

Why Trust China Now?

By Leonard S. Spector

AS our intelligence agencies struggle with the implications of Larry Wu-Tai Chin's 20 years of top-level spying for China, across town at the State Department they're readying a celebration: The long-sought United States-China nuclear trade pact, under which we will give China technology and materials for nuclear power, is about to become a reality.

In its current form, as the Administration has acknowledged, the accord is unverifiable. China has refused to permit the International Atomic Energy Agency to keep track of American nuclear exports or to allow comprehensive American inspections. Instead, the agreement gives Washington the vague right to "visits" and "exchanges of information" — but not a program of systematic accounting required in all other agreements with nations that import nuclear materials from us, including Britain and France.

In essence, this means trusting China's word that it won't misuse American nuclear transfers. With our Government accusing China of 20

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years of deceit — deceit that continued even as the nuclear deal was being negotiated — unqualified reliance on such assurances hardly seems warranted today, if it ever was.

A resolution conditionally endorsing the accord was passed by the Senate before the spy scandal broke and is shortly to be adopted by the House. It demands no new verification concessions from China but merely calls on the President to certify that China has accepted "effective" verification mechanisms — without setting clear-cut standards. Unfortunately, the Administration is on record as stating that existing arrangements are already adequate to protect our interests.

More than potential Chinese nuclear chicanery is at stake. The sensitive nuclear pact has been treated by both sides as a key barometer of United States-China relations. In the immediate aftermath of the spy scandal, Washington's stand on the accord may be the single most important indicator of how seriously it views China's spying exploits. President Reagan's fist-shaking at the spies in our midst seems like so much bluster now that he has decided to continue business as usual with China on the highly visible nuclear issue.

There is also the question of candor. Only days before China's spying activities were revealed in the press — at a time when they were certainly known to senior Central Intelligence Agency and Justice Department officials — key members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee were briefed by the C.I.A. On the basis of that briefing, the committee ex-

pressed its support for the nuclear agreement. Did the committee learn of China's spying activities at the briefing and decide to endorse the agreement anyway? Or was this information withheld because it would upset the nuclear deal?

Technically, the nuclear accord is not a treaty. It becomes effective automatically once it has been before Congress for 90 days of "continuous session," a period that will end tomorrow night. Disapproval by a majority of each house of Congress could have stalled the agreement. But this is highly unlikely to happen before the deadline expires. The President could also have withdrawn the agreement on his own and resubmitted it after America had made clear its displeasure with the Chinese. But he too has declined to act.

Why has Washington accepted an unverifiable nuclear pact and undermined the President's antispying crusade in the bargain? Because Washington's real concern is to strengthen ties with a potential anti-Soviet ally — despite the damage to other United States interests.

There's still one last chance to improve the pact. The actual delivery of nuclear materials is still months away; and tomorrow, the Senate will consider an amendment by Senator John Glenn that would require truly effective safeguards before exports are allowed. Will the Senate seize this initiative? Or will it casually give China a vote of confidence barely two weeks after Mr. Chin's arrest? □