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# The EU Arms Embargo, Taiwan, and Security Interdependence between China, Europe and the United States<sup>1</sup>

Frans Paul van der Putten  
Research Fellow, Asia Studies/Security and Conflict Programme,  
Clingendael Institute of International Relations, The Hague, Netherlands  
fputten@clingendael.nl

## Introduction

Current relations between China and the European Union (EU) are characterised by the predominance of economic exchange and the near absence of security cooperation. The end of Portuguese rule over Macao in 1999 removed the last European colonial outpost in China. What continues to shape the bilateral relations is a variety of economic linkages. European companies are important investors in the Chinese economy and there has been a rapid growth of Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong investment in the European Union. By comparison, security issues play only a marginal role in the current Sino-European relations. The bilateral security dialogue tends to revolve around topics such as proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, responses to terrorism and to international organised crime.<sup>2</sup> Important though they are, these topics do not touch the fundamentals of EU-China relations. In recent years, there has been an intense debate about the lifting of the EU arms embargo against China. This debate is linked to the Taiwan Question, a major security issue in the East Asian region that indirectly undermines the relationship between China and Europe. The debate on the arms embargo highlights the need for interrelated security dialogues between China, the European Union and the United States.

## The EU Arms Embargo on China

The European Union imposed the arms embargo against China in the wake of the suppression of the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in Beijing on June 4, 1989. The purpose was to put pressure on the Chinese government to end “repressive actions against those who legitimately claim their democratic rights.”<sup>3</sup> All the current twenty-seven member states of the European Union are supposed to adhere to the arms embargo against China. Because of the large number of member states, it is very difficult for the European Council to reach a unanimous decision about a possible end to the arms embargo.

The arms embargo was initially aimed at the prosecution of pro-democracy activists, later the aim became more broadly focused on improving human rights conditions in China. Throughout the years, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have published many stories about the persecution of political activists in China. Up to perhaps 10,000 people are estimated to be executed every year by the Chinese state, some of whom are political prisoners.<sup>4</sup> The lack of transparency in the Chinese bureaucracy is an important obstacle to the European Union in its assessment of how far China's human rights policies have improved since 1989.

As time went by the EU developed also a second goal for the embargo, namely to maintain the balance of power between China and Taiwan.<sup>5</sup> The military balance between China and Taiwan was not a major issue in 1989. Between 1979 and 1995, there was a "sustained relaxation of the military confrontation across the Taiwan Strait."<sup>6</sup> The tensions between China and Taiwan had become largely demilitarised by 1991, the high point of the Taiwan Strait *détente*. It was only in 1995 that China made military threats against Taiwan because of the growing demands for Taiwanese independence.

Politically the arms embargo provides the twenty-seven EU member states with a diplomatic mechanism to criticize China's human rights conditions and its policy towards Taiwan. The other three countries against which the EU maintains an arms embargo are Sudan, Myanmar and Zimbabwe, all of which are authoritarian states deeply involved in ethnic conflicts and violent repression. Beijing does not want to be seen as identical to these states in international diplomacy.

At another level, the arms embargo makes it difficult for Beijing to purchase certain weapons from Europe. This has an impact on the development of China's military strategy. The embargo is not the only policy on weapons exports at EU level that potentially affects China. Since the early 1990s, the EU has issued criteria for arms exports by its member states.<sup>7</sup> In 1998 these criteria were incorporated into a Code of Conduct. Although the code is not legally binding, the implication is that even if the EU would lift the arms embargo against China, there is still a potential obstacle for Beijing to purchase weaponry from Europe. The EU has announced that an end to the arms embargo will only happen in conjuncture with an improved common arms export code.<sup>8</sup> The criteria laid out in the existing code have already precluded the sale of weapons if they could be used to repress a country's own population (criterion 2a), or to act "aggressively against another country or to assert by force a territorial claim" (criterion 4). In 1995, the European Council also implemented a law to control the transfer of any civilian technology with the potential to be used for military purposes, so-called dual use goods.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the individual member states also have their own regulation on arms exports.

In practice the arms embargo and the other export limitations only have a limited impact on the transfer of militarily relevant technology between China and Europe.<sup>10</sup> Since 1989, many European countries have been selling arms to China. France, Italy and Britain are the largest arms exporters to China within the EU. In 2003, the total value of arms exports licensed by the EU countries was 416 million Euros.<sup>11</sup>

Russia is China's major supplier of advanced weaponry such as military aircraft and submarines.<sup>12</sup> What China is interested in buying from Europe are specific niche

technologies such as radar, air-to-air missiles, sonar equipment, torpedoes, and C4ISR (command and control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) equipment.<sup>13</sup> Some of the technologies involved can be easily obtained today as dual-use goods. Nonetheless, the lifting of export restrictions by the EU will increase competitive pressure on international arms sellers such as Russia and Israel, which will benefit China as a buyer.

Beijing has repeatedly asked the EU to lift the arms embargo and it did so, for instance, in the white paper on its EU policy and at the annual EU-China summits.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese leaders claim that the embargo is an obstacle to the normalisation of Sino-European relations.<sup>15</sup> European arms dealers and the manufacturers of dual-use goods also want the arms embargo to be lifted.<sup>16</sup> Many manufacturers outside the defence industry also expect to benefit from the lifting of the arms embargo, if Beijing rewards the EU with the contracts for passenger planes, telecommunication systems and nuclear power plants in China.<sup>17</sup> Although the EU claims that an end to the embargo will not result in more arms sales to China, this is widely doubted.<sup>18</sup>

In 2004 Germany and France proposed to the other EU member states to lift the arms embargo against China. According to observers, Germany was keen on improving its overall economic links with China and France acted under pressure from its defence industry.<sup>19</sup> At the EU-China summit in December 2004, the EU announced that it planned to lift the arms embargo in the first half of 2005.<sup>20</sup> But this plan failed to materialize because of three new developments. First, on 14 March 2005 China's Anti-Secession Law was ratified and went into effect. This law declared that China would, as a final resort, employ non-peaceful means to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence. This increased the likelihood that China might use any European weaponry it has to attack Taiwan. Second, the United States sent very strong signals to the EU that the lifting of the arms embargo would have serious repercussions for transatlantic relations. Third, public opinion in Europe also expressed concerns about the authoritarian government in China and reacted negatively to the passing of the Anti-Secession Law.<sup>21</sup> The European Parliament denounced China's threats of military action against Taiwan and called on the European Council not to lift the arms embargo.<sup>22</sup> By mid-2005 it had become clear that opposition to lifting the arms embargo was too strong and the decision was postponed.<sup>23</sup>

Opposition to ending the embargo has grown even stronger since 2005. Germany changed its position. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder favoured lifting the arms embargo but his successor, Angela Merkel opposes it.<sup>24</sup> America's most important ally in Asia, Japan, has also put increasing pressure on the EU to retain the embargo.<sup>25</sup> However, at the same time the EU is faced with the problem that it had announced earlier that the arms embargo would soon be lifted, a fact that Beijing continues to bring up.

### **The Taiwan Question**

The growth of tensions between China and Taiwan undermines Sino-European relations and the arms embargo is directly related to this. Depending on how well the EU Code of Conduct functions,<sup>26</sup> lifting the arms embargo can lead to increased military capabilities of China. This could make the use of force a more viable option for Beijing in its dispute with Taiwan. Or, if Taiwan responds by enhancing its military through arms purchases in the U.S., lifting the embargo could stimulate an arms race across the Taiwan Strait.

An extensive study by the International Crisis Group in 2003 states that in the current decade, China lacks the military power to enforce an effective blockade of Taiwan and it is not militarily strong enough to achieve the goal of reunification without sacrificing its fast-growing economy.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, each year China's defence expenditure grows significantly. The lifting of the EU arms embargo could affect the balance of power between China and Taiwan. None of the countries involved prefers a war across the Strait, but the situation remains dangerous. "Because a low-level attack – or the use of significant non-military coercive measures – cannot be excluded, the risk of war across the Taiwan Strait has to be taken seriously."<sup>28</sup>

American officials and defence experts are strongly opposed to the removal of the EU arms embargo on China.<sup>29</sup> The Taiwan Question is a primary reason for this. As President George W. Bush stated, "there is a deep concern in our country that a transfer of weapons would be a transfer of technology to China, which would change the balance of relations between China and Taiwan, and that is of concern."<sup>30</sup>

Should a Chinese-Taiwanese military conflict break out, then the United States could be easily dragged into it.<sup>31</sup> The Taiwan Relations Act, which dates from 1979, requires the U.S. government to maintain the status quo across the Taiwan Strait by arming Taiwan and by stationing substantial military forces in Japan. In 2001, the Bush administration began to move towards a full military alliance with Taiwan.<sup>32</sup> In the same year the United States military created the Operations Plan 5077 for the defence of Taiwan. This plan includes such options as maritime intercept operations and attacking targets in Mainland China, while the use of nuclear weapons is not ruled out.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the Bush administration upgraded its military alliance with Japan and increased its military cooperation with the Philippines. All these policies were to ensure that America's Pacific-based forces would be strong enough to contain a Chinese military attack on Taiwan.<sup>34</sup> The policymakers in Washington take the risk of a war with China over Taiwan very seriously. The American forces in East Asia might have to engage the People's Liberation Army of China in the future. This is the most important reason why Washington opposes its European allies to lift the arms embargo.<sup>35</sup> The American government has threatened the Europeans that if the embargo is lifted, America will reduce the export of its military technology to Europe and reconsider the existing transatlantic military relations.<sup>36</sup>

The military repercussions of a Taiwan Strait crisis can be grave. If there are serious military tensions between China and the United States, Washington will probably expect its NATO allies to isolate China internationally. The implication is that the NATO alliance system makes it very difficult for Europe to act independently in a Sino-American crisis.<sup>37</sup> This undermines the relationship between China and the European Union.

### **The Current Security Policies of China and the EU**

The Taiwan Question plays a fundamental part in China's security strategy.<sup>38</sup> Beijing perceives any tendency towards Taiwan's independence as "a grave threat to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as to peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits and in the Asia-Pacific region as a whole."<sup>39</sup> In its statements, the Chinese

leadership is consistent about its aim of reunifying Taiwan with Mainland China and using force to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence.

China does not connect the Taiwan Question with its economic policy towards Europe. The only link indicated by Beijing is its concern that the EU might support or stimulate Taiwanese independence, or exports arms to Taiwan. The two security topics mentioned in China's policy paper on the EU are the arms embargo on China and EU-China military cooperation. The proposed cooperation is very limited and consists mostly of "exchanges in respect of military officers' training and defence studies".<sup>40</sup>

On the European side, there is no security framework to address the Taiwan Question or the international position of China.<sup>41</sup> As Ian Anthony points out, "thinking about China [in Europe] has been driven by political and commercial considerations rather than an evaluation of the security environment in East Asia and China's place in it."<sup>42</sup> With regard to the Taiwan Question, the EU opposes the use of force and the unilateral change of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait. It supports pragmatic solutions and ongoing dialogue between China and Taiwan. It also continues the economic links between Europe and Taiwan.<sup>43</sup> The EU has not expressed what it would do in the event of a Taiwan crisis, or how it perceives the relevance of the arms embargo and the NATO alliance for such a crisis. There is no reference to Taiwan in the EU's white paper on its security strategy.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Obstacles to Security Dialogue between China and the EU**

The EU has been under strong pressure from the United States to maintain the arms embargo against China. Because the EU has announced that it would lift the embargo, it cannot keep stalling again and again. Stalling makes the EU look indecisive and weak in its policies towards the United States and China.<sup>45</sup> For the EU to take a credible stance on the arms embargo, it needs to overcome at least two hurdles. We will assume here that the EU member states are sufficiently united to engage in collective decision-making on their security interests in Asia.

First, the purpose of the arms embargo against China needs to be restated in more definite terms than in the original 1989 declaration. As time passed by, the initial purpose of addressing the violent repression of the pro-democracy movement of 1989 has broadened into improving human rights in China. Moreover, the security concern over East Asia has become a new dimension to the debate. As long as the purpose of the embargo keeps shifting and expanding, any dialogue on ending the embargo is likely to drag on indefinitely.

Second, the importance of the United States needs to be acknowledged and its involvement regarding EU decision-making needs to be defined and formalised. The European Union has a vital interest in maintaining close relations with the U.S., and cannot ignore American pressure to keep the embargo in place.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it also has an interest in the American role of safeguarding regional stability in East Asia.<sup>47</sup> European decision-making regarding the arms embargo that does not take into account the position of Washington is doomed to be fruitless. Therefore the EU needs to clarify in

what form and to what extent it allows and welcomes American involvement in this process.

For Europe to overcome these obstacles, it needs a security framework for East Asia that addresses all the major issues including its economic interests in China and Taiwan, the arms embargo, the outbreak of a new Taiwan Strait crisis, and relations within NATO.<sup>48</sup> Not only should a solid security framework be developed, but it is also necessary that Europe actively uses its international influence to contribute to security in East Asia.

Meanwhile, China and the United States need to take certain steps too. They can contribute to more stable international relations by accepting the EU as a participant in dialogues on East Asian security.<sup>49</sup> Europe has large economic interests in East Asia.<sup>50</sup> It is also a major economic partner to both the U.S. and China, it has military technology that can help China modernise its military, and it is the most important military ally of the United States. The arms embargo on China is of great symbolic value. How Europe handles the arms embargo reflects – to a certain extent - its relative position towards Washington and Beijing. This in turn has an effect on the relationship between the U.S. and China.

The EU, unlike the United States, does not actively carry a responsibility for security in East Asia. Although this promotes closer economic links between Europe and China, it undermines the longstanding security relations between Europe and the United States. According to David Shambaugh, “If Europe had any significant strategic interests or military presence in East Asia, for example, or was committed to Taiwan’s security, European leaders would probably be much less tempted to lift the arms embargo.”<sup>51</sup> But ultimately the lack of a European security involvement in East Asia destabilizes also EU-China relations. The economic dimension in this relationship does not represent the whole picture. Only an institutionalized security dialogue between Europe and China, which is tied to the U.S.-China and the U.S.-EU dialogues on global security, will build a solid foundation for Sino-European interactions.

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> I thank Elsabé Willeboordse, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Ingrid d'Hooghe, Maurice de Loo and Marie Oudemans for their help.
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See also "Security is 'key priority' in EU-China Talks: Solana." Available at: [http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/sghr\\_int/79737.pdf](http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/sghr_int/79737.pdf).
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- <sup>4</sup> Amnesty International, "People's Republic of China, the Olympics Countdown: Failing to keep human rights promises," September 21, 2006. Available at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA170462006?open&of=ENG-CHN> and <http://hrw.org/englishwr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/china14867.htm>
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- <sup>8</sup> Greg Austin, "The 1989 China Arms Ban: Putting Europe's Position to Congress." (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2005) 13. Available at: <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/444.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> Ian Anthony, "Military Relevant EU-China Trade and Technology Transfers: Issues and Problems." (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2005). Available at: <http://www.sipri.org/contents/expcon/2005-0601chitechtransfer.pdf>
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- <sup>11</sup> Richard F. Grimmett and Theresa Papademetriou, "European Union's Arms Control Regime and Arms Exports to China: Background and Legal Analysis." (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 1 March 2005) 9. Available at: <http://italy.usembassy.gov/pdf/other/RL32785.pdf>
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- <sup>13</sup> Kogan, *The European Union Defence Industry*, 30.
- <sup>14</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China's EU Policy Paper." (Beijing, October 13, 2003). Available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t27708.htm>
- <sup>15</sup> Sebastian Bersick, "The Transatlantic Institute Common Agenda Roundtable: Lifting the Arms Embargo on China, a Shift in EU Priorities?" (April 6, 2005). Available at: <http://www.eias.org/specialbriefing/2005/armsembargo060405/bersick.pdf>
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- <sup>17</sup> Kogan, *The European Union Defence Industry*, 22.
- <sup>18</sup> For instance, Kogan, *The European Union Defence Industry*, 10.
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- <sup>20</sup> Frank Ching, "The EU's Balancing Act: Selling Arms to Beijing," *China Brief* 5/6 (Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, March 15, 2005).
- <sup>21</sup> Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "A European Role in Cross-Strait Relations?" (Berlin: SWP, 2005). Available at: [http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/common/get\\_document.php?asset\\_id=2702&PHPSESSID](http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/common/get_document.php?asset_id=2702&PHPSESSID)
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- <sup>24</sup> Andreas Lorenz, "Merkel's Chinese Balancing Act," *Spiegel Online*, May 23, 2006. Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,417763,00.html>
- <sup>25</sup> Most recently in January 2007: "Japan's Abe Wants Arms Embargo Kept on China." Available at: [http://www.neurope.eu/view\\_news.php?id=69058](http://www.neurope.eu/view_news.php?id=69058)

- <sup>26</sup> The EU has announced plans to revise the Code and make it legally binding. Moreover, individual member states also have national regulation of arms exports.
- <sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group, *Taiwan Strait II: The Risk of War* (Beijing, June 6, 2003): i.
- <sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group, *Taiwan Strait II*, 23.
- <sup>29</sup> David Shambaugh, "The New Strategic Triangle: U.S. and European Reactions to China's Rise," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no.3 (Summer 2005): 23.
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- <sup>31</sup> Denny Roy, "Rising China and U.S. Interests: Inevitable vs. Contingent Hazards," in Paul J. Bolt, Damon V. Coletta and Collins G. Schackelford Jr. (eds.), *American Defence Policy* (Baltimore, Maryland: 2005): 72; "U.S. Likely to Intervene in Chinese Attack on Taiwan: Specialist." Available at: <http://fas.org/news/taiwan/2000/e-02-19-00-8.htm>
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- <sup>33</sup> William M. Arkin, "America's New China War Plan," *Washington Post*, May 24, 2006. Available at: [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/earlywarning/2006/05/americas\\_new\\_china\\_war\\_plan.html](http://blog.washingtonpost.com/earlywarning/2006/05/americas_new_china_war_plan.html).
- <sup>34</sup> International Crisis Group, *Taiwan Strait II*, 33.
- <sup>35</sup> Richard F. Grimmett and Theresa Papademetriou, "European Union's Arms Control Regime and Arms Exports to China: Background and Legal Analysis." (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2005): 10. Available at: <http://italy.usembassy.gov/pdf/other/RL32785.pdf>
- <sup>36</sup> Grimmett and Papademetriou, "European Union's Arms Control Regime," 11.
- <sup>37</sup> Nineteen out of twenty-seven EU countries are members of NATO.
- <sup>38</sup> Tiejun Zhang, *Reconstructing the Great Wall: Chinese Security Strategy in the Early 21st Century* (Göteborg: Göteborg University, 2003): 159-161.
- <sup>39</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, *China's National Defence in 2006* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2006): 6.
- <sup>40</sup> The Chinese Foreign Ministry, "China's EU Policy Paper," October 13, 2003. Available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t27708.htm>
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- <sup>42</sup> Anthony, "Military Relevant EU-China Trade and Technology Transfers," 20.
- <sup>43</sup> The European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: EU-China, Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities." (Brussels, October 24, 2006):11. Available at: [http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/october/tradoc\\_130875.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/october/tradoc_130875.pdf)
- <sup>44</sup> The European Union, "A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy." (Brussels: December 12, 2003). Available at: <http://ue.eu.int/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf>
- <sup>45</sup> Zaboroewski, "Developing a European Perspective on China," 6.
- <sup>46</sup> There is a growing awareness in Europe that action needs to be taken with regard to the American concerns before the arms embargo can be addressed. In 2005, Greg Austin of the British Foreign Policy Centre called for a European public diplomatic effort to explain to the U.S. Congress its proposed policy change on the arms embargo. Greg Austin, "The 1989 China Arms Ban: Putting Europe's Position to Congress." (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2005) 26. Available at: <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/444.pdf>. See also Werner Weisenfeld, "Asia's Rise Means We Must Re-Think EU-US Relations," *Europe's World* (Spring 2007).
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- <sup>48</sup> See also Eberhard Sandschneider, "Is China's Military Modernisation a Concern for the EU?" in Zaborowski (ed.), *Facing China's Rise*, 46.
- <sup>49</sup> The need for an American-European dialogue on East Asia security has been mentioned by several experts in the United States, including Kristin Archick, Richard F. Grimmett and Shirley Kan, "European Union's Arms Embargo on China: Implications and Options for U.S. Policy." (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, May 27, 2005). Available at: <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32870.pdf>; Dan Blumenthas and Thomas Donnelly, "Feeding the Dragon, Hurting the Alliance: Why Is Europe Eager to Sell Arms to China?" *Washington Post*, February 20, 2005.
- <sup>50</sup> Tanca, "Towards a Comprehensive China Strategy," 116.

<sup>51</sup> Shambaugh, "The New Strategic Triangle," 8, 20-21.