

Lifting the EU Arms Embargo on China: Symbols and Strategy*

Pascal Vennesson

European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
E-mail: pascal.vennesson@eui.eu

Abstract

From October 2003 to March 2005, the prospect of lifting the European Union's (EU) arms embargo on China grew into a diplomatic crisis, and the focus of an intense bargaining between China, the EU, the EU member states, the U.S., Taiwan and Japan. However, the 1989 arms embargo is a non-legally binding political declaration that never fully prevented the selling of European military equipment to China. Furthermore, it is neither the only, nor the principal, mechanism governing EU member states' technological and military related exports to China. Why do some actors so badly want to have it lifted, while others insist that the EU should maintain it at all costs? The paper argues that the international crisis triggered by lifting the arms embargo was the product of a combination of symbolic

Received March 20, 2007; accepted June 14, 2007; last revised July 18, 2007

Proofreaders: Jeffrey Cuvilier, Wen-chi Chang, Hua-Hsuan Chu, Pei-Hua Lee

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Conference "EU Relations with Taiwan and China," Institute of European and American Studies (IEAS), Academia Sinica, Taipei, December 1-2, 2006. I thank the participants, David Huang, Takako Ueta, the doctoral researchers of my seminar "Europe and the World" at the European University Institute, as well as two anonymous reviewers, for their comments and suggestions.

and strategic dynamics. Employing a conceptual framework inspired by the work of Barry O'Neill on the symbolic dimensions of international politics, this paper distinguishes between message symbols and focal symbols. By lifting the arms embargo, EU leaders wanted to send a symbolic message exclusively to China, but the form that they used—lifting the arms embargo—created an unwanted focal symbol that reached a wider audience: Europeans will sell arms to China. EU leaders did not foresee this transformation of their symbolic message to China and, for the most part, had not meant to create that focal symbol.

Key Words: Arms embargo, People's Republic of China, European Union, Strategy, Symbols

I. Introduction: The EU Arms Embargo Crisis and the International Politics of Symbolism

From October 2003 to March 2005, the prospect of lifting the European Union's (EU) arms embargo on China grew into a diplomatic crisis and the focus of an intense bargaining between China, the EU, EU member states, the U.S., Taiwan and Japan. One line of the rather short Madrid European Council decision taken in June 1989 was transformed into a major, and divisive, international political issue with potentially far-ranging consequences for all the actors involved. Since mid-2005, ending the arms embargo has not been as high on the EU's agenda. Increasing U.S. pressure, the passing of the Chinese anti-secession law in March 2005, and the rise to power of Angela Merkel in Germany made a rapid lifting of the ban improbable (Anders, 2006; Jacob, 2006). However, the issue has not disappeared from the policy agenda and policy-makers regularly raise the issue during EU-China summits, during official visits of European head of states in China, and in EU-U.S., and EU-Japan meetings.

The international crisis over the lifting of the arms embargo is, at first sight, surprising. First, unlike later EU embargoes grounded in the European political cooperation and part of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the 1989 embargo is not legally binding. This political declaration is even less legally binding for the states that joined the EU after 1989. Second, the arms ban never prevented EU member states from selling arms to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in comparatively modest quantities. Third, the scope of the arms embargo has never been defined, and as a consequence member states implemented it in various ways, in conformity with their own national export control laws and their policies toward China. The so-called EU arms embargo against China is, in fact, a series of national arms embargoes (Anthony, 2005). Fourth, the actual impact of the embargo on the human rights situation in China—in itself, or as a lever—has been hard to assess and is probably limited, if not

nonexistent. Finally, a significant proportion of exports of technologically sensitive items from EU member states to China is not covered by the arms embargo, but by the “Dual Use Regulation”, which is legally binding and applies directly to all member states (which does not mean that it is without problems) (Anthony, 2005). In sum, the arms embargo is neither the only, nor the principal, mechanism governing technological and military related exports to China by EU member states.

If the arms embargo is not legally binding and of only limited effectiveness, why do some actors greatly desire to have it lifted, while others insist that the EU maintain the ban at all costs? Those opposed to lifting the arms embargo point out that, even though the arms ban is not efficacious, lifting it would convey the wrong message to China. But if the EU’s arms embargo is not efficacious, why should lifting it convey an undesirable impression? (for a good illustration of these ambiguities and confusions: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2005) I argue that the international crisis, tensions, misperceptions, and disagreements triggered by the proposed lifting of the arms embargo were products of a combination of symbolic and strategic dynamics. I provide a thorough listing of the motives articulated by policy-makers in Europe, in China, in the U.S., in Taiwan, and in Japan, for and against lifting the arms embargo, and argue that symbolic elements, played a key role—though not an exclusive one—in the motivations of all the actors involved. Yet, the symbolic dimension is consistently either neglected, or poorly understood by statesmen and scholars alike.

II. Symbols in International Politics: Definitions and Framework

A. Message Symbols and Focal Symbols

The conceptual framework I bring to the analysis of the arms embargo crisis is inspired by the work of Barry O’Neill on the

symbolic dimensions of international politics, and on the complexity of communication between international actors (2001). O'Neill is not the first to draw attention to the importance of symbolism in politics (see, for example, Cobb & Elder, 1983; Edelman, 1964, 1971, 1977), nor to international politics, where credibility and prestige matter (Press, 2005). O'Neill's main contribution is the examination of symbols within a strategic paradigm, inspired by game theory (O'Neill, 2001: xii-xiii). His work belongs to a research tradition which combines strategic calculations, perception and communication (in this tradition, see notably: Delahaye, 1977; Jervis, 1970, 1989: 174-225; Schelling, 1960, 1966). The perspectives of cognitive psychology and social constructivists on symbolism are certainly worth consideration, but O'Neill's framework shows that actors engage in symbolic behavior even when emotions, rhetoric, or cultural stereotypes are not involved, and even if they are aware of their situation and primarily focused on the consequences of their actions (O'Neill, 2001: xii).

A symbol is an object or a phenomenon used to provide a meaning not inherent in the object itself (Cobb & Elder, 1983). A symbolic effect means that the actors' reactions to the stimulus cannot be understood solely from the material object or the event itself. Symbolism entails beliefs about the beliefs of others: the parties ask themselves what is in the other's mind, not only what the objective situation is (O'Neill, 2001: 216). Two types of symbols are significant: message symbols and focal symbols (O'Neill, 2001: xi-xii, 6-7). First, message symbols are a specific means of communication based on prototypes, metaphors and metonymies. The action conveys a message because of the intentions of an actor (O'Neill, 2001: 26-27). This intention is comprised of three elements: an initial action, a chain of causes and consequences, and a goal. Policymakers expect that their actions will start a causal chain leading to the accomplishment of their objective (O'Neill, 2001: 27). The initial action (here, lifting the EU's arms embargo) is a communicative act if it is designed to

initiate a specific causal chain. “The sender must hold the intention and that, *on account of recognizing that intention*, the receiver will believe something or do something” (O’Neill, 2001: 27).

Second, focal symbols are events that, without being the result of a deliberate action of agents, lead observers to a common judgement of the actions they envision. A focal symbol is an event that “establishes a focal point in a game through an analogy or a prototype” (O’Neill, 2001: 45). Focal symbolism is important in a wide range of bargaining.

B. The EU’s Arms Embargo

On June 27, 1989 in Madrid, the European Council (EC), reacting to the crackdown of the students’ movement, decided to impose on the PRC a set of political and economic sanctions. The then twelve EC member states decided in particular on the suspension of bilateral ministerial and high-level contact, the postponement of new cooperation projects, the reduction of programs governing cultural, scientific and technical cooperation, the postponement of the examination of new requests for credit insurance, as well as the postponement of the examination of new World Bank credits. Among these measures, the European Council also decided to adopt an “interruption by the member states of the Community of military cooperation and an embargo on trade in arms with China” (European Council, 1989, June 27). Since the beginning of the 1990s, under the embargo, European defense-related sales to China have increased from about 55 million euros, to 400 million euros. By comparison, Russian arms sales to China rose from \$1.2 billion during the 1990s to about \$2.5 billion at the beginning of the 2000s (Archick, Grimmett, & Kan, 2006: 14). European military-related sales to, and cooperation with, China under the embargo regime included such items as: howitzers, helicopters, fire control radars, jet engines, avionics, diesel engines for naval ships and submarines, as well as satellites (Archick et al., 2006: 15, 37-42).

III. Lifting the EU's Arms Embargo: Nonsymbolic and Symbolic Rationales

In what follows, I present and discuss the motives raised by policymakers in Europe, the U.S., China, Taiwan and Japan, for and against the lifting of the arms embargo. During the diplomatic struggle, policymakers raised those arguments both to justify their own position, and to disqualify the position of their opponents, notably by exposing what they saw as the real motives behind the official rationale. I lay out two types of arguments: the symbolic and nonsymbolic rationales.

A. Nonsymbolic Rationales: In Favor of the Lifting of the EU's Arms Embargo

For Europeans, the main nonsymbolic rationale for lifting the embargo is the pursuit of commercial interests, in defense related products but just as much, if not more, in other areas. Policymakers seek to deepen the EU's foreign investment profile and to close the EU's trade deficit with China. Lifting the embargo, they believe, should encourage favorable procurement decisions by PRC authorities in areas like commercial aircraft, automotives, civil engineering, and transportation infrastructure (Archick et al., 2006: 20). Ultimately, these civilian contracts could be more significant than the defense-oriented ones. The Europeans who favor lifting the ban do not think it would make a significant difference for the military balance in the Taiwan Strait. According to President Chirac, for example, the lifting of the arms embargo is unable to modify the strategic relations in the region (*"Il n'est naturellement pas de nature à modifier les rapports stratégiques"*) ("Conférence de presse," 2004: 4). Europeans in favor of lifting the ban also emphasized that the legal basis of the embargo is fragile and creates growing problems of implementation, especially with new EU member states. In sum, Europeans consider that from a material point of view, the embargo is not tight and ultimately inefficient.

Finally, regarding human rights, Europeans argue that since 1989, China's policymakers have actually made progress, arguably too limited, but progress nevertheless. However, this progress cannot be attributed to the arms embargo which makes no practical difference on human rights conditions in China.

On the Chinese side, while officials studiously avoided any detailed reference to material expectations, several material objectives were part of their calculation. Without explicitly linking the arms embargo and commercial deals, Chinese officials repeatedly pointed out that the end of the embargo would, as Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui said, "greatly push forward bilateral relations" (Agencies, 2004). Defense analysts argue that lifting the ban would facilitate China's capacity to buy weapons and defense-related sophisticated technology from Europe. More than buying weapon systems, Chinese officials would also be interested in technology-transfer, co-development and co-production, especially French missile technology, German submarine technology and British engine technology, including advanced electronics and information technology, precision-guidance for missiles, sensors, lasers, radars and stealth technology (Archick et al., 2006: 16). The lifting of the arms embargo could also provide several indirect material benefits to China. First, it would increase China's bargaining power with other weapons suppliers, notably Russia and Israel (Umbach, 2004: 3). Second, if European arms manufacturers were to supply China, Chinese officials believe that they could persuade them to stop selling arms to Taiwan (Lam, 2004). Third, Chinese officials think that if the EU were to lift its embargo, it would put great pressure on the U.S. to follow suit (Lam, 2004).

B. Nonsymbolic Rationales:

Against the Lifting of the EU's Arms Embargo

Those who oppose the lifting of the arms embargo, especially U.S. officials, argue that lifting the embargo would enable China to

accelerate its defense modernization by filling key technological gaps. China's resulting defense modernization would change the military balance in Northeast Asia, and especially in the Taiwan Strait. The transfer of technology could take two forms that appear worrisome to U.S. officials in Congress more than in the State Department. First, EU countries might sell additional dual-use technologies and weapons to China. Second, since EU companies are involved in U.S.-European defense cooperative projects, they might transfer U.S. defense technology to China, undermining U.S. export controls and sanctions on arms sales (Archick et al., 2006: 3). In March 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained that lifting the EU ban on arms sale to China, "might actually serve to alter the military balance in a place where the United States, in particular, has very strong security interests" (quoted in: Austin, 2005: 1-2; Casarini, 2006: 35-37).

Throughout the arms embargo diplomatic crisis, Japanese diplomats also emphasized the potential military consequences of lifting the ban. For example, on February 8 2005, Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura explained to Javier Solana that Japan opposed the lifting of the arms embargo because it would have "a negative effect on security not only in Japan, but also in East Asia" (quoted in: Archick et al., 2006: 32). Contrary to the U.S., Taiwan, and the European Parliament, Japanese diplomats did not link the lifting of the arms embargo and human rights. This choice is coherent with Japanese policy-makers' broader reluctance to actively promote human rights in Southeast Asia (Katsumata, 2006). They repeatedly expressed military concerns related to rapid increases in the Chinese defense budget and its lack of transparency. First, they argued that if the embargo was lifted, European countries could help China to increase their naval capabilities, threatening Japan's sea lanes of communication. Second, Japanese policy-makers thought that lifting the ban would contribute to shift the military balance in favor of China in the Taiwan Strait. Lifting the arms ban could embolden the Chinese leadership and facilitate the use of force against Taiwan (Ueta,

2006: 6-7). Furthermore, U.S. and Taiwanese officials argue, China's record in the realm of the proliferation of weapons and technologies is problematic. China's export-control system is inefficient (Umbach, 2004: 4). Even if Europeans did actually transfer little military technology, some defense analysts were concerned about the "ripple effect" of lifting the arms ban: other countries selling to China would be compelled to sell even more advanced items to remain competitive with European dealers (Archick et al., 2006: 21).

Finally, some European analysts explained that the security rationale raised by U.S. officials against the lifting of the arms embargo was misleading and that, in fact, their goal was protecting U.S. economic interests. The real concern of U.S. officials is not that the member states of the EU sell weapons to China, but that—thanks to the EU engagement policy—their civilian businesses would find themselves better positioned on an intensively competitive market. U.S. economic interests and concerns about growing European competition, especially in the commercial aircraft sector, contributes to motivating, in part, American opposition to an end of the arms embargo (Archick et al., 2006: 20).

C. Symbolic Rationales: In Favor of the Lifting of the EU's Arms Embargo

When Chinese diplomats officially expressed their country's position on lifting the arms embargo, they pointed out that their goal was not to purchase arms. Their intention, they argue, was to put an end to a humiliating situation that reflected neither changes in China since 1989, nor in relations between the EU and China. For them, the arms embargo represented the past, and the Cold War in particular. China's Premier Wen Jiabao, for example, said that the embargo is "a product of the Cold War era and is totally outdated" (quoted in Lam, 2004: 1; see also Buckley, 2005, April 11). During meetings with EU officials, Chinese policy-makers

have explained time and again that they perceived the arms embargo as an affront to China's dignity (Patten, 2006: 260). China's Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing pointed out that the EU ban on arms sales entailed a form of "political discrimination" against China. Chinese officials regularly stressed the fact that the only other countries with which the EU has maintained an arms embargo are Zimbabwe, Sudan and Burma/Myanmar, and they noted that North Korea has not be subject to the same ban (Casarini, 2006: 31).

The Chinese official position on the arms embargo fits the victimization narrative that became dominant in China in the 1990s (Bush, 2005: 192). In sum, Chinese officials are hoping, in part, to set aside their perceived victimization and regain honor and prestige by eliminating this source of humiliation and winning a symbolic contest in their conflict with Taiwan (on the relationship between prestige and symbolism, see O'Neill, 2001: 195). Lifting the arms embargo would demonstrate that China is, in principle, able to buy weapons and have normal military-to-military links with EU countries. The fact that the authority that would lift the ban is the EU, a part of the West, provides additional credence to the signal that China is worthy of equal treatment and not of discrimination. Finally, lifting the embargo would help establish the country's "face" in the hierarchy of international power. As honor is in part associated with group membership, Chinese officials are keen on receiving equal treatment as a full member of the international community, instead of being marginalized as a failed or rogue state (O'Neill, 2001: 87-88).

European policymakers also perceive the Chinese arms embargo as a hindrance to developing closer EU-China ties. For them, the arms embargo is an outdated symbol of the past. President Chirac explained that he was "favorable to the lifting of an embargo which is, by now, more than 15 years old, and which does not correspond at all to the political reality of the contemporary world" ("Conférence de presse," 2004: 2). Since

1989, proponents of lifting the ban argue, China's leadership has changed, as has Chinese society. EU officials perceived the Chinese rationale and agreed with it. They were keen to treat China as a full-fledged member of the international society, and for the EU the arms embargo was one element of a wider, and deepening, relation with China (Casarini, 2006). When he reported to the European parliament on the arms embargo in November 2004, the Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten explained: "The Chinese authorities consider the embargo to be evidence of discrimination against them, arguing that it is 'obsolete.' They claim that it severely hinders the further development of bilateral relations" (Patten, 2004: 1). On 21 April 2005, Javier Solana (High Representative for CFSP [HR—CFSP]) observed: "We don't want to deal with China with sanctions, we want to deal with China as a country in the international community" (quoted in: Austin, 2005: 10).

From January to April 2005, EU officials, like Javier Solana and Peter Mandelson, described the arms embargo as "unfair" and "anachronistic" (Austin, 2005: 13). They explained that it sends a negative signal about the state of EU-China relations (Archick et al., 2006: 19). Hence, "lifting the embargo on China would be a politically symbolic act, and that it would remove a psychological barrier to improved relations with China" (Archick et al., 2006: 19). For example, in January 2005, Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative for CFSP, explained that lifting the arms embargo is "more a political decision than a military one . . . it simply involves putting a stop to a political decision made at a specific time in the history of China, rather than a modification of military relations between the EU and China. It does not mean increasing arms exports" (Agence Europe, January 26, 2005, quoted in Archick et al., 2006: 19). European officials believe that by treating China as a respectful actor, they can ease its integration into the international system and truly develop their engagement policy, as well as a genuine strategic partnership (Casarini, 2006: 31). EU officials have explained that the lifting of the arms embargo would

be mainly a “symbolic gesture” (Casarini, 2006: 32).

This political decision does not imply that EU member states would sell arms or military technology to China. Their goal, as they see it, is not to change the current strategic balance in East Asia (Casarini, 2006: 32). In the Presidency conclusions of the Brussels European Council of 16-17 December 2004, the European Council officially and publicly reaffirmed its political will to continue working towards lifting the arms embargo, but “underlined that the result of any decision should not be an increase of arms export from EU member states to China, neither in quantitative nor qualitative terms” (Council of the European Union, 2004: 19). In March 2005, in an interview published by the Japanese daily *Asahi Shimbun*, Jacques Chirac explained that lifting the embargo was aimed at improving relations with China. “The Europeans have no intention of engaging in an armaments exportation policy toward China . . . What the Europeans want is to normalize their relations with China” (Chirac, 2005, March 21). Since, many EU policymakers see the arms embargo as “merely” symbolic and weak, lifting it does not appear particularly significant (Archick et al., 2006: 18).

D. Symbolic Rationales:

Against the Lifting of the EU’s Arms Embargo

Those who oppose the lifting of the arms ban refer to symbolic arguments as well. First, the U.S. State Department connects the arms ban to its original motivation: China’s human rights violations, which, they argue, are still relevant. Lifting the embargo would reduce the leverage of the U.S. and Europe on China to improve its human rights situation. “From the viewpoint of U.S. concerns, a relaxation would send a signal to China that it can continue to violate international standards of human rights and that the United States, rather than China, is increasingly isolated in its views” (Archick et al., 2006: 8). For instance, in June 2004, a State Department spokesman pointed out that “lifting the ban

would not contribute to regional stability and would send the wrong signal to China regarding its continued poor human rights record” (quoted in: Anthony, 2005: 10).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), activists and human right groups used similar arguments. On March 22, 2005, hundreds of people, including the former leaders of the 1989 pro-democracy movement, relatives of victims of the crackdown, and other activists, signed a letter to the Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union and to the President of the European Commission noting that: “Doing away with this sanction without corresponding improvements in human rights would send the wrong signal to the Chinese people, including especially those of us who lost loved ones, who are persecuted, and for all Chinese who continue to struggle for the ideal that inspired the 1989 movement” (Open letter to EU Secretary-General and President of the European Commission, March 22, 2005). Brad Adams, from the UK’s Human Right Watch, explained: “This is a huge political signal from Europe that they are willing to forget about Tiananmen Square” (BBC News, January 21, 2005). Robert Parker, the military security and police coordinator for Amnesty International explained: “What signal does this send to human rights defenders who are imprisoned for their activities in China? What leverage does the EU then maintain, if any, over China if it gives up the arms embargo in terms of human rights?” (quoted in: Austin, 2005: 2).

Similarly, Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ May 2006 position paper on the arms embargo warned that: “Lifting the embargo now would equate to nothing less than an endorsement of China’s continued misconduct. This would clearly fly in the face of the European Union’s original intent in implementing the embargo, and send the wrong signal to Beijing” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006: 3). Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ position paper continues: “By this token, China’s leaders could end up believing that China’s economic allure means that they can make the European Union cooperate without making any effort to resolve the issues related to the Tiananmen Square incident and other

human rights issues” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006: 3-4). This sense of betrayal and Taiwan’s policy-makers criticism of what they saw as the EU’s hypocritical violation of fundamental European principles is also a common response of Taiwanese policy-makers to their frustration in their relationship with the U.S. (Bush, 2005: 252). In short, as Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s (SIPRI’s) arms trade expert Siemon Wezeman argued, the EU’s arms embargo is “the last political symbol left over from a package of measures which was put together after 1989. And there’s still enough to criticise about the human rights situation in China for that symbol to be retained” (Amnesty International evidence to Select Committee on Defence, 15 December 2004, quoted in: Austin, 2005: 2).

Second, the other disturbing symbolism of lifting the arms embargo is related to the military balance in Northeast Asia, and especially in the Taiwan Strait. In 2003, the International Crisis Group underlined that the military balance in the Strait, and its perception was a sensitive issue: “The bigger issues are transparency and managing the perceptions of the military situation in the Strait. Both sides are too willing to use point scoring about military deployments, and this overshadows the visible progress in civil cooperation, especially the prospect for establishing comprehensive direct links and joint oil exploration in the middle of the Strait” (International Crisis Group, 2003). During her first visit in Asia in March 2005, Secretary of State Rice emphasized that an initiative that could appear to be modifying the military balance between China and Taiwan would constitute a problem for the U.S.: “Anything that would appear to try and alter that balance would be of concern to us” (quoted in: Archick et al., 2006: 10). Specifically, she explained: “The European Union should do nothing to contribute to a circumstance in which Chinese military modernization draws on European technology or even the political decision to suggest that it could draw on European technology when, in fact, it is the United States—not Europe—that has defended the Pacific” (quoted in: Archick et al.,

2006: 10). Similarly, at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 16, 2005, Senator Lugar explained: "This is no time to be taking steps that might either help China achieve a decisive military advantage over Taiwan or send the wrong political signal" (quoted in: Archick et al., 2006: 3). Overall, according to Rice, lifting the embargo in a context of growing concern vis-à-vis Chinese policies regarding human rights and the military balance, "would not be the right signal" (quoted in: Austin, 2005: 2). It would also send a signal in Washington that "the EU cannot be trusted to be a responsible security partner" (Archick et al., 2006: 26).

More specifically regarding Taiwan, the symbolism of lifting the arms embargo appeared to opponents to be especially problematic. From the U.S. point of view, the arms embargo is perceived within the broader framework of the relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan, and especially the implementation of the *1979 Taiwan Relations Act* (P.L. 96-98). American officials worry that in ending the embargo, "the EU could inadvertently send a different message for that of U.S. policy, which denies Beijing's claim to any justification to use force against Taiwan" (Archick et al., 2006: 31; Bush, 2005). Lifting the embargo is perceived by U.S. and Taiwanese officials as undermining the EU's stated policy of supporting a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question. By adopting a strong position on this, comparatively minor issue, U.S. policy-makers signal the determination of their commitment in favor of Taiwan.

Taiwanese officials' concerns focused on the indirect legitimation that lifting the ban could have for Beijing. In November 2004, Chairman Jaushieh Joseph Wu of the Mainland Affairs Council pointed out that the European Union must "carefully handle the . . . arms ban to avoid giving China the wrong impression that Europe supports its military threat against Taiwan" (Mainland Affairs Council, 2004). According to the Republic of China's (ROC's) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, lifting the arms embargo would "represent support for China in its attempt to

use force to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty, security, and dignity" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006: 9). At a minimum, lifting the embargo before the establishment of a framework to ensure cross-strait dialogue "would reduce Beijing's willingness to resume dialogue with Taiwan, thus making cross-strait peace even less likely" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006: 15). In sum, for Taiwan, the arms embargo has an important symbolic meaning: it can make China realize that "peace and freedom-loving countries that uphold democracy and human rights do not welcome its strong-handedness and military build-up at all" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006: 15). Hence, "Continuation of the European Union sanctions against China would directly lead to world peace and the development of democracy" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006: 16).

IV. From "Merely Symbolic" to the "Wrong Signal": Messages and Conflict in the EU's Arms Embargo Crisis

Why did the prospect of lifting the arms ban generate so much resistance, ultimately compelling EU leaders to postpone their arms ban decision beyond the June 2005 deadline? Realizing the magnitude of skepticism and resistance that the lifting of the arms embargo provoked, especially in the U.S., what made it difficult for EU officials to convince U.S., Japanese and Taiwanese officials? Message symbols and focal symbolism can account for key aspects of the international bargaining and crisis on the lifting of the EU arms embargo on China between September 2003 and March 2005.

A. A Bilateral Message Symbol and the Cross-Strait Knot

Since a symbolic message is usually not expressed in language—even if language usually accompanies the symbol—the

intended receiver may not spot that it is a message at all. Furthermore, an unintended receiver may spot a message that does not exist, or a message that is not the sender's intended message. O'Neill explains that usually a message symbol and a focal symbol share a common consequence: people come to a mutual understanding. In some cases, however, as in the arms embargo crisis, the message symbol designed to create convergence of beliefs between the sender and the receiver generated instead a divergence of belief between the intentional sender, receiver, and the audience of stakeholders. In the group of unintended receivers, this external event creates a convergence of belief. The message symbol becomes an event. European officials tried to send to Chinese officials a message symbol, but they used a form—lifting the arms embargo—that had an unwanted focal meaning. Even policy-makers who believe that the European's were in fact unwilling to sell arms to the PRC, saw the lifting of the arms embargo as symbolically important (O'Neill, 2001: 54-58). To paraphrase O'Neill, the crucial issue was not only how American, Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese officials saw the EU's intentions in lifting the arms embargo, but how they would expect each other to act as a consequence of learning about the prospect of the lifting of the arms embargo (O'Neill, 2001: 56).

The original message symbol between the EU and China set up focal symbolism. The symbolic message between the EU and China spoke louder than words and made the undesirable outcome more focal. The EU promise to put in place a "code of conduct" and a "toolbox" to regulate the selling of arms was insufficient to compensate for the negative impact of the lifting of the arms embargo for three reasons. First, the process was sequential. Instead of beginning to define and implement the code of conduct and the toolbox, and then shifting to the decision to lift the embargo, by that time obsolete, the proponents proceeded in reverse order which arouse suspicions. It even became possible to argue, inaccurately, that while the arms embargo was legally binding, the code of conduct need not be. Second, the meaning of

the metaphor “lifting the arms embargo” was much more powerful and perceived more clearly than the “code of conduct”, more technical, arcane and less vivid. Third, European leaders in favour of lifting the arms embargo misperceived the profound mistrust, and depth of suspicion of all the actors involved in the Taiwan conflict about the intentions and objectives of the others.

If U.S. officials, as well as officials in Taiwan and in Japan, saw the lifting of the EU’s arms embargo as a challenge, it is important to ask whether European policy-makers meant it that way, i.e. as a challenge to the U.S., but also to Japan and Taiwan. It is true that for Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder, in the wake of the Iraqi crisis, asserting a “European” position and distancing themselves from the U.S. was part of their objective. However, there is convincing evidence that some European officials (both member states and the EU as such, Council secretariat and Commission) did not mean for the lifting of the arms ban to be perceived as a challenge by the U.S., Taiwan and Japan. Many officials underestimated the reaction of the U.S. and other countries, and they were taken by surprise by the vigor of their opposition. They did not expect that their symbol message to the PRC would be immediately caught in the cross-strait knot (on the cross-strait knot: Bush, 2005; Cabestan, 2003). Their focus was solely (or mostly) on sending a symbol message to China, and they thought that it would be possible to send this symbol message exclusively to China. This bilateral EU-China focus led them to underestimate the interdependence of actors in Northeast Asia, the connections between their commitments, the logic of deterrence in a security dilemma, and the fact that a message symbol targeting one actor only would have multiple receivers and become a focal symbol.

When the high-level EU delegation visited Washington in mid-March 2005 to explain the EU position on the arms embargo, there was surprise at the level of mistrust between the EU and the U.S. (Bates & Niblett, 2005; Dinmore, 2005). A senior EU official admitted: “We can’t solve this in one visit” (quoted in: Dinmore,

2005; see also Dempsey, 2005). Following that visit on March 17 2005, Javier Solana felt the need to underline publicly the need to “dispel some perceptions in the U.S. and elsewhere that we don’t care about East Asia, that we are far away from the Pacific, and therefore not interested, that we take decision out of the blue” (“Summary of remarks,” 2005: 2). This need to dispel the impression effectively acknowledges that EU officials discovered the depth of skepticism that their symbol message to China generated in the U.S. EU officials strenuously denied that the lifting of the arms embargo was in any way a challenge to the U.S., Taiwan or Japan. For example, during his visit to Washington in May 2005, Javier Solana told a press briefing: “What is important is to have a sentiment of trust, of confidence, and nobody in the European Union wants to put American soldiers in difficulty” (quoted in: Agencies, 2005). Chinese officials objected to the third party interference. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao pointed out that: “The arrangement between the EU and China to lift the embargo is not directed against any third country, or aimed at undermining the interests of any third party. Therefore, to stand in the way is totally unnecessary and unreasonable” (Xiao, 2005).

In sum, European officials did not initially view the lifting of the arms ban as posing a serious threat—not even a symbolic threat—to U.S. interests in East Asia. What European officials did by proposing to lift the arms ban was indeed symbolic, but did not unfold quite the way they expected. Lifting the embargo, which European policy-makers presented as an innocuous, “merely” symbolic gesture to China, became a focal symbol: it induced the observers to commonly expect a certain outcome in a game that they would play with each other (O’Neill, 2001: 6). The symbolism of lifting the arms embargo spoke so loudly that it became difficult, even impossible, to hear what Europeans actually said. It symbolically suggested selling arms, encouraging an arms race, helping China militarily, even tacitly accepting the resort to force by China against Taiwan. European officials’ words were

ineffective at dispelling this impression, and even policy-makers and analysts who were aware of European's intentions saw the embargo as symbolically significant (on this dynamic: O'Neill, 2001: 54). Ironically, the adoption of the anti-secession law by China in mid-March 2005 had a similar effect, and provoked its own unwanted effects on the ongoing negotiations to lift the ban. The Chinese message to Taiwan, especially the determination to use force in case of unilateral proclamation of Taiwan's independence, became a message for all the other actors involved as well. The timing of the law's adoption unexpectedly clashed in an unfavorable way with a high-level EU delegation's visit to Washington to assuage U.S. concerns (Dinmore, 2005). U.K. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said China's decision had "created quite a difficult political environment" (quoted in: Dempsey, 2005. See also: Berkofsky, 2005; Bildt, 2005). These consequences took the Chinese leadership by surprise as well.

B. Symbolic Competition, Credibility and Deterrence

Opposition to the EU's initiative was vocal because the arms embargo crisis created a focal symbol in prenegotiations, or more accurately in a web of ongoing negotiations about the rise of China in general, and about China-Taiwan relations specifically (O'Neill, 2001: 61-62). In such contexts, symbols become substantive. The EU symbol message was caught in the broader logic of the contest between China, the U.S., and Taiwan. This contest can be interpreted as one of focal symbolism. In this "symbolic precursor game", the players "make their moves in the knowledge that the outcome will influence the play of the second more important game, through the mechanism of focal symbolism" (O'Neill, 2001: 61). For example, Taiwan and the PRC regularly compete for diplomatic recognition by other states, and for international recognition in international institutions. "Like symbolic prenegotiations, the contest can be viewed as a precursor game that influences the outcome of a conflict with greater consequences.

Success in the diplomatic recognition contest sets expectations of who will back down later on in a Chicken-like crisis” (O’Neill, 2001: 237). Similarly, getting the EU to lift the arms ban—or succeeding in delaying or avoiding the lifting—is taken as an indication of relative position in the more important aspect of the conflict. Winning this contest would be a symbolic victory bringing an advantage in a broader conflict, and create a symbolic precedent. As a consequence, actors engage in bargaining over symbolism, hoping to gain an advantage in the real confrontation. Success in diplomatic bargaining defines the expectations of future interactions. Influencing other countries, or getting their support in a relatively limited contest—like the lifting of the arms embargo—might give indications about the chances of winning the support of allies in a more important future conflict.

Finally, from the U.S. perspective, the lifting of the arms embargo appeared especially problematic because the U.S. is engaged in a policy of dual deterrence in the Taiwan Strait. U.S. policy-makers seek to shape the intentions of leaders in both Beijing and Taipei so that neither will provoke the other (Bush, 2005: 263). The lifting of the arms embargo could be perceived as disrupting the delicate balance of dual deterrence. U.S. officials, for example, might think that Chinese officials would see the embargo as a measure of their resolution about other issues, notably Taiwan. The publicity of the lifting of the arms embargo made it especially salient and problematic in the deterrence process. Its structure made it a member of a larger class of U.S.-China negotiations, and it became a focal point in U.S.-China-Taiwan relations. The EU’s move to lift the arms ban provided an opportunity for U.S. officials to show their resolve about China and China-Taiwan relations, and whether or not it was really a challenge by the Europeans need not be considered (on this kind of dynamic: O’Neill, 2001: 236). In their response to the EU, U.S. officials were not only sending messages to the Europeans, but more importantly to the Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese.

V. Conclusion

From October 2003 to March 2005, the diplomatic crisis between some EU member states, the U.S., Taiwan, Japan and China did not focus directly on arms and military related technology transfer to China, but specifically on lifting the arms embargo. Symbols, and the strategic manipulation of symbols, were a salient element of the arms embargo controversy for both proponents of lifting the ban and their critics. By lifting the arms embargo, EU leaders tried to send a symbolic message exclusively to China, but the form that they used—lifting the arms embargo—created an unwanted focal meaning reaching a much wider audience. EU leaders did not foresee this transformation of their symbol message to China and, for the most part, had not meant to convey the broader focal symbol. Once this focal symbol was in place, however, their words were unable to dispel its symbolic effects. Other actors perceived their initiative as symbolically significant, precisely when the Europeans sought to play down its significance by calling it “merely” symbolic.

My focus on symbolic communication, and specifically on the connection between message symbols and focal symbols, has broader policy implications for the management of the Taiwan Strait conflict. International symbolic communication is based on a specific grammar and a specific vocabulary. Messages can be translated in a symbolic form, and as receivers extract meaning ambiguities may be generated. Understanding the forms of symbolic messages and the logic of their transmission, as well as their drawbacks; should help policy-makers to limit misperceptions in symbolic communication.

References

- Agencies. (2004, December 3). Official: Airbus deal not linked to arms ban. *China Daily*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-12/03/content_397154.htm
- Agencies. (2005, May 5). Solana: It's time to end China arms embargo. *China Daily*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-05/05/content_439616.htm
- American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. (2005, February 1). Europe, China, and the arms embargo: The implications of Sino-European partnership for American interests [Conference transcript]. Retrieved from http://www.aei.org/include/event_print.asp?eventID=994
- Anders, H. (2006, October 24). The EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports: The Current State of Play. Retrieved from <http://www.grip.org/bdg/g1058.html>
- Anthony, I. (2005). Military relevant EU-China trade and technology transfers: Issues and problems. *SIPRI Paper*, p. A21.
- Archick, K., Grimmett, R. F., & Kan, S. (2006). *European Union's arms embargo on China: Implications and options for U.S. policy*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress.
- Austin, G. (2005). *The 1989 China arms ban: Putting Europe's position to congress*. London, UK: The Foreign Policy Centre.
- Bates, G., & Niblett, R. (2006). Diverging paths hurt U.S. and Europe. *International Herald Tribune*, September, 6: 6.
- BBC News. (2005, January 21). Human Rights Watch and the Arms Embargo. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4188017.stm
- Berkofsky, A. (2005, March 25). U-turn politics on EU-China arms ban. *Asia Times Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.>

- atimes.com/atimes/China/GC25Ad01.html
- Bildt, C. (2005, September 26). *Can we overcome the European crisis?* Speech given by Carl Bildt, Former Prime Minister of Sweden—Annual Conference of the EU Institute for Security Studies, Paris.
- Buckley, C. (2005). EU offers China hope on embargo. *International Herald Tribune*, May, 12: 3.
- Buckley, C. (2005, April 11). *China's Hu to tell Europe arms ban should go*. Retrieved from Reuter-Tiscali.
- Bush, R. C. (2005). *Untying the knot: Making peace in the Taiwan Strait*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Cabestan, J-P. (2003). *Chine-Taiwan. La guerre est-elle concevable?* Paris: Economica-Bibliothèque Stratégique.
- Casarini, N. (2006). *The evolution of the EU-China relationship: From constructive engagement to strategic partnership (Occasional Paper No. 64)*. Paris, France: European Union Institute for Security Studies.
- Chirac, J. (2005, March 21). Interview accordée par M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République. *Asahi Shimbun*, p. 11.
- Cobb, R. W., & Elder, C. D. (1983). *The political uses of symbols*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Conférence de presse conjointe de M. Jacques Chirac. (2004, January 27). *Président de la République et de M. Hu Jintao, Président de la République Populaire de Chine à l'issue de leur entretien élargi*. Retrieved from Palais de l'Élysée, Paris.
- Council of the European Union. (2004, December 16-17). *Presidency conclusions, 16238/1/04, February 1, 2005*, Brussels.
- Delahaye, Y. (1977). *La Frontière et le texte: Pour une sémiotique des relations internationales*. Paris, France: Payot.
- Dempsey, J. (2005, March 23). EU feels the heat on China embargo. *International Herald Tribune*.
- Dinmore, G. (2005). EU fails to sway US on China arms ban.

Financial Times.

- Edelman, M. (1964). *The symbolic uses of politics*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Edelman, M. (1971). *Politics as symbolic action*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- Edelman, M. (1977). *Political language: Words that succeed and policies that fail*. New York, NY: Academic Press.
- EU Business. (2006, September, 18). Prodi urges EU to lift arms embargo on China. *EU Business-EU law, politics, and finance*.
- European Council. (1989, June 27). *Presidency Conclusions*. DOC/89/1, Madrid, Spain.
- International Crisis Group. (2003, June 6). Taiwan Strait II: The Risk of War. *Asia Report*, 54.
- Jacob, A. (2006, February 24). Berlin approuve l'embargo européen sur les ventes d'armes à la Chine. *Le Monde*, 25 février.
- Jervis, R. (1970). *The logic of images in international relations*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Jervis, R. (1989). *The meaning of the nuclear revolution: Statecraft and the prospect of Armageddon*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Katsumata, H. (2006). Why does Japan downplay human rights in Southeast Asia? *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 6, 2: 249-267.
- Lam, W. (2004, May 2). European embargo tops Wen's agenda. CNN. Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2004/WORLD/asiapcf/05/02/wen.europe.willy/index.html>
- Mainland Affairs Council. (2004, November 30). *Press Release*, 100.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan). (2006, May). Appeal to the European Union to Maintain Its Arms Embargo on China—Position Paper. Retrieved from <http://www.mofa.gov.tw/webapp/public/Attachment/65715541253.pdf>

- O'Neill, B. (2001). *Honor, symbols and war*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Patten, C. (2004, November 16). *Lifting of the arms embargo on China: The Rueda report on arms exports*. Speech European Parliament, Strasbourg, France.
- Patten, C. (2006). *Cousins and strangers: America, Britain, and Europe in a New Century* (rev. ed.). New York, NY: Times Books.
- Press, D. G. (2005). *Calculating credibility: How leaders assess military threats*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Schelling, T. C. (1960). *The strategy of conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schelling, T. C. (1966). *Arms and influence*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Summary of remarks by Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the CFSP, after the meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister, Li Zhaoxing, Brussels, S118/05. (2005, March 17). Retrieved from http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/discours/84209.pdf
- Ueta, T. (2006). Japan, the EU, and OSCE. In M. D. C. Esteves (Ed.), *EU's foreign governance: CFSP and ESDP and its impact on Asia*. Macau, China: Tipografia Macau Hung Heng Ltda.
- Umbach, F. (2004, June 23). Will the EU arms embargo towards PR China be lifted? Perspectives and implications. *Taiwan Perspective e-Paper*, 29.
- Xiao, H. (2005, June 16). China condemns arms embargo interference. *China Daily*. Retrieved from http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-06/16/content_452145.htm

歐盟解除對中國武器禁運——象徵與策略

巴斯卡·威念松
(洪德欽譯)

摘 要

二〇〇三年十月至二〇〇五年三月，有關解除歐盟對中國武器禁運成爲一項外交危機，以及歐盟與中國、歐盟會員國、美國、台灣及日本間密集談判之焦點。然而，一九八九年武器禁運乃是一項沒有法律拘束力之政治宣言，並不能完全阻止歐洲軍事設施對中國之銷售。另外，宣言也不是唯一以及主要架構用以管制歐盟會員國對中國從事科技與軍事相關的出口。爲什麼某些國家急於將它解除，而其他國家堅持歐盟應該不計代價予以維持。本文論證解除武器禁運引發之國際危機乃是一項結合象徵與策略動機之產物。運用巴利·歐尼爾著作有關國際政治象徵面向之概念架構 (O'Neill, 2001)，本文區分訊息象徵與焦點象徵。藉由解除武器禁運，歐盟領導者意圖單獨向中國發送一項象徵性訊息，然而解除武器禁運之形式對廣泛旁觀者仍產生一項沒有必要的焦點象徵，亦即歐洲國家將對中國出售武器。歐盟領導者事先沒有預見這項對中國象徵訊息之變化，以及就大部分而言，並不意味已產生該項焦點象徵。

關鍵詞：武器禁運、中華人民共和國、歐洲聯盟、策略、象徵