backing to CNPF's decisions. The mission eventually comprised twenty-three delegates designated by the unions of the involved economic sectors.³⁴ The president, however, was nominated by the government, which chose Senator Emile Rochereau, president of the Committee for Economic affairs of the Council of the Republic. In addition, the government assigned a civil servant from the Office of the Secretary of State for Economic affairs, Louis Bacquier to the mission with the task to coordinate its work and provide objective information to the government.³⁵ The presence of Rochereau and Bacquier did not change the private nature of the trade mission, yet it signals a significant involvement of the French government behind the surface.

The government did not limit to participating in the setting up of the delegation. On the contrary, it is in facilitating the activity of the trade mission that its engagement is most visible. The French Foreign Ministry stepped in to smooth the Rochereau Mission's way to China. As a first step, the French ambassador in London organised a dinner to let Rochereau meet with the Chinese chargé d'affaires, Huang Hsiang. Apart from introducing the senator to the Chinese beforehand, the dinner allowed to appraise the Chinese authorities' positive reaction at the announcement of the envoy of a French economic mission to Beijing.³⁶ Second, the Quai d'Orsay took responsibility for obtaining, through the Chinese representation in London, the Chinese authorities' approval of the composition of the mission and the grant of visas for the delegates.³⁷ Finally, in order to remedy the

³⁴ Steel, mechanical, electromechanical, electronic, electrical, automotive and agricultural equipment, cotton, wool, artificial textiles, inorganic chemistry, chemistry organic, pharmacy, consumer industries, banks, commerce, dyes, civil aviation and public works.

³⁵ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, MAE, DAEF, Circulaire, 'Mission Chine', 25 janvier 1956.

³⁶ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Lettre de l'Ambassadeur de France en Grande-Bretagne, Chauvel, au Ministre des AE, Antoine Pinay, 12 janvier 1956.

³⁷ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, MAE, DAEF, Circulaire, 'Mission Chine', 25 janvier 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

absence of French diplomatic posts in China, the Quai d'Orsay secured the logistic and diplomatic support of the British government, which put its chargé d'affaires in Beijing at the French trade mission's disposal.³⁸ The French government also acted so as to ensure the success of the Rochereau mission in terms of results. Although complying with Chincom rules, the government made large use of the procedure of exemption. It granted the delegation exemptions up to \$ 3 million to facilitate the conclusion of contracts for industrial plants. By the same mechanism, it allowed the mission to sign contracts for steel products up to one million dollars, should the success of the negotiations depend on such a concession.³⁹ Provided they remained within the limits of these exemptions, the trade mission delegates would have no difficulty in honouring and fulfilling the commitments signed in Beijing. Furthermore, the government gave the mission delegates assurances against reprisals from third governments.⁴⁰

A look at the Quai d'Orsay's considerations about the Rochereau Mission helps highlight the interest of the French government in the establishment of economic contacts with the Chinese. The French diplomacy considered the trade mission an important event for its overall strategy. Politically, it was the most visible manifestation of the new trend of more conciliatory policy towards the PRC. Economically, it could give a significant boost to trade and would, in any case, allow French interested parties to get a more accurate idea of the possibilities offered by the Chinese market. Last but not least, it would get France in the 'competition between the countries of Western Europe', which the Quai d'Orsay expected to become harsher as soon as the Chincom

³⁸ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Tel à l'arrivée de Londres (Chauvel), 9 janvier 1956.

³⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, DAEF, Le Ministre des Affaires étrangères au Secrétaire d'État aux affaires économiques, 'Livraison à la Chine de produits dits stratégiques', 28 mars 1956.

⁴⁰ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, DG des Affaires Politiques, Note, secret, 'De nos rapports avec la Chine populaire durant l'année 1955', 31 Janvier 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

barriers fell.⁴¹ Indeed, the Asian Department repeatedly lobbied for a quite early date of departure of the Rochereau Mission, as the existing European competition suggested that others would fill in any space France would leave, especially at the time when the Chinese government was elaborating projects for its second Five-Year Plan.⁴² The Directorate-General of Political affairs substantially shared this impression, 'if the question of establishing relations with Beijing does not amount yet to a race among several countries, we have nonetheless interest in not missing an opportunity when it is before us'.⁴³

It was therefore important to act timely and seize Chinese overtures. The Quai d'Orsay considered that the contacts made with the Chinese in Geneva, Bern, and London, together with the MPs mission to China, had helped create a new atmosphere between France and the PRC. The Chinese had shown an open and forthcoming attitude, expressed with 'kind words about France and its democratic traditions and culture' and via some conciliatory gestures, such as the release of three French soldiers imprisoned in China since 1951.⁴⁴ Especially important had been Zhou Enlai's statement that there was considerable room for improvement and development of relations between the two countries before recognition, which indicated a desire for rapprochement and understanding with France. It did not pass unnoticed that the Chinese had adopted a softer and more forthcoming attitude towards France than, say, Italy, whose government was also keen to develop cultural and economic exchanges with the PRC. Indeed, in talks with the Italians, the Chinese had linked the expansion of bilateral trade to the establishment of diplomatic relations; although they accepted to

⁴¹ AMAE, AO, Chine 484, DG Affaires politiques, Lettre à M. Regaudie, Président de la Commission des moyens de communication et du tourisme de l'Assemblée Nationale, 23 octobre 1956

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ AMAE, AO, Chine 520, DG Affaires politiques – Asie-Océanie, Note, Secret, 'Du problème de la reconnaissance de la Chine populaire', Paris, 30 janvier 1956.

⁴⁴ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, DG Affaires Politiques, Note, secret, 'De nos rapports avec la Chine populaire durant l'année 1955', 31 Janvier 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

discuss trade, they would not drop their political demands, which weighted upon all negotiations with the Italians. By contrast, the political and diplomatic question had been postponed in the case of talks with the French.⁴⁵ Chinese authorities' eagerness to receive the Rochereau Mission had been evident also in their promptness to resolve issues relating to travel. Visas had been granted exceptionally quickly, especially if one considers that several names had been communicated to the Chinese at the last minute.⁴⁶ The Quai d'Orsay therefore esteemed that the framework had been set for the development of a pragmatic and effective policy towards the PRC. This would consist in leaving aside political problems for the time being and focusing instead on tightening cultural and, above all, trade contacts, working for the withdrawal or softening of the embargo, and moving steps towards normalisation of relations.⁴⁷ On this last point, the Quai considered that establishing a French presence in Beijing would be undeniably beneficial with a view to future recognition.⁴⁸ Two solutions were *a priori* considered: either sending a middle-rank consular officer to the Chinese capital, without reciprocity, or establishing a permanent trade delegation with unofficial status. For the moment, though, the Quai awaited the Rochereau Mission to bring useful guidance in this regard.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ AMAO, AO, Chine 522, AO, Note pour la Direction d'Europe, 'Nos relations avec la Chine populaire', 21 avril 1956.

⁴⁶ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Lettre de l'Ambassadeur de France en Grande-Bretagne, Chauvel, au Ministre des Affaires étrangères, Antoine Pinay, 12 janvier 1956.

⁴⁷ AMAE 520, DG Affaires politiques – Asie-Océanie, Note, Secret, 'Du problème de la reconnaissance de la Chine populaire', Paris, 30 janvier 1956.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, DG des Affaires Politiques, Note, secret, 'De nos rapports avec la Chine populaire durant l'année 1955', 31 Janvier 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

The Rochereau Mission to China took place from 23 January to 20 February 1956.⁵⁰ At the end of it, a joint statement signed by Rochereau and Lu Hsu-Chang, the representative of the Chinese Committee for the promotion of international trade, expressed the satisfaction of both sides. The latter pointed to the existence of a ‘great potential for the development of trade between the two countries’, and pledged to ‘continue their efforts for growth and standardization of these exchanges.’ The joint statement also declared satisfaction for the conclusion of a number of contracts.⁵¹ These were numerous indeed on both non-strategic and strategic products, for which the use of the exemption procedure to Chincom embargo had proved highly useful. In addition, a protocol was signed on payments and financial regulations, a system that would contribute to the significant increase of bilateral trade during 1956. On the way back to France, Rochereau released a very positive statement to a Hong Kong newspaper, ‘Our desire is to restore a sound basis for commercial contacts between France and China so that trade between the two parties continues to increase [...] we can state that the visit was successful.’⁵²

The positive results of the Rochereau Mission pushed the French government to resume talks with the Chinese in London on the question of a French post in Beijing. In March 1956 the French ambassador to the UK met with the Chinese chargé d'affaires to convey the French government's desire to officially station a commercial attaché in Beijing. The proposal fell on deaf ears, and two months went by without reply. The Chinese contact in London proved evasive any time the French ambassador called on him to discuss the issue. Given the circumstances, the Quai d'Orsay started to

⁵⁰ It is not possible here to go into the detail of the conduct of the mission and negotiations that take place in Beijing. On the matter consult AMAE, AO, Chine 483. See also Robin, *Le coq face au dragon*, ch. VII, and Robin, T. (2013). ‘Une délégation patronale française en Chine communiste pendant la guerre froide: la mission économique Rochereau de 1956’, *Relations internationales*, no. 154, pp. 63–75.

⁵¹ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Déclaration commune, 19 février 1956.

⁵² AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Ta Kung Pao de Hong Kong, ‘“La Chine deviendra un important pays exportateur”, déclare M. Rochereau à son retour de Pékin’, 22 février 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

consider the opportunity to resume contacts in Geneva with the Chinese ambassador to Warsaw, Wang Bingnan, with whom it had been implicitly agreed to discuss matters of a more political nature should they arise. In the meantime, the French government considered the opportunity to give the Chinese government some satisfaction, specifically on the question of reciprocity of commercial representation and of the accreditation of a correspondent of the official news agency *Xin Hua (New China)* in Paris.⁵³ Before moving into this direction, however, a new attempt was made in London. In June, the French ambassador presented a proposal envisaging an official yet temporary commercial post in Beijing entrusted with the task of assisting the fulfilment of Sino-French trade contracts.⁵⁴ Thought to be more palatable to the Chinese, this arrangement would achieve two fundamental goals. First, it would secure a smooth execution of the contracts signed during the Rochereau Mission while preparing for a new French mission to China. Second, it would constitute a step in the establishment of more official yet not diplomatic relations between the two countries. The so-called 'temporary solution' would have the advantage to 'materialise, even provisionally, the French presence in Beijing.'⁵⁵ It would take a few years for the temporary solution to transpire; in the meanwhile, the bureau of the French commercial attaché in Berne became the heart of the French economic system of information on China, in conjunction with the one in Hong Kong.

Although the Chinese proved lukewarm on the question of a French post in Beijing, they were otherwise highly interested in a second Rochereau Mission, about which talks with the Chinese representative resumed in Berne during the summer.⁵⁶ Yet the autumn brought a halt due to

⁵³ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, AO, Note pour le Président, 'de la représentation de la France à Pékin', 25 mai 1956.

⁵⁴ AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, AO, Note 'de l'établissement d'une représentation commerciale française à Pékin', 10 juillet 1956.

⁵⁵ AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, Note, 'Représentation de la France à Pékin', 12 juillet 1956.

⁵⁶ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Tel à l'arrivée de Berne (Dennerly), 26 septembre 1956; Ibid., Lettre de Dennerly (AmbaFRance Berne) à Millet (MAE, Directeur d'Asie), 12 octobre 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

the Suez crisis. The PRC stood firmly behind Nasser and pledged full support to Egypt.⁵⁷ In addition, some orders appeared to have been cancelled by the Chinese in reprisal to French 'imperialist activities' in Egypt, and Rochereau did not consider the moment appropriate to proceed with the organization of a new mission to China.⁵⁸ A close scrutiny to the facts, however, denied the senator's suspicions. The French Foreign Ministry esteemed that the Chinese government's propaganda campaign about Suez had been a tactical move aimed at re-gaining some leadership of the Bandung group, rather than an action springing from true hostility towards France or Britain. Moreover, the campaign had had no significant repercussions on Sino-French cultural relations. For example, the French Film Festival and the exhibition of reproductions of modern French paintings (Picasso, Matisse, Lurcat), both taking place in Beijing during the height of the Suez crisis, had met with a great success of public and had been highly praised by the Chinese authorities. Nor had the Chinese actually boycotted French products. The slowdown in Sino-French trade following the Suez crisis was very limited: On a total of \$ 12.5 billion, the amount of cancelled contracts was only \$ 2 billion; in addition, these contracts were for the most part to be revised in the light of increased transportation costs, and Chinese buyers had probably preferred to just give them up rather than suffering additional costs.⁵⁹ Overall, the French Foreign Ministry expected a continuation of the development of Sino-French economic (and cultural) contacts.

The Suez crisis was quickly put behind the back when considering relations with the PRC, and the French government gave new impulse to the idea of a Mission Rochereau 2. As the Chinese proved deaf to the request of establishing a French permanent or temporary commercial post in Beijing, a new trade mission would allow maintaining contacts with the RPC. All the more so since

⁵⁷ Zhai Qiang, 'Seeking a Multipolar World', pp. 183-184.

⁵⁸ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, AO, Note pour le Secrétaire général, 'Mission Rochereau', 9 novembre 1956.

⁵⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, DG Affaires politiques, Note pour le cabinet du ministre (à l'attention de M. Jacques Roux), 5 fév 1957.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

the envoy of the French prominent senator, who would also be allowed to meet with political personalities, would manifest continuity of the French government's interest in the normalization of relations between the two countries. The Quai d'Orsay was confident that a second Rochereau Mission would 'have a favourable influence on the continuation of these relations'.⁶⁰ In January 1957, Rochereau resumed contacts in Berne, where the Chinese proved friendly. Yet a temporary halt came from the President of the Council of Minister, Guy Mollet, who asked the senator to wait for the end of the UN debate on Algeria.⁶¹

If the question of French international image was evidently at stake, so were France's economic and strategic interests in China. The European competition to reach out to Beijing was getting fierce, and put pressure on the French. Senator Rochereau wanted to visit China in mid-March in order to get there before the West German trade mission, whose date of departure seemed impending.⁶² Yet the Chinese pulled the breaks. They first insisted for April, but this move proved to be only a dilatory tactic. In early April the Chinese affirmed that, during the conversation with Rochereau in Berne, they had 'negatively commented on the opportunity of a new mission', which was not true.⁶³ Faced with the Chinese volte-face and the total lack of serious explanations on their part, Rochereau renounced the mission (though only for the time being).⁶⁴ The French government's reading of the situation was that the Chinese were playing tactics so as to push French authorities to give the second Rochereau Mission a more political nature.⁶⁵ On the French side there was no readiness to step up in this direction. Nonetheless, the year 1957 witnessed a quite

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, AO, Note pour le Secrétaire général, 1 février 1957.

⁶² AMAE, AO, Chine 483, AO, DG Affaires politiques, Note pour le Président, '2ème mission Rochereau en Chine populaire', 19 février 1957.

⁶³ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Lettre de l'Ambassade de France à Berne a Millet, AO, 9 avril 1957.

⁶⁴ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, AO DG Affaires politiques, Note de dossier, 2 mai 1957.

⁶⁵ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Lettre de Dennery (Berne) à Millet, Ministre Plénipotentiaire Directeur d'Asie, 11 juin 1957.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

significant change of mind in French political and diplomatic milieus, which permeated French analysis of the international situation and was visible in transatlantic quarrels over Chincom rules.

Transatlantic quarrels

The success of the mission guided by Rochereau in 1956 boosted the French government's action to modify Chincom rules. It coordinated efforts with the British government to rally support from other Chincom members on the proposal to align Chincom rules to Cocom prescripts and win the U.S. administration's obstinate opposition.⁶⁶ The endeavour proved quite easy, for a large gulf existed between the United States on the one side and Canada and the European allies on the other, the latter being willing to adopt a softer attitude towards China at both economic and political levels.⁶⁷ Among the countries that had recognized the PRC in 1950, Denmark and Norway went as far as to support the PRC on the issue of the permanent seat at the UN Council, which was still held by Taiwan; the UK and the Netherlands had contested the questioning of Taipei's rights to the seat, but had qualified their stance on the issue as temporary. Following the Geneva conference of 1955 and under the influence of the so-called 'spirit of Geneva' promoting détente, the governments of Canada, Belgium, Italy, and France had planned to recognise the PRC. Belgian Foreign Minister Paul-Henry Spaak, for example, had been particularly vocal on the issue, and had explicitly mentioned the impossibility to withhold the admission of the PRC to the United Nations further. Belgium's preference was for a Western common policy on the matter, but Spaak insisted that the

⁶⁶ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, DAEF, Note pour le Président – secret- urgent, 19 mars 1956.

⁶⁷ AMAE, AO, Chine 520, Tél. à l'arrivée de Ottawa (Lacoste), reçu 1er février 1956. On the issue of consultation and negotiation between allies about Chincom see the whole AMAE, AO, Chine 494; see also Cain, F. (2007). *Economic statecraft during the Cold War: European responses to the US trade embargo*, Routledge, London & New York.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

United States had to be shown that an important trend existed in most European countries which favoured recognition of Socialist China, and this should be taken in due consideration in order to elaborate a common stance.⁶⁸ Belgium and the other countries refrained from taking any official step towards the PRC before the U.S. presidential elections of November 1956, as the timing would be highly inappropriate.⁶⁹ Indeed, it was impossible to imagine that the U.S. government would change its policy in an election year.⁷⁰

Re-elected for his second term, President Eisenhower did not change attitude with regard to China. On the contrary, the White House outlined its views on the importance of maintaining the existing special controls towards the PRC and even tightening the overall Cocom and Chincom controls in light of the past events in Hungary and the Middle East.⁷¹ In addition, the U.S. administration lamented the lack of compliance with Chincom rules on the part of its European allies, among which France featured prominently. A year after the Rochereau Mission, French sales of embargoed goods far exceeded in value those of all other categories of products (12 billion francs vs. 3,5 billion).⁷² The U.S. government sought to limit quantitatively and qualitatively European countries' use of the derogation procedure. In the case of France, the memorandum submitted on 4 January by the U.S. embassy in Paris described the use of derogation as 'beyond any

⁶⁸ AMAE 520, Senat, séance du 21 mars 1956, Extrait de la déclaration de Mr. Spaak, Ministre des Affaires étrangères.

⁶⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine 520, DG Affaires Politiques, Note, 'Du problème de la reconnaissance de la Chine populaire', 30 janvier 1956.

⁷⁰ AMAE, AO, Chine 520, Tél. à l'arrivée de Ottawa (Lacoste), reçu 16 février 1956.

⁷¹ Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1955–1957 Volume X, *Foreign Aid and Economic Defense Policy*, Document 156. Memorandum of Conversations, Department of State, Washington, April 17, 1957, 'U.S. Proposal on China Trade Controls'.

⁷² AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, DG Affaires politiques, Note pour le cabinet du ministre (à l'attention de M. Jacques Roux), 5 février 1957.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

reasonable expectation'.⁷³ The approach of the U.S. government did not produce any results, though, as it came at a time when all other Chincom members wished a relaxation of the embargo.

Although the French government did not withdraw from transatlantic solidarity, it was becoming evident that its reading and stance on Asian issues was quite different from those held in the U.S. administration. To start with, France did not have the same reasons to be as hostile to the regime in Beijing as the United States, which supported Chang Kai-shek strenuously. It was true that China had been guilty of aggression in Korea and of military support to the Viet Minh in Vietnam, but the situation had changed with the armistice of Panmunjom and the Geneva Accords, and the French government now maintained relations with North Vietnam. Moreover, it was argued in the Foreign Ministry, the West recognised the Soviet Union, which was far from having 'clean hands'. Second, France's reasons to stay loyal to Taipei were quite weak, and everybody in the country remembered the treatment that the Chinese nationalist government gave France during the Tonkin events after World War II.⁷⁴ The Quai d'Orsay was aware that the recognition of the PRC would have negative repercussions on France's relations with those Asian countries that were 'subservient to the United States'; explicit reference was made to South Vietnam, where French economic and cultural interests were particularly important.⁷⁵ Yet, and this is the strongest signal of the change of mind taking place at the Quai d'Orsay, if France's Asian policy 'has in the past been based on our Indochina policy, we can rightly claim that now it is our policy in Indochina that must

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ After the end of WW II in Asia, Chiang Kai-shek was awarded the task to disarm the Japanese in northern Indochina and accept their surrender. In February 1946, Chiang Kai-shek forced the French to surrender all of their concessions in China and renounce their extraterritorial privileges in exchange for withdrawing from the region and allowing French troops to reoccupy northern Indochina. See, for instance, Tønnesson, S. (2010). *Vietnam 1946. How the War Began*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, p. 41.

⁷⁵ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, AO, Note – secret – 'Reconnaissance de la Chine communiste. Aspects politiques du problème', sans date (mi-1957).

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

descend from our policy in Asia.'⁷⁶ The role of the PRC in international affairs had become important enough to justify on its own the diplomatic recognition of the Maoist regime. A diplomatic representation in Beijing would allow the French government to gather more useful intelligence to appraise the Chinese government's intentions in both domestic and international domains. The Foreign Ministry deemed the chance to be better informed as 'extremely desirable to the highest point [...] especially in light of the interests we still hold in Indochina, as well as with regard to the growing influence of Socialist China in the affairs of Eastern Europe, which hit us close.'⁷⁷

At the same time, a more vigorous push for recognising the PRC came from the French parliament. On 6 March 1957, a draft resolution was presented at the National Assembly which 'urge[d] the Government to take the lead in talks to recognize the People's Republic of China and to establish formal diplomatic relations with it.'⁷⁸ On 19 December an identical resolution was tabled in the Council of the Republic.⁷⁹ For the time being, the French government abstained from taking any official political initiative towards Mainland China and maintained its relations with Taiwan: Western solidarity 'require[d] that close cooperation be maintained with allies, particularly with the Government of the United States.'⁸⁰ Yet, while assuring French loyalty, French Ambassador to the United States Hervé Alphanand was also instructed to remind the Americans every now and then that the French government was in favour of recognising Socialist China.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, N. 4424, Assemblée Nationale, 'Proposition de résolution à l'Assemblée Nationale tendent à inviter le Gouvernement à reconnaître la République populaire de Chine', 6 mars 1957.

⁷⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine 520, N° 128, Conseil de la République, 'Proposition de résolution tendent à inviter le Gouvernement à reconnaître la République populaire de Chine', 19 décembre 1957.

⁸⁰ AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, Tél. à l'arrivée de Alphanand, reçu le 5 mars 1957.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

For sure, alignment with the U.S. policy did not relate to cultural and commercial contacts with the PRC, and the French were transparent on the subject. They informed the U.S. administration, via embassy channels, about the first Rochereau mission,⁸² its results,⁸³ and the plans for a forthcoming 'Rochereau 2'.⁸⁴ More importantly, the French government took the initiative on the issue of embargo. At the Cocom meeting of 12 April, the French delegate tabled and presented a project for changing the policy of discrimination against Socialist China. The French proposal envisaged a three-phase one-year process that would lead to the suppression of the so-called 'China differential' and the application of Cocom rules to trade with the PRC.⁸⁵ The British delegate was unequivocal about the UK government's impossibility to justify and endorse any longer the existing system, and pushed for a fast discussion of the French proposal and for resolution of the problem.⁸⁶ Indeed, at the Anglo-American talks in Bermuda in late March 1957, British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd had already firmly expressed his government's intention to align Chincom lists and procedures to those of the Cocom.⁸⁷ Delegates of Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Turkey, and the Netherland gave their approval in principle to the French proposal. The Canadian lacked instructions from Ottawa, while the West German delegate accepted the opening of discussions on the subject. So did the U.S. delegate, who announced he would table a counter-proposal by mid-May.⁸⁸ In fact, the U.S. aide-memoire and

⁸² AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Tél. au départ pour AmbaFrance Washington, 12 janvier 1956.

⁸³ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Tél. au départ pour AmbaFrance Washington, 8 mars 1956.

⁸⁴ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, DG des affaires politiques, Note pour M. le Président du Conseil, 22 février 1957.

⁸⁵ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, Doct. CH/1384 (57), 13 avril 1957.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, Tel. n. 1743/48 de Chauvel, Londres, 29 mars 1957.

⁸⁸ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, Note, Baquin à DAEF, 15 avril 1957.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

draft proposal were circulated to allied ambassadors in Washington within a week.⁸⁹ Before the actual discussion of the American draft in the Cocom, the British government felt compelled to make sure that the White House would clearly acknowledge its position. The UK ambassador to Washington, Harold Caccia, informed U.S. Deputy Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Douglas Dillon that the British government could not accept the U.S. proposal, which it deemed insufficient, and that the only sensible proposal for Britain was alignment of the two lists. The American, however, replied that 'never, or at least not for still a long time, would the U.S. government accept equality of Cocom and Chincom lists'.⁹⁰ The day after, at the NATO meeting in Bonn, Foreign Secretary Lloyd reiterated the same position to U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and complained that 'the items that really counted were still on the embargoed list'.⁹¹

Cain has thoroughly analysed the transatlantic quarrels during Chincom negotiations.⁹² Suffice it here to remind briefly that the United States made several efforts to preserve the China differential but achieved no results. The first U.S. counter-proposal had no positive reception. The British delegate regretted that it did not meet any of the criteria on which the French proposal was based and which the UK had fully supported. The majority of the other delegates still favoured the French proposal and either supported it completely or stated that 'a solution must be found close to that proposal'.⁹³ In a quandary over rallying its allies on the maintaining of a China differential at least for some items, the U.S. administration tried to elaborate a compromise proposal. Tabled at the Chincom meeting of 21 May, it had no better luck. A last attempt was made to find a compromise

⁸⁹ FRUS, 1955–1957 Volume X, Document 156, cit.; AMAE, AO, Chine 494, Tél. Alphand (AmbaFrance) à Pineau, Ministre des Affaires étrangères, Washington 18 avril 1957.

⁹⁰ AMAE, AO, Chine 494, Tel. N. 3355/3356 Alphand (AmbaFra Washington) à MAE, 1 et 2 mai 1957.

⁹¹ FRUS, 1955–1957 Volume X, Document 158, Telegram From the Secretary of State to the Department of State' Bonn, May 3, 1957.

⁹² Cain, *Economic statecraft during the Cold War*.

⁹³ FRUS, 1955–1957 Volume X, Document 166, 'Editorial note'.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

that might be acceptable to all: a group of delegates, acting personally, elaborated two proposals, which were circulated the following day.⁹⁴ The U.S. State Department instructed its diplomatic missions abroad to approach the respective governments 'at highest level', inform them of the importance that the United States attached to the multilateral trade control issue, and urge them to support a compromise proposal preserving effective continued Chincom controls.⁹⁵ According to U.S. sources, the Americans 'were pushing the French very hard'.⁹⁶ The hope was that if the latter reversed their position at the next meeting the British might feel isolated and eventually reconsider their stance.⁹⁷

Yet French support never materialised, and the Americans believed that 'there must have been a prior binding commitment to support the British position to the end.'⁹⁸ Indeed, as has been reported above, the French and the British governments kept in close contact and coordination since late 1955 with the aim of eliminating the China differential altogether. Far from just expressing vague ambitions, the French had worked to rally support of the other Chincom members, and had eventually tabled the proposal for realising the transition to the Cocom regime. Despite U.S. pressure exerted on the French ambassador and, via the U.S. ambassador in Paris, on Foreign Minister Christian Pineau and Prime Minister Guy Mollet, the French government had proved deaf to American hard lobbying and even to more or less veiled threats that '[m]aintenance of French position w[ould] inevitably affect Franco-American relations in other fields during coming

⁹⁴ FRUS, 1955–1957 Volume X, Document 169, 'Editorial note'.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ FRUS, 1955–1957 Volume X, Document 170, Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in France, Washington, May 24, 1957; *Ibid.*, Document 172, 'Memorandum of a Telephone Conversation Between the Secretary of State and the Deputy Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Dillon), Washington, May 25, 1957'.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ FRUS, 1955–1957 Volume X, Document 175, Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State for Economic Affairs (Dillon), Washington, June 4, 1957.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

months'.⁹⁹ Commercial diplomacy was more than ever the path chosen for the French rapprochement to the People's Republic of China, and the China differential stood in the way. On 27 May, the British withdrew unilaterally from Chincom.¹⁰⁰ On June 20, the French government informed national exporters that it had followed the British example.¹⁰¹ France prepared the second Rochereau Mission.

The rationales for recognition increase

Only access to relevant Chinese documents would reveal whether PRC authorities' dilatory tactics in the spring of 1957 actually aimed at extorting a politically significant gesture from the French government or was rather the consequence of domestic issues. It should be noticed that precisely in the spring of 1957 the effects of the Hundred Flowers Campaign launched the previous year became worrisome for Chinese authorities: eloquent members of the Chinese society began to criticize government policies openly, and within a few weeks an increasing amount of criticism targeted the ruling Communist party. It was probably not in the latter's best interest to allow Western foreigners in the capital at the time. Yet it must have been also important not to lose good contacts with the French. As a matter of fact, the Chinese government itself unblocked the situation in May, when it

⁹⁹ FRUS, 1955–1957 Volume X, Document 170, Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in France, Washington, May 24 1957.

¹⁰⁰ Jing-dong Yuan (1994). 'Between economic warfare and strategic embargo: US-UK conflicts over export controls on the PRC, 1949-51', *Issues & studies: a social science quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian affairs*, vol. 30, no. 3, p. 93.

¹⁰¹ Badel, *Diplomatie et grands contrats*, pp. 298–9. Despite U.S. opposition, other Chincom members followed suit.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

invited to Beijing former French Prime Minister Edgar Faure.¹⁰² The visit was evidently meant to convey to the French authorities a clear interest on the part of the Chinese government in the continuation and development of economic relations. Faure was received by Zhou En Lai in person, who confirmed what he had said to Rochereau the previous year: The Chinese authorities understood that recognising only one China – the PRC – was problematic for the French government, and were in no hurry to see it happen. In addition, Zhou expressed the Chinese government's desire to receive the second Rochereau Mission in September, which he hoped would feature major French businessmen.¹⁰³

As direct consequence of Faure's visit to Beijing friendly contacts resumed in Berne, where on 22 June Rochereau met with Feng Hsuan, the Chinese Ambassador to Switzerland. As conversations went into the detail of the mission, e.g. composition of the delegation and domains of desired exchanges, the French felt confident that the Chinese were now serious about receiving the economic mission.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, within a week Rochereau received the Chinese government's formal invitation to go on economic mission to China in September.¹⁰⁵

Although still private in nature, the second Rochereau Mission revealed a more conspicuous engagement of the French government behind the scenes. The Directorate General of Economic, financial and technical affairs (DAEF) of the Foreign Ministry closely followed the preparation of the mission, which took place at the Syndicat d'études pour l'Extrême-Orient (SEPEO). Created in 1946, SEPEO was an association gathering the main French enterprises interested in trade with Asia. The eventual delegation listed delegates from big French companies such as *Schneider*,

¹⁰² AMAE, AO, Chine 522, Tél. de Pierre Millet (AO) à Hong Kong, 2 mai 1957. While in charge, Faure had expressed sound perplexity at the lack of recognition of the PRC.

¹⁰³ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, AO, Note, 'Voyage du Président Edgar Faure en Chine communiste', 28 juin 1957.

¹⁰⁴ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, Le Conseiller Commercial, Note pour l'Ambassadeur, 'Compte-rendu de la visite de M. le Président Rochereau à l'Ambassade de Chine le vendredi 21 juin', Berne 22 juin 1957.

¹⁰⁵ AMAE, AO, Chine 483, DAEF, (Boegner), Tél au départ pour Hong Kong, 28 juin 1957.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

Alstom, *Neyrpic*¹⁰⁶, *Saint-Gobain*¹⁰⁷, and *Pechiney*¹⁰⁸. More importantly, it also featured representatives of public institutions: The director of the French Bank for Foreign Trade (Banque Française du Commerce Extérieur, BFCE),¹⁰⁹ a representative of the French Company of Insurance for Foreign Trade (Compagnie Française d'Assurance pour le Commerce Extérieur, COFACE), and two Chincom and Cocom specialists respectively from the Ministry of Economic affairs and the Ministry of Industry. By contrast, the Quai d'Orsay denied the participation of Jacques Hirsch-Girin and Raymond Grimaud, respectively financial attaché and commercial adviser in Hong Kong, for their presence would give the mission a too openly diplomatic character.

The second Rochereau Mission took place in September as scheduled, in a very friendly and constructive atmosphere. The French were particularly satisfied with the list of exports, especially as it was 'more detailed than that gained by the West German mission staying in Beijing at the same time'.¹¹⁰ The Chinese also expressed their strong interest in starting soon technical cooperation on chemical plants as well as electrification of railways; more specifically, they would like to send a group of technicians to France to better understand the possibilities offered by the French industry in these areas.¹¹¹ Obviously interesting from an economic point of view, a Chinese technical mission of this kind arose some problems in terms of security, for the same technology could be used in China for military purposes. Once again competition at European level tilted the balance in favour of accepting the Chinese request. The Foreign Ministry's Asian Department highlighted

¹⁰⁶ Founded in the 1860s, it became a leading producer of big hydraulic equipments.

¹⁰⁷ Mirrors producer since 1665, then glass and fiberglass producer.

¹⁰⁸ Aluminium producer since 1855.

¹⁰⁹ BFCE is a public-private institution, it receives public money annually by the Ministry, but it acts as a private actor furnishing funds and bonds to French exporters. Its main shareholders are banks whose ownership is the state, and its director is appointed by the Minister of Finance.

¹¹⁰ AMAE, AO Chine 483, DAEF, Note, 'Les résultats de la mission Rochereau en Chine populaire', 11 octobre 1957.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

‘when the Germans and Italians are concerned to establish technical ties with China (an Italian trip to China is planned for January, and the Germans must send in April experts in the field of mechanical equipment and oil industries) ... it seems essential that we do not lose the lead that we gained via the Rochereau Mission.’¹¹²

Moreover, the same two countries called for a meeting in Paris on 17 January to create a more or less permanent organisation entrusted with coordinating EEC members on Chinese issues; this was an additional stimulus to the French to move on with national initiatives before a possible coordinated action could narrow French room for manoeuvre.

Chinese technicians were thus welcomed in France in February 1958 for a five-week mission, after which French company *Sofrerail* scored a contract for the equipment of Chinese railways.¹¹³ The year 1958 was a milestone in Sino-French economic relations: French exports increased from 7 to 18.6 billion francs, of which 66% consisted of steel products. The second Rochereau Mission had certainly contributed to re-launch Sino-French exchanges, but accomplice in this stepping up was also the freezing of commercial relations between China and Japan, which forced the PRC government to turn to Western Europe for massive purchases.¹¹⁴ Not only could Western European countries offer China high-quality technology, they also proved very eager to do so, engaged as they clearly were in a contest for rapprochement with the PRC.

As Figure 1 shows, since 1958 French trade with Socialist China continued to grow, and in 1960 the People's Republic became France's first customer in Asia with imports for 26 billion

¹¹² AMAE, AO, Chine 483, DG Affaires Culturels et techniques, Note de Hessel pour Seydoux, ‘Coopération technique avec la Chine continentale’, 25 novembre 1957.

¹¹³ AMAE, AO Chine 484, AO, Note, ‘Commerce franco-chinois – historique’, janvier 1959.

¹¹⁴ AMAE, AO, Chine 484, ‘Relations économiques entre la Chine populaire et la France’, avril 1961.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

francs, surpassing South Vietnam and India (respectively at 22 and 20 billion francs).¹¹⁵ By 1960 many French businessmen travelled to China and concluded excellent affairs.¹¹⁶

Figure 1: France's trade with the People's Republic of China 1953-1962

(FIGURE 1)

France, as well as other Western European countries, would also benefit significantly from the Sino-Soviet split, which became evident in 1960 as the Soviets recalled from China their technicians involved in cooperation and aid programmes. Deprived of Soviet assistance, Chinese demand turned to Western countries. Imports grew and also changed qualitatively, as the Chinese sought in the West technology and equipment that Moscow would no longer supply. As a matter of fact, French and British enterprises got into a strong competition in the fields of aerospace, naval, and chemical industry, irrespective of the U.S. administration's harsh reactions to the sell of such strategic goods to a Socialist regime.¹¹⁷

Yet economic and commercial interests did not represent a sufficient motivation to recognise Socialist China. Although acknowledging that a diplomatic representation in Beijing would certainly assist French business better than the current recourse to accredited embassies in neighbouring countries, the French government esteemed that recognition would not make a substantial difference in trading with the PRC. States that already had diplomatic relations with it, such as Britain, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries, did not gain business advantages unquestionably superior to those enjoyed by West Germany, Belgium, or France, which made excellent business with the PRC. It was West Germany, not Britain, which held the highest ranking

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ AMAE, *Asie-Océanie 1956-57, Chine*, 485, tel à l'arrivée de Chauvel, reçu le 16 janvier 1962. For more detail see Badel, *Diplomatie et Grands Contrats*, pp. 309–10.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

among Western European countries in terms of exchanges with Socialist China (see Figure 2), and with nationalist Taiwan too.¹¹⁸ The PRC could well be politically motivated in its purchases from underdeveloped countries, but it clearly proved to be inspired by considerations of price, payment conditions, and quality when trading with Western Europe.¹¹⁹

Figure 2: Main West European Countries' Exports to the PRC, 1953-1962.

(FIGURE 2)

Rationales for recognition should therefore be political. The mainstream historiographical interpretation argues that General de Gaulle's return to power changed everything. The General believed that France should recognize the PRC, but a series of obstacles prevented him for some years from going ahead. Heightened Cold War tensions from 1958 to 1962, i.e. crises in Berlin and Cuba, made it harder to break ranks with Western allies, especially with the United States.¹²⁰ In addition, the on-going war in Algeria made it impossible to conceive of political normalisation with China: Not only was the PRC propaganda vociferously condemning French imperialism, it also actively supported the Algerian National Liberation Front by supplying international legitimacy, military advice, and weapons.¹²¹ Yet, as Martin put it, 'several factors helped to bridge the gap between France and China, especially from 1962 on', i.e. blossoming economic ties, the end of the Algerian War by the Evian Accords, and the lessons of the Cuban crisis.¹²²

¹¹⁸ AMAE, AO, Chine 520, AO, Note pour le Ministre, 'Du problème de la reconnaissance de la Chine communiste', 2 juillet 1958.

¹¹⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine 521, AO, Note, 'La question de la reconnaissance du Gouvernement de Pékin', 27 juin 1960.

¹²⁰ Martin, 'Playing the China card?', p. 55.

¹²¹ AMAE, Asie-Océanie, Chine, 539 – Évolution des relations diplomatiques France-RPC, coupures des presse internationale 1960. See also Zhai Qiang, 'Seeking a Multipolar World', pp. 186–8.

¹²² Martin, 'Playing the China card?', pp. 55–59.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

Although sharing this interpretation at a general level, there is latitude to qualify it by bringing into the picture the underlying evolution of French policy towards the PRC. It has been reported in the previous pages that a revision of France's Chinese policy was already underway before de Gaulle's return to power, and that several steps had been taken to promote a certain degree of reconciliation with Beijing via cultural and economic relations. This evolution continued in the midst of the two crises in Berlin and Cuba, and the Algerian question did not prevent the continuation of the gradual rapprochement between France and China. In fact, it is possible to suppose that another international crisis influenced Sino-French relations for the better, i.e. the Sino-Soviet split.

Already in February 1957, the French prime minister received a note by the Quai d'Orsay's Directorate General of Political affairs highlighting that 'differences of interest are inevitable and already existing between Beijing and Moscow'.¹²³ In the same note, the Foreign Ministry lamented the U.S. government's 'complete disregard for the potential use of existing and potential divergent interests between Beijing and Moscow'.¹²⁴ U.S. obstinacy was growing indeed. In September 1958, a memorandum by the State Department clearly refuted the assumption that it would be possible to release the Sino-Soviet alliance by forging diplomatic relations with Socialist China. French diplomacy could not have a more different view. It held it impossible to exclude *a priori* that the Soviets would try, sooner or later, to curb Chinese ambitions to play a more decisive international role. Neither did the Quai d'Orsay deem it possible to ignore that the Chinese, on their part, had interest in seeking a conciliatory attitude towards the West as a counterweight to their too exclusive dependence on the Soviet Union; actually, the analysts of the French Foreign Ministry's political affairs department esteemed that this interest would increase together with Chinese economy's

¹²³ AMAE, AO, Chine 522, DG Affaires politiques, Note pour M. le Président du Conseil, 22 février 1957.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

growing needs. If Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, 'the French Government would definitely consider it useful to the free world to exchange representatives with Beijing'.¹²⁵

After the Sino-Soviet split fully transpired in 1960, other rationales for and incentives to recognising the PRC accumulated in spite of the fact that both the Algerian war and the Berlin crisis were still open. First, the newly independent African nations, including those of the French Community, had no reason to remain loyal to Taiwan, and sooner or later would establish relations with Socialist China. The prestige of Beijing had decisively increased in the Afro-Asian world, and it was in France's interest not to let the new African nations step away from the French Republic. It would therefore be wiser that France be represented in Beijing before African countries would open their embassies there. Second, an embassy in Beijing would be able to collect useful intelligence and inform the French government in detail on a country 'whose initiatives certainly weigh heavily on the world's destiny' and whose population amounted to a quarter of humankind.¹²⁶

France's change of heart was particularly relevant as for loyalty to the United States on this issue. A deviation from the American line was no longer conceived as unthinkable. In fact, there was a genuine view at the Quai d'Orsay that France's recognition of the PRC 'would not raise more objections than did some NATO and SEATO allies in the past (Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Pakistan).'¹²⁷ Moreover, a clear element of competition with the United States emerged as for normalisation with the PRC:

"On the occasion of the beginning of détente between the Soviet Union and the United States – or should the latter's strategic stance in the Pacific soften – the [U.S.]

¹²⁵ AMAE, AO, Chine 520, DG Affaires politiques, Note, 'Évolution possible de la position française en ce qui concerne la reconnaissance de la Chine communiste', 24 janvier 1959.

¹²⁶ AMAE, AO, Chine 521, AO, Note pour le Ministre, 'Éventualité d'une reconnaissance par la France du Gouvernement de Pékin', 3 février 1961.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

Democratic administration could be tempted to conclude an agreement on the question of Formosa. If such an agreement in turn helped the establishment of official relations between Washington and Beijing, it is indisputable that we would lose a lot of prestige if we were to wait until that moment to connect with the communist capital.¹²⁸

The elements of de Gaulle's *grandeur* were by then established. It only took the President the right moment to implement fully France's new China policy.

Conclusions

While agreeing with Robin that trade was not the driving force behind France's recognition of the PRC, it is possible to argue that economic relations played an important role in bridging the gap between the two countries' political authorities and diplomatic officials. This rapprochement, though, did not occur in 1962 as Martin points out, but was rather a process developing along almost ten years.

From the mid-1950s, commercial diplomacy had been chosen to establish an atmosphere conducive to the normalisation of Sino-French relations. By carefully preparing, assisting, and monitoring the private channels of commercial and technical missions, the French government set in motion a gradual opening of unofficial diplomatic contacts between France and the PRC at the time when the international juncture discouraged steps towards official recognition. Trade and cooperation missions not only aimed to re-launch French economic interests in the area, they were also increasingly conceived by the Quai d'Orsay as political a means to prepare the ground for future official relations. In other words, commercial missions were political trial balloons, meant to

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

allow remote and once hostile interlocutors to better know each other's intentions, find common interests, and appraise the possibility to develop substantial though unofficial contacts. The choice to nominate at the head of the first commercial mission an eminent senator of the Republic, and his confirmation for the successive mission, where he would also have green light to discuss some political issues, was made with the intent of showing the Chinese continuity and seriousness of the French government's interest in normalisation of relations between the two countries. It is interesting to notice that the French were also willing to step up to a more official level, provided the latter kept confined to the realm of commercial relations and would not involve the official political sphere yet. Indeed, via the channel in Berne, the French government asked if Chinese authorities would allow the opening of a French permanent commercial representation in the Chinese capital. The post would not only take care of business, but also establish more official contacts and materialise the French presence in Beijing.¹²⁹

The question of normalising to a certain extent relations with Socialist China acquired more and more importance in light of the evident and growing contest among European countries to reach out to the PRC. Besides actual competition in the realm of business and trade, it was important for France not to lose political status vis-à-vis other European countries and the world – the French *grandeur* that de Gaulle would later incarnate and promote at its highest point. Even more important, perhaps, was the necessity not to lose entirely a certain grip on former French colonies now newly independent states of Africa. French concerns about the PRC's appeal on these developing countries, and the fear that the latter might open official relations with and diplomatic posts in Beijing before France could step in is quite revealing of the urgency felt in the Quai d'Orsay to promote rapprochement with Mao's regime. Nor was French reasoning deprived of Cold War-related considerations. French analysts in the Foreign Ministry had already detected both seeds for and evidence of a forthcoming Sino-Soviet split, and envisaged the possibility to weaken the

¹²⁹ AMAE, AO, Chine, 522, Note, 'Représentation de la France à Pékin', 12 juillet 1956.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

Socialist camp by promoting China's relations with the West. In a sense, the French were twenty-five years ahead of the Americans, which would undertake to play the China card only in under the Nixon administration. In the mid- to late 1950s, evidence of disagreement with the United States over treatment of the PRC, and annoyance at the White House's unwillingness to revise its reading of Cold War and international dynamics progressively weakened French disposition to comply with U.S. demands for maintaining a harsh stance on Socialist China. Eventually, it did take de Gaulle to break the ranks and make France officially recognise the PRC. Yet the General's move had been preceded by a ten-year duly orchestrated gradual rapprochement to Beijing that testifies of the evolution of French diplomacy's thinking and assessment of China's and France's place in international relations. Although it is not the aim of this article to establish a direct link between these contacts and the way in which official relations between France and Socialist China were eventually established, some points can nonetheless be made for the benefit of prompting further research and discussion. First, upon his arrival to power in 1958, de Gaulle drew information from contacts that had been established in the 1950s: as Martin reports, Étienne Manac'h, the head of the Asia department of the Quai d'Orsay, described de Gaulle as 'passionately interested in all things Chinese and ... always questioning visitors from Asia ... about the evolution of Chinese affairs'.¹³⁰ Second, when launching his move towards the Chinese, de Gaulle decided to make use of previous paths and men: he sent Edgar Faure '—because of the latter's experience with China— (...) on a secret mission to find out what the Chinese leaders thought about the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations'.¹³¹ Finally, and perhaps most relevant point, the Chinese did build on previous contacts with France: as clearly showed by Martin in his article, they continued to cultivate established economic contacts with businessmen and unofficial channels with diplomats to make de

¹³⁰ Martin, 'Playing the China card?', p. 55.

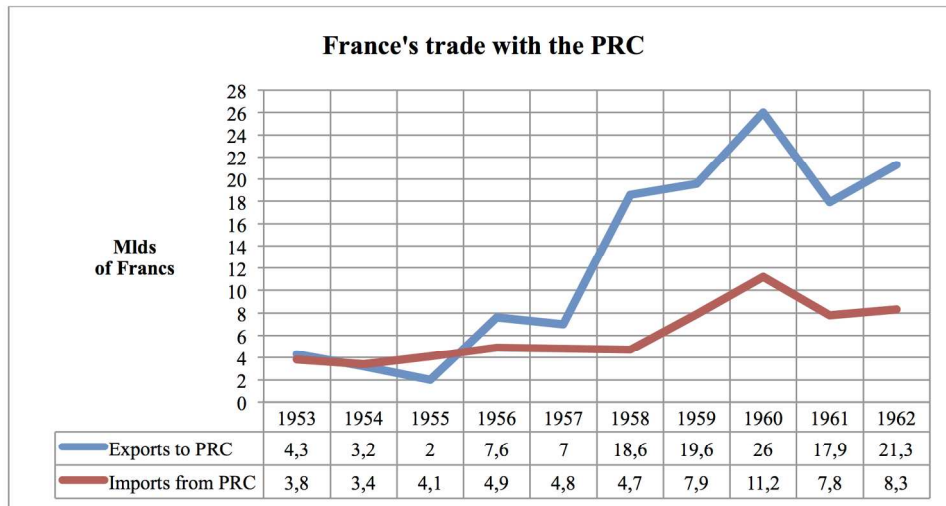
¹³¹ Martin, 'Playing the China card?', p. 67.

Waiting for de Gaulle: France's ten-year warm-up to the recognition of the People's Republic of China

Gaulle know 'their desire to establish diplomatic relations with France'.¹³²

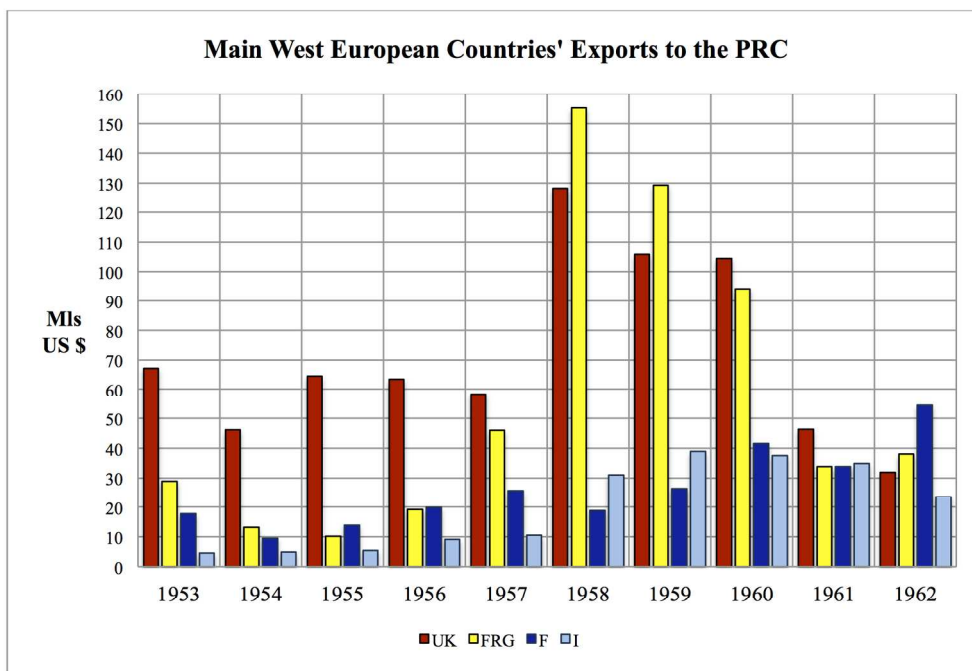
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¹³² Martin, 'Playing the China card?', pp. 63–64.



Source for 1953-1955 data: AMAE, AO, Chine 484, Note, 'Etat actuel des échanges entre la Chine et la France', 9/II/1957.

Source for 1956-1962 data: AMAE, AO, Chine 485, Tél. S.6-374 de Conseiller Commercial de France à Hong Kong, 'Les échanges commerciaux entre la France et la Chine continentale en 1962', 9 mai 1963.
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Source: Zhang Shu Guang, *Economic Cold War: America's embargo against China and the Sino-Soviet alliance, 1949-1963*, Stanford University Press, c2001, pp. 289-291.
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