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## The Lifting of the EU Arms Embargo on China: An American Perspective

*Peter Brookes*

Later this year, the European Union (EU) will consider lifting the Tiananmen Square arms embargo against the People's Republic of China (PRC). The U.S. and the EU imposed the embargo following the June 1989 crackdown on democracy protestors in Beijing. This paper presents a range of opinions to help confront this nettlesome issue that has crept into the trans-Atlantic relationship.

### American Concerns

In general, Americans are not pleased with the change in EU policy. First, perhaps, among their concerns about the policy change is China's refusal to renounce the use of force against Taiwan. In light of China's ongoing military buildup, Beijing might decide to coerce or take military action against Taiwan. The "Anti-Secession" law is not encouraging. Yet more to the point, the sale of EU arms to China could mean that European weapons would be used against American servicemen in a Taiwan contingency.

Second, a lifting of the EU arms embargo might further exacerbate the shift in the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait. In the next few years, the cross-Strait conventional military balance of power will move decidedly in Beijing's favor. This change might lead Beijing to perceive an ability to resolve Taiwan's future through force. This sort of miscalculation has the potential for catastrophic results.

Third, in some quarters there is significant concern that China wants to succeed the U.S. as the preeminent power in the Pacific. Increased Chinese military

### Talking Points

- The European Union's decision to lift the arms embargo against China will not help close the trans-Atlantic divide, and may perhaps even widen it. America's perception of Europe—already troubled because of Iraq—will not be improved.
- The decision will also be perceived as an imprimatur of dismal human rights records everywhere and could increase the likelihood of military conflict in the Pacific by accelerating China's military buildup.
- There will certainly be attempts to clamp down on defense industrial cooperation with European firms and prohibit Department of Defense purchases from EU businesses that sell arms to China.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/europe/hl866.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/europe/hl866.cfm)

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might derived from EU arms sales could eventually allow Chinese forces to deter, delay, or deny American military intervention in the Pacific. Though many Asian countries welcome Chinese economic opportunities, they are concerned about Beijing when it comes to security matters. Some strategists believe that China also has an eye on subjugating Japan and dominating Southeast Asia. Australia and Japan have already expressed their unhappiness with the EU's policy change.

Fourth, China's conventional arms, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and ballistic missile proliferation behavior are of great concern. The PRC's export control laws leave a great deal to be desired. Willful government-supported proliferation is even more troubling. China's relationship with North Korea, Iran, Burma, or even Syria could lead to sensitive European technology falling into the wrong hands.

Finally, China's human rights record remains deeply troubling and scarcely merits reward. As recently as 2004, Chinese security services harassed and detained the justice-seeking mothers of Tiananmen Square victims, political activists, and Internet users. In fact, some suggest that China's human rights record has regressed since 1989. Once the arms embargo is lifted, the EU will lose significant leverage with China regarding human rights. In addition, ending the arms embargo would send the wrong signal to other repressive regimes.

### **Perceptions of European Motivations**

Why is Europe thinking of making this change? Probably the most dominant belief is that the EU is trying to curry favor with China for preferential treatment in commercial market transactions. China is one of the world's hottest economies, and lifting the sanctions may lead to large deals for EU firms such as Airbus. If the political climate is right, the PRC may also look to EU companies for high-speed rail, telecommunications, satellites, energy generation plants, or even high-end nuclear plants as China's insatiable appetite for energy grows.

A second—and more sinister—reason is to open a new arms market for European weapons in

China. The PRC is a veritable cash cow for arms sales. China's defense budget currently runs between \$50 billion and \$70 billion per year, including plenty of money for arms purchases. With declining defense budgets for Europe's beleaguered defense firms, China provides a golden opportunity for selling arms in a growing market.

Third, from a political perspective, some EU members may be pushing their fellow members to acquiesce on this issue because if the new arms policy should go awry (e.g., the use of EU weapons against political dissidents, Tibetans, or Uighurs), the EU can spread the political responsibility for the policy change across the breadth of EU membership. By altering the policy under the EU's umbrella, some states will inoculate themselves from their constituents' disapproval for backing down on China's human rights record.

Finally, some cynics believe that the EU is attempting to balance American global power through the development of a "multi-polar" world. In such a construct, American power could be counterbalanced by other power centers such as China, Russia, Japan, India, and the EU. In this construct, making China more powerful will help Europe challenge the United States' global pre-eminence.

### **Chinese Motivations**

No doubt China has motivations of its own. First, Beijing continues to seek political absolution among the international community for the Tiananmen Square massacre. The recent death of former Communist Party leader Zhao Ziyang is another nail in the coffin for the requirement that the Chinese government account for its actions at Tiananmen. The lifting of the EU embargo would be another.

Second, because the PRC's main advanced-technology arms supplier is Russia, China is looking for some competitive pricing and alternative sources for the arms it currently buys from Moscow. With the U.S. and EU currently out of the Chinese arms market, it is a seller's market for the Russians.

EU arms producers can compete with Russian arms producers in terms of quality and (possibly) price. This would turn the Chinese arms market

into a buyer's market for Beijing, decreasing dependence on Russian arms and enhancing the likelihood of generous, advanced-technology transfers to the Chinese arms industry as part of any arms deal. The Chinese may also be hoping that the EU's decision will lead to pressure in Washington from defense firms to do the same. (However, a change in American policy is highly improbable.)

Third, Beijing is hunting for military technology it cannot find elsewhere, especially in the Russian market. The Chinese can find top-notch fighters, diesel submarines, destroyers, and surface to air missiles in Russia, but they may not be able to find the necessary command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems it needs to make these other systems more effective. The EU may be just the market for such technology.

Fourth, Beijing would like to drive a wedge into the trans-Atlantic alliance. China certainly would not object to having an ally in the EU, especially when jousting with the United States in the U.N. Security Council or other multilateral institutions about issues such as Iran's nuclear program. China just signed a \$70 billion gas/oil deal with Iran.

Fifth, it should come as no surprise that a lifting of the arms embargo would be seen as a significant defeat for the Taiwanese in Europe, and would support China's desire to increasingly isolate Taiwan from the international community in hopes of early unification. It could be argued that if the Europeans sell arms to China, they should sell them to Taiwan as well.

## Conclusion

There are sure to be consequences to the trans-Atlantic relationship over a decision to lift the arms embargo against China. America's perception

of Europe—already troubled because of Iraq—will not be improved. Americans, especially veterans, would gasp at the thought that European arms might be used against American service personnel in a Taiwan or Korean contingency. Americans may also resent a decision on the part of the Europeans that will negatively alter the security situation in a region (i.e., the Pacific) in which they have little or no responsibility for security.

Even with the advent of a new arms sale Code of Conduct, and other regulations, the Bush Administration will be unhappy. Congress, however, will react most strongly. There will certainly be attempts to clamp down on defense industrial cooperation with European firms and prohibit the Department of Defense from purchasing defense articles from EU businesses that sell arms to China.

The United States welcomes China's peaceful integration into the international community as an open and free society through commerce, tourism, academic exchanges, and official dialogue. These activities maximize the free world's efforts to encourage positive political and social change for 1.3 billion Chinese.

But in the end, the EU's decision to lift the arms embargo against China will not help close the trans-Atlantic divide, and may perhaps even widen it. The decision will also be perceived as an imprimatur of dismal human rights records everywhere. Finally, it could increase the likelihood of military conflict in the Pacific, which is no one's interest—not even the EU's.

—Peter Brookes is Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation. This speech was delivered in Brussels, Belgium at the European Security Forum.