

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3097
January 18, 2011

EU's Arms Embargo on China: David Cameron Must Continue to Back the Ban

Sally McNamara and Walter Lohman

It has been revealed that EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton is pushing for the lifting of the EU's 1989-imposed arms embargo on China. EU leaders failed to reach agreement on the issue at their summit in Brussels in December, but Lady Ashton is reported to be working closely with France and Spain to take the issue forward this year, describing the embargo as "a major impediment" to intensifying relations between Brussels and Beijing.¹

British Prime Minister David Cameron rightly opposes lifting the ban on both security and human rights grounds. It is vital that Cameron work closely with his European allies—including Poland and the Czech Republic—to block Lady Ashton's initiative and make clear that he will use Britain's veto power if necessary. The new chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), should also make clear that a lifting of the embargo would fundamentally weaken the transatlantic alliance.

A Violation of Human Rights and Breaking Faith with an Ally. The EU's ban on arms sales to China was imposed on human rights grounds in 1989 following the Tiananmen Square massacre. Not much has changed since in the area of human rights. In 2010, The Heritage Foundation conducted an extensive examination of every annual State Department human rights report since the massacre and found the situation over that time "not improving and occasionally worsening."²

China wants the embargo lifted for two reasons. First, the Chinese do not believe that as a major

world power they should be held accountable for their internal policies. Second, by accessing European defense technologies and reverse engineering those products, Beijing can improve its technological expertise, expand its military capacity, and increase defense sales. China is developing its armed forces rapidly, and Beijing has little intention of leaving itself dependent on foreign sources for key weapons in the long term.

And at whom is China's weapons buildup directed? Last week, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen said out loud what many analysts have long observed: "Many of these capabilities seem to be focused very specifically on the United States."³ It is inconceivable that the EU would directly assist in the development of forces in the Pacific intended to undermine America's historical mission to safeguard peace, prosperity, and security in East Asia, an area of the world where it has tens of thousands of troops and its Pacific Fleet in harms way.

Lifting the embargo would also represent a contravention of several elements of the EU's Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. The voluntary agreement—already blatantly disregarded by France, which announced that it will sell its Mistral assault

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3097>

Produced by the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

ships to Russia—includes a commitment to “prevent the export of equipment which might be used for internal repression or international aggression or contribute to regional instability” and to take into account the risks posed to friends, allies, or other member states from arms sales.

An Economic Decision. During his visit to Europe, Vice-Premier Li announced that he would purchase €6 billion (\$7.78 billion) of Spanish debt amidst Madrid’s worsening financial crisis. China has also purchased over \$1 billion in Portuguese debt.

It is difficult to tell if such purchases are actually influencing national policies concerning arms exports, but there can be no doubt that Beijing sees these purchases as political and diplomatic investments. Beijing certainly has further financial reserves to draw on, as well as more false promises regarding greater access to Chinese markets. However, there is no legitimate economic argument that China’s activities to date should exert critical influence in Europe. If EU member states are being bought, it is because they want to be bought.

European Support and Opposition. Although France and Spain have long advocated a lifting of the arms ban, they have now found a powerful ally in Lady Ashton, who commands her own diplomatic service—the European External Action Service. However, Lady Ashton refused to allow her diplomatic nominees to be publically quizzed by

the European Parliament before their appointments. Lady Ashton’s spokesman stated bluntly, “These hearings need to take place in camera (in private), that has been accepted by the European parliament.”⁴ Lady Ashton’s lack of transparency prevented elected members from putting the highly paid officials on record, and as Daniel Hannan, a British Member of the European Parliament, recently stated, “What the devil is Brussels doing fuelling the revanchism of a Communist tyranny?”⁵

During a trade mission trip to China in November, Cameron raised concerns about Beijing’s human rights record, stating: “There is no secret that we disagree on some issues, especially around human rights. We don’t raise these issues to make to us look good, or to flaunt publicly that we have done so. We raise them because the British people expect us to, and because we have sincere and deeply held concerns.”⁶ Foreign Secretary William Hague stated in Parliament in December, “We have no plans to lift the arms embargo on China. I have made that clear in EU discussions.”⁷

Unanimous support is required to lift the embargo. Therefore, Cameron and Hague must build allies to block the initiative, especially among Britain’s allies in Central and Eastern Europe who have shown a steadfast commitment to the principles of human rights and the transatlantic alliance. However, they must make clear that they will use

1. Chris Wan, “Possible Lifting of EU’s China Arms Embargo Raises Concerns,” GlobalSecurity.org, January 5, 2011, at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/china/2011/china-110105-cna02.htm> (January 18, 2011); Agence France-Presse, “EU Could End China Arms Embargo in Early 2011,” *Defense News*, December 30, 2010, at <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=5342402&c=POL&s=TOP> (January 18, 2011).
2. Walter Lohman and Nicholas Hamisevicz, “Make China Account for Its Dismal Human Rights Record,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2455, August 23, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/08/Make-China-Account-for-Its-Dismal-Human-Rights-Record>.
3. Yahoo News, “New Chinese Arms Aimed at US: Military Chief,” January 12, 2011, at http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110112/pl_afp/chinausmilitarydiplomacyweapons_20110112205106 (January 18, 2011).
4. EUBusiness, “EU’s Ashton Refuses U.S.-Style Hearings for Ambassadors,” October 5, 2010, at <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/diplomacy-us-japan.6fc> (January 18, 2011).
5. Daniel Hannan, “EU Plans to Lift Arms Embargo on China,” *The Daily Telegraph*, January 12, 2011, at <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/danielhannan/100071585/eu-plans-to-lift-arms-embargo-on-china> (January 18, 2011).
6. China Times, “Full Text of UK Cameron’s Speech at China’s Peking University,” November 10, 2010, at <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?cid=1101&MainCatID=11&id=20101110000108> (January 18, 2011).
7. William Hague, “House of Commons,” Hansard, December 14, 2010, at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm101214/debtext/101214-0001.htm> (January 18, 2011).

Britain's veto power if necessary to block a Franco-Spanish-backed initiative led by Baroness Ashton to lift the embargo.

Time to Step Up. President Obama should convey to Brussels that America's regional security concerns are grave and that the lifting of the embargo would seriously damage the transatlantic alliance. The lifting of the embargo should also be a NATO agenda item so that Washington's voice is heard within Europe's security architecture.⁸ Should Baroness Ashton press ahead with the issue regardless,

as America's closest ally in Europe, Great Britain must stand behind its commitment to uphold human rights in China and veto any attempt to lift the embargo.

—*Sally McNamara is Senior Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, and Walter Lohman is Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*

8. John Tkacik, Jr., and Nile Gardiner, "Blair Could Make a Strategic Error on China," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1768, June 7, 2004, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2004/06/blair-could-make-a-strategic-error-on-china>.