

*Georgina Higuera*

*“China: Revenge of the Dragon” and author specializing in Asia, among others, a journalist.*

*E-mail: [g.higuera@hotmail.com](mailto:g.higuera@hotmail.com)*

## SPAIN-CHINA, TEN YEARS OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

### **Abstract**

*Spain played only a minor role during the first few years of China's almost unconditional opening up to the West, though it had established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in 1973. After the Tiananmen Square incident and the sanctions imposed by the West in 1989, including the arms embargo that is still in place, the support that Madrid showed for the continuity of the economic reforms and the opening-up policy launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 significantly changed China's perception of Spain. Beijing very much appreciated Spain's understanding. From then on, it was considered “China's best friend in Europe” and fifteen years later Beijing upgraded bilateral relations to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The objective of this article is to analyse the reasons for this cooperation and the aspirations of both countries.*

### **KeyWords**

*China; Spain; European Union; arms embargo; Tiananmen; Chinese Foreign Policy; diplomatic relations;*

## SPAIN-CHINA, TEN YEARS OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

### INTRODUCTION

China established its first strategic partnership in 1993, at the height of international isolation, to boost relations with Brazil, a country with which it had no disputes or sanctions and with which trade was increasing. My aim in this article is to analyse what China understood by “strategic partner”, the reasons that led it to step up certain bilateral relations and its motives, in November 2005, for inviting Spain to become a member of what was then a select club, but which has since lost some of its lustre on account of the many new members that have joined over the last five years. Nevertheless, China continues to use it to enhance its image abroad and to protect its interests.

After examining China’s incursion into the international arena after Deng Xiaoping began to open up the country to the outside world in December 1978 and a brief look at early foreign policy in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), I will move on to the real aim of the study and look at Beijing’s determination to lift the arms and technology embargos that were imposed on it by the West following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

Spain – having minimal economic and financial relations with China - played only a minor role during the early years of China’s almost unconditional opening up to the West. However, in November 1990, with China forced into isolation by the West, the then Spanish Foreign Minister, Francisco Fernández Ordóñez, became the first Western authority to visit Beijing. This was the Spanish Government’s way of showing its support for the reforms undertaken by Deng and the continuity of its opening up policy. This huge gesture of support was highly appreciated by Beijing, and from that moment on it regarded Madrid as one of its closest allies. Spain had laid the foundation for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership it would be offered fifteen years later by President Hu Jintao.

### THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGY

In order to understand the different perceptions of strategic partnerships, we must first analyse the meaning of the term “strategy”. According to the Chinese dictionary, strategy is translated as *zhanlue*(战略), which is comprised of two characters: *zhan*

(战), which refers to war (*zhanzheng* 战争), and *lue* (略), which means plan, i.e., “the planning or general management of war”. In Europe, however, the word comes from the Latin word *strategia*, which stems from two Greek words: *stratos* (army) and *agein* (conductor, guide); therefore, the primary meaning of strategy is “the art of directing military operations”. In Wanjun Zhang’s opinion, the two meanings have to do with tactics but, while the Western meaning suggests the use or threat of the use of force, in China *zhanlue* suggests the general and long-term vision required to prepare for war.<sup>1</sup> China and Spain’s different expectations of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can be attributed, according to the author, to the different interpretations of the concept of strategy.

When studying the strategic partnerships forged by China, special mention should be made of the fact that the first one was with Brazil – a developing country with which it had no disputes or sanctions, and with which it enjoyed a thriving bilateral trade following the Cold War and four years after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Later on, the Chinese government spoke of the aims of these partnerships: to maintain a peaceful international environment for China’s modernisation projects, optimise dialogue between China and the world powers, promote a multipolar agenda, practise an economic diplomacy that is more open and attractive to direct foreign investment and improve China’s image abroad.<sup>2</sup>

However, this did not change relations between Beijing and Brasilia; it was merely seen as a gesture in a political situation in which, externally, China was determined to break from the shackles of isolation and, internally, the reforms were given a major boost with Deng Xiaoping’s “trip to the south” in spring 1992.<sup>3</sup>

In 1996, China re-embraced the term “strategic” to establish relations with its great northern neighbour, Russia, in a bid to negotiate a solution to the disputes over the 3,650-km-long border dividing the two countries. Furthermore, Beijing and Moscow shared the view that it was necessary to have a greater distribution of power in the international arena; however, the Chinese government made it clear that the new “strategic partnership of coordination” and cooperation between the two countries

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1 ZHANG, Wanjun Franklin: “China’s Foreign Relations Strategies under Mao and Deng: A systematic comparative analysis” in OVIEDO, Eduardo Daniel “China: Visión y práctica de sus llamadas ‘relaciones estratégicas’”, México: Estudios de Asia y África, vol XLI, núm. 3, (septiembre-diciembre, 2006), pp. 385-404 (Available at <http://rehip.unr.edu.ar/bitstream/handle/2133/2684/2006%20Oviedo%20Relaciones%20Estrat%C3%A9gicas.pdf;sequence=1>).

2 ROCHA PINO, Manuel de Jesús: “China en transformación: la doctrina del desarrollo pacífico”, Foro Internacional, vol. XLVI, núm. 4, (septiembre-diciembre, 2006), pp. 693-719.

3 China’s official website, China.org, regards the ‘south China tour’ as the “backbone” of the Deng Xiaoping Theory on ‘Socialism with Chinese characteristics’, according to which “planning and market forces are not the essential difference between socialism and capitalism”. (Available at [http://www.china.org.cn/china/CPC\\_90\\_anniversary/2011-04/19/content\\_22392494.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/CPC_90_anniversary/2011-04/19/content_22392494.htm)).

was not an alliance and it was not aimed at a third country. The speed with which this partnership was set up suggests that China's real attention was focused on Russia and the US. "China wished to maintain stable and amicable relations with the global powers as the new world order was taking shape".<sup>4</sup>

The following year, President Jiang Zemin and his North American counterpart, Bill Clinton, vowed to boost cooperation and build a constructive strategic partnership. However, George W. Bush took office the following year and it never materialised.

China was defining its role in the world and transforming its relationships with certain countries into strategic ones, whether for economic, geostrategic, security, natural resource or energy reasons, or a combination of all of these. In the early 21st century, it set up around twenty strategic partnerships, six of which were with European countries, including Spain. In 2004, the then prime minister Wen Jiabao explained in Brussels what the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership launched with the EU in 2003 meant for China:

*By "comprehensive" it means that the cooperation should be all-dimensional, wide-ranging and multi-layered. It covers economic, scientific, technological, political and cultural fields, contains both bilateral and multilateral levels, and is conducted by both governments and non-governmental groups. By "strategic", it means that the cooperation should be long-term and stable, bearing on the larger picture of China-EU relations. It transcends the differences in ideology and social system and is not subjected to the impacts of individual events that occur from time to time. By "partnership", it means that the cooperation should be equal-footed, mutually beneficial and win-win. The two sides should base themselves on mutual respect and mutual trust, endeavour to expand converging interests and seek common ground on the major issues while shelving differences on the minor ones.*<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, China decided to admit around thirty new members to the club. These are of such diverse characteristics and clout that it is hard to imagine what it expects of them. Moreover, the fact that close collaborators of Beijing like North Korea and Nepal are regarded as *only* "friends"<sup>6</sup> makes the club appear insignificant. To date, China has built strategic partnerships with 48 countries and three international

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4 FENG Zhongping and HUANG Jing: "China strategic partnership diplomacy: engaging with a changing world", FRIDE, June 2014, (Available at [http://www.fride.org/download/WP8\\_China\\_strategic\\_partnership\\_diplomacy.pdf](http://www.fride.org/download/WP8_China_strategic_partnership_diplomacy.pdf)).

5 WEN Jiabao: 'Vigorously Promoting Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between China and the European Union'. Speech by H.E. Wen Jiabao, Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, given at the China-EU Investment and Trade Forum in Brussels on the occasion of Wen's visit to Europe. *Diario del Pueblo*, 8 May 2004. (Available, in Spanish, at <http://spanish.peopledaily.com.cn/31620/2483424.html>).

6 FENG Zhongping and HUANG Jing: "China strategic..." pp. 8 .

organisations: the European Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the African Union (AU).

## THE PRINCIPLES OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

The principles of China's foreign policy have basically remained unchanged since their inception, and the ultimate goal is the consolidation of the Chinese state. Policy is based on three principles: 1) Maintaining the power of the People's Republic of China (PRC). 2) Defending its territorial integrity, which, with the principle "One country, two systems" facilitated the recovery of Hong Kong and Macau in 1997 and 1999. This principle includes the only "One China" framework, which considers Taiwan an inalienable part of China and hopes for a reunification, rejects outright all support for separatist movements in Xinjiang and Tibet and impedes the recognition of the exiled Dalai Lama and Tibetan government. 3) The quest for prestige and reputation in the eyes of the international community.

After the Kosovo War, and with annual economic growth of 10%, Beijing saw the unlimited power of the US as a threat to its interests, including reunification with Taiwan and its establishment as a superpower, which would explain China's unconditional commitment to multipolarity".<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the country's foreign policy, one of the most centralised and least transparent areas, had been affected by decentralisation, the opening up policy and the absence of a charismatic leader with the authority of Mao or Deng. In addition, new actors were emerging, such as the defence industry, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the provincial authorities, who up to this point had played only a minor role in decision-making in diplomacy".<sup>8</sup> And therefore it used economic growth to reinforce the perception of national security.

In 1997, China's Foreign Minister Qian Qichen presented the four general lines of China's new concept of security and diplomacy for the post-Cold War era to the UN General Assembly:

1. 1. Security systems based on military alliances and arms competition have been unable to ensure peace.
2. 2. Relations between states should be based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty; mutual

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<sup>7</sup> BRITTINGHAM, Michael A.: "China's contested rise: Sino-U.S. relations" in GUO Sujian and HUA Shiping (edit) *New Dimension of Chinese Foreign Policy*, Lexington Books, 2007, pp. 100.

<sup>8</sup> Lu Ning: *The Dynamics of Foreign Policy Decision Making in China*, USA, Westview Press, 1997, Second Edition, pp. 3-5.

non-aggression; mutual non-interference in internal affairs; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence.

3. 3. The international economy should become the basis for regional and global security in order to promote mutual benefit and peer-to-peer practices.
4. 4. *All countries should create consultation and cooperation mechanisms in the area of security and enhance mutual understanding and trust in order to resolve their disputes through peaceful means.*<sup>9</sup>

Based on the assumption that “vulnerability to threats is the main driver of China’s foreign policy”, Nathan and Scobell speak of China’s enemies and claim that it deals with security matters as if they were located in four concentric circles. The second circle contains China’s borders and twenty-two actor countries, including the U.S., whose “presence poses the largest single challenge to China’s security”.<sup>10</sup>

## THE TIANANMEN SQUARE INCIDENT

The opening up to the outside world and the entry of foreign direct investment (FDI) in China put the country under strong pressure from foreign investors looking for guarantees for their investments. As modernisation progressed in China, the country became increasingly dependent on international markets. The *old communist guard* saw some of the concessions made to foreigners as a threat. One of the hardest concessions was that made in 1986 when, in order to attain membership of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), whose directors did not want to expel Taiwan, Beijing had to accept the presence of the “rebel island” under the official name “Taipei, China”. However, the decision proved to be the right one, given that the ADB has been essential in driving development in China and, with 29.76 billion dollars received in loans up to April 2014, it is China’s second largest lender.<sup>11</sup>

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9 ROCHA PINO, Manuel de Jesús: “China in...” pp. 695 and 696.

10 NATHAN, Andrew J. and SCOBELL, Andrew: *China’s Search for Security*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 3 to 5. The authors point to the mighty presence of the U.S. in China’s neighbourhood, with its Pacific Command headquarters in Honolulu; its giant military base on the Pacific island of Guam (9,000 kilometres from the continental U.S., but only 3,000 km from China); its dominating naval presence in the South and East China Seas; its defence relationships of various kinds around China’s periphery with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Taiwan; and its economic and political influence all through the Asian region. All in all, China’s immediate periphery has a good claim to be the most challenging geopolitical environment in the world for a major power.

11 See the statistics published by the ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK (ADB), founded in 1966 and with its headquarters in the Philippines. The ADB states that China, following three decades of

Nevertheless, the rift created between Chinese leaders as a result of these changes had disastrous consequences for the Tiananmen Square protesters. And one of the aspects that must be considered when analysing the disproportionate violence used to quash the protests was the PRC's fear of losing control of the situation and, consequently, its power. There was a fear that the refusal by senior military commanders to obey orders to use force to quash the protest would lead to confrontation between different units within the PLA.<sup>12</sup> Fear that the rift between the party leaders would tear the Communist establishment apart, jeopardise the state and lead to chaos. The neo-conservatives feared that the liberals would replace the communist revolution with a consumerist one, and believed them capable of "destroying the entire present order".<sup>13</sup>

The Tiananmen Square massacre, which has never been investigated, "marked a turning point in relations between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the people"<sup>14</sup> both inside the country and outside the country, between China and the West. Beijing believed that the ensuing sanctions were intended to halt its economic growth and restrict its ability to obtain energy and natural resources. "The U.S. used its dominant voting rights in the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to block most new loans to China for several years, and Japan postponed some of its ODA loans".<sup>15</sup> Once again China felt misunderstood, humiliated and beleaguered by the West, but during its isolation, Beijing kept detailed notes of how the countries reacted, noting Spain's "sympathetic attitude".

At the end of a disastrous 1989, Deng Xiaoping resigned as president of the Central Military Commission, a position from which he had wielded almost absolute power. Before leaving, he drafted his final instructions to the CPC and Jiang Zeming, his successor. In a concise, classical poetic style, Deng wrote a 24-character instruction, and provided an additional 12-character instruction for the communist party leaders. The 24 characters described the Foreign and Defence strategy that China was to pursue:

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exceptional economic growth, is now regarded as "an upper middle-income country". (Available at <http://www.adb.org/publications/peoples-republic-china-fact-sheet>).

<sup>12</sup> On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Tiananmen Square, on 3 June 2014 *The New York Times* published an article highlighting the refusal of Maj. Gen. Xu Qinxian, leader of the mighty 38th Group Army, to use military force to quash the protests in Beijing, as well as other information about the division of the PLA that can be found in army documents spirited out of China in recent years and acquired by Princeton University Library (USA) after their authenticity was verified. (Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/world/asia/tiananmen-square-25-years-later-details-emerge-of-armys-chaos.html>).

<sup>13</sup> YARGER, Richard: *El Partido. Los secretos de los líderes chinos*, Madrid: Turner, 2011, pp. 68.

<sup>14</sup> HIGUERAS, Georgina: "Disidencia y derechos humanos en China", revista del IEEE, núm. 3, (mayo 2014), pp. 181-198. (Available at <http://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/pprevistas/e2c2a26b-fb63-65ab-9bdd-ff000451707/index.html#/182/>).

<sup>15</sup> NATHAN, Andrew J. and SCOBELL, Andrew: *China's...* pp. 250.

Observe calmly; secure our own position; calmly deal with things; conceal our capabilities and bide your time; keep a low profile, never become a leader.

This was followed by the 12-character instruction:

*Enemy troops are outside the walls. They are stronger than we. We should be mainly on the defensive.*<sup>16</sup>

Deng did not specify who the enemies were; he simply asked his successors to be cautious and to focus their efforts on internal development because it was not yet time to project its force outward.

## SPAIN “CHINA’S BEST FRIEND IN EUROPE”

The fact that China’s reform and opening up process coincided with Spain’s political transition and democratisation of diplomacy meant that Madrid felt a certain sympathy towards the Asian giant, particularly following the magnificent welcome extended to King Juan Carlos, the first head of state to visit the PRC. Bilateral relations were developing within a framework that was new for both countries and this meant that Spain – which had itself experienced international isolation during the dictatorship – took a more sympathetic stance toward the Chinese progressives’ determination to continue with the economic reforms and openingup policies following Tiananmen Square.

A member of the European Union since 1986, Spain held the presidency-in-office of the Council during the first half of 1989. Therefore, it was at a summit held in Madrid in late June that it was decided to penalise China with a series of sanctions similar to those imposed by the U.S. These included a) interruption by the Member States of the community of military cooperation and an embargo on trade in arms with China; b) suspension of bilateral Ministerial and High Level contacts; c) postponement by the community and its Member States of new cooperation projects; d) education of programmes of cultural, scientific and technical cooperation, and e) prolongation by the Member States of visas to Chinese students who wish it.<sup>17</sup>

Amendments to Chinese Human Rights legislation enabled the EU to lift the sanctions in October 1990, except for the arms and dual-use civil and military technology embargos. As a gesture to mark the end of isolation, Madrid sent its Foreign Minister

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16 DENG Xiaoping in KISSINGER, Henry: *China*, Barcelona, Random House Mondadori, 2012, pp. 452.

17 Declaration on China of the European Council, 26-27 June 1989. (Available at [http://www.european-council.europa.eu/media/848998/1989\\_june\\_-\\_madrid\\_eng\\_.pdf](http://www.european-council.europa.eu/media/848998/1989_june_-_madrid_eng_.pdf)).

to Beijing the following month. Thus, Fernández Ordóñez became the first senior government official from the West to meet with the Chinese authorities following Tiananmen Square. Five years later, King Juan Carlos became the first European head of state to visit China since that fateful fourth of June 1989.

Eugenio Bregolat, three times Spanish ambassador to China, claims that he frequently heard Chinese officials say that “Spain is China’s best friend in Europe”. Bregolat bases his claim on the Memoirs of Qian Qichen, the Minister of Foreign Affairs between 1988 and 1998, who said:

*In a general surge against China at that time, Spain was the country that did not follow the crowd and showed understanding for the situation in this country, it never ceasing to perform the credit agreement, economic cooperation projects between states, and took active measures to resume political exchanges.*<sup>18</sup>

“Spain put itself on China’s map” when González took the decision to send his head of diplomacy, said Bregolat, during an interview with the author of the work. “We understood”, he goes on to add, “that Deng Xiaoping was being hounded by the conservatives who reproached him because the West, in exchange for supporting the economic reforms (markets, capital, technology, admission of Chinese students to Western universities, etc.) was demanding the establishment of a liberal democracy in China, i.e., precisely what the students in the Square had been demanding - the end of socialism. And it was decided, despite the media attention, to help Deng”.<sup>19</sup>

Spain also had the support of a hugely popular figure in China, Juan Antonio Samaranch, who, when Vice-president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1980, orchestrated the Taiwan-China formula so that the PRC could return to the IOC and promote its sport. In 2001, when Samaranch announced in Moscow that Beijing would host the Olympic Games in 2008, no one doubted his unwavering support. Indeed, China was so grateful that it opened the Juan Antonio Samaranch Memorial Museum in Tianjin in 2013.<sup>20</sup>

18 BREGOLAT, Eugenio: “Las relaciones bilaterales hispano-chinas: pasado, presente y futuro”, brief epilogue in Xulio RÍOS (coord.): *Las relaciones hispano-chinas Historia y Futuro*, Madrid: Catarata, 2013, pp. 217 and 218.

19 BREGOLAT, Eugenio: Interview conducted by email on 23 June 2014. The ambassador did not clarify whether China had invited Spain to become a member of the strategic club or vice versa. However, he does say that: “From our point of view, the relationship with China had to be strategic because of China’s present and future importance. I believe that the formula at the time was the right one: to the three traditional dimensions of Spanish foreign policy (European, which is now halfway between domestic and foreign policy, Latin American and Mediterranean), Spain should add a fourth one: Asia-Pacific. This is justified by the economic and geopolitical situation. Failure to understand this is to remain stuck in the last century. The reality is that Spain, as a society and as a country, has (with all the exceptions you want) not understood China at all or how China is changing the world we live in”.

20 Available at <http://www.sport.es/es/noticias/mas-deportes/abren-china-museo-juan-anto>

When Felipe González visited China in 1985 he said he was impressed with the country's "spectacular development" and with the pragmatism of Deng, who said the now-famous line "It doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice". Determined to "design and implement a foreign policy that would make Spain a middle power",<sup>21</sup> González was convinced that Spain could act as a bridge between Latin America and China and "coordinate Beijing's interests" in the region, as announced by the government spokesman and Minister for Culture, Javier Solana<sup>22</sup>. González offered Spain's knowledge to his counterpart, Zhao Ziyang, who was preparing his first visit to Latin America. Although the term "triangulation" was not adopted until the Asia Pacific Framework Plan 2000-2002,<sup>23</sup> in 2010 González acknowledged that he had been promoting Spain's potential to act as a bridge between Latin America and other regions since 1985.

However, triangulation did not produce any concrete results. "After González' visit, we were convinced that we could learn a lot from Spain and that we could enter Latin America with its assistance. Very soon, however, and before the turn of the century, we had developed close and productive relations with many Latin American countries and therefore ceased to consider triangulation".<sup>24</sup>

While Spain was vying to become the world's eighth largest economy and China the sixth (China is now the second and Spain the twelfth largest economy in the world), economic relations between the two shrunk in absolute terms. While in 1985, Spain had a record share of 1.3% of the Chinese market, the figure had fallen to 0.32% by 2005. Spanish investment did not reflect the growth of the two economies either, with China accounting for just 0.18% of total Spanish foreign investment in 2004. Moreover, when Spanish imports of Chinese goods increasing to 5%, it caused a trade imbalance, with a coverage rate of just 12.8%.<sup>25</sup>

This data demonstrates that economic relations between the two countries were insignificant. The Spanish government's, albeit erratic, attempts to enter new markets in China were somewhat frustrated by an ill-prepared entrepreneurial sector, foreign

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21 HERRERA FELIGRESAS, Andrés: "Las relaciones diplomáticas entre España y China" in Xulio RÍOS (Coord), *Las relaciones hispano-chinas Historia y Futuro*, Madrid: Catarata, 2013, pp. 63.

22 BAYÓN, Félix: "Felipe González afirma que con su visita pretende incrementar las inversiones japonesas en España", *El País*, 11/09/1985.

23 Asia Pacific Framework Plan 2000-2002, (Available at [http://www.casaasia.es/pdf/home\\_plan\\_asia\\_pacifico.pdf](http://www.casaasia.es/pdf/home_plan_asia_pacifico.pdf)).

24 Statements made by Chinese diplomats in Beijing to the author in March 2013.

25 BREGOLAT, Eugenio: *La segunda revolución china*, Barcelona, Ediciones Destino, 2007, pp. 369 to 413.

competition that was knowledgeable of and well established in these markets, and each parties' ignorance of the other's capabilities. It was not, therefore, for economic reasons that China had chosen Spain as a strategic partner. The decision has to be examined in light of Spain's geostrategic position, and the political clout that Madrid had at the time, particularly within the EU, where Javier Solana was the Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

## THE EMBARGO OF DISCORD

In response to the international trade sanctions and intense pressure from states and NGOs, the Chinese government published its first white paper on Human Rights in China in 1991.<sup>26</sup> In the paper, subsistence and economic development were given priority over the full enjoyment of human rights. Talks on the matter between China and its Western partners improved, although the EU continued to exert collective pressure until 1997, when France spearheaded a group, comprised of Germany, Italy and Spain, opposed to continuing to present a resolution that was co-sponsored with the U.S. and critical of China at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). Jacques Chirac was accused of yielding to commercial interests, but the French president persisted with his policy. In March 1998, the EU agreed to “neither propose nor endorse, either by the organization as a whole or by individual members, any resolution criticising China”<sup>27</sup> in the Human Rights Commission.

It was accepted that France's approach, that is, the need to have dialogue about respect for human rights, not a farcical resolution that did not have enough votes to make it valid, was the right one. However, China still had one great battle left to fight before it could erase the traces of Tiananmen Square from its bilateral relations: the lifting of the arms embargo, a battle it is still fighting. Beijing has been resolute in its determination to get the EU to put an end to the embargo declared 1989; however, this desire is continuously frustrated by the head-on opposition of the U.S., which is afraid that its European partners will take a giant leap forward in their relations with China, once the main obstacle to relations has been removed. According to Zhu Bangzao, the Chinese Ambassador to Spain, the embargo is fruit of the Cold War, and “China demands that it be lifted in order to undo the political discrimination and defend the right to equality”<sup>28</sup>.

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26 HIGUERAS, Georgina: “Disidencia y ...”.

27 WONG Reuben: “An anatomy of European and American perspectives on China in the International system” in Roland VOGT (edit) *Europe and China Strategic partners or rivals?*, Hong Kong University Press, 2012 pp. 108.

28 ZHU Bangzao: Interview conducted by email on 03/09/2014. The Chinese Ambassador to Spain

France and Germany were the first Member States to submit an official proposal for the lifting of the embargo to the European Council in December 2003. Despite the reluctance of some Member States, the Council agreed to discuss it. Italy and Spain were in favour of it. According to Chirac, the prohibition to sell arms and transfer dual-use technology to China had become obsolete and “did not reflect the political reality of the contemporary world”. Five months later, the UK, Finland and the Netherlands announced their support for the proposal, despite growing pressure and criticism from Washington since the start of the year. Denmark and Sweden led opposition to the proposal.<sup>29</sup>

Brussels tried to assuage the U.S. by reassuring it that the lifting of the embargo would merely be a symbolic or “political gesture” and that it was not the EU’s intention to alter the strategic balance of East Asia,<sup>30</sup> given that the sale of arms and dual-use technology has been subject to what is known as the European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports since 1998. This restricts the export of equipment to countries that do not respect human rights, regions where there is instability or military repression”.<sup>31</sup>

The votes against the proposal in the German and EU Parliaments, and its almost unanimous rejection on 2 February 2005 by the U.S. House of Representatives (411 votes to 3), who believed that the lifting of the embargo would bring instability to the Taiwan Strait and put the U.S. Navy’s Seventh Fleet at risk,<sup>32</sup> counteracted the diplomatic campaign China had undertaken in a bid to end what it considered a humiliation.

Beijing believed that it could celebrate the 30th anniversary of relations with the EU (16 September 1975) without the stigma of the embargo, which was why it revived its dormant strategic club, throwing the doors open for the EU in 2003, France, Germany, Italy and the UK in 2004, and Spain and Portugal in November 2005 during the visit of President Hu Jintao. By then, however, U.S. pressure had deprived China of its *birthday present*, although Beijing did not withdraw the invitation to Madrid and Lisbon.

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until December 2014 considers that bilateral relations are smooth when it comes to communication and cooperation in international affairs. He pointed out that “Spain is China’s eighth largest trade partner in the EU. In 2013, bilateral trade totalled 24.9 billion dollars, and was up 1.4% over the previous year. Chinese exports to Spain increased 3.8%, to 18.93 billion dollars, and Chinese imports to Spain totalled 5.98 billion, representing a drop of 5.5%”.

29 CASARINI, Nicola: “The evolution of the EU-China relationship: from constructive engagement to strategic partnership”. European Union Institute for Security Studies, October 2006. pp. 30.

30 *Ibid.*, pp.32.

31 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: Resolution on the European Union Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. Official Journal C034 of 02/02/1998, pp. 0163.

32 CASARINI, Nicola: “The evolution of...”, pp. 31 to 35.

Enrique Barón, one of the first members of González' government to visit China, claims that what Beijing was aiming for when it made Spain a global strategic partner was to "be granted market economy status in the WTM and the lifting of the arms embargo by the EU".<sup>33</sup>

The Hispanic-Chinese rapprochement prompted Spain, during its presidency of the Council in the first half of 2010, to make another attempt to have the embargo included in the agenda. Despite enormous pressure from Washington, Spain agreed to take the matter to the European Council. In February 2010, Godement insinuated that the reason Barack Obama was not going to attend the US-EU Summit, due to be held in May, was that Spain's Foreign Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, was trying to have the end of the arms embargo put on the agenda of the EU summit to be held later that year. According to Godement, Moratinos' endeavours reflected "China's priorities".<sup>34</sup>

Spain persisted in its attempts up to three days before the summit, until it became obvious that the US had once again won the battle, causing a rift, mistrust and confrontation between the Member States.

The embargo has virtually become a showdown between Washington and China. For Beijing, which is supplied with arms by Russia, the Ukraine and Israel, it is more a question of shame, and even anger at the EU and its Member States at being treated the same way as Burma, Sudan and Zimbabwe",<sup>35</sup> countries that have arms embargoes with Brussels.

The showdown is clearly evident from the Department of State cables compiled by WikiLeaks. Of particular interest are those that refer to Washington's request to the EU embassies to prevent Spain, during its presidency of the EU, from having the lifting of the arms embargo placed on the EU agenda. In this regard, cable number 249230, dated 17 February 2010, states:

*This is an action request for all Embassies in EU countries to reiterate our position that the EU should retain its arms embargo on China... We continue to believe that lifting the embargo is not warranted, on either human rights or security grounds... We refer you to the Department of Defense's annual PLA Military Power Report, which highlights the*

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33 BARÓN, Enrique: Interview conducted by email on 11 July 2014. When speaking about the pressure exerted by the U.S., the former minister and European Parliament President declared that "there is growing concern about the arms race in the Far East and the role of China as a regional power, without there being any change to the regional security and defence framework".

34 GODEMENT, François: "Again, the China arms embargo issue", European Council on Foreign Relations, 03/02/2010.

35 LI Wang: "From Client Status to Strategic Partnership: China's changing perceptions of Europe" in VOGT, Roland: *Europe & China Strategic Partners or Rivals?* Hong Kong University Press, 2012, pp. 81-93.

*increased capabilities of Chinese military forces. Lifting the arms embargo would have serious implications for the security and stability of the Pacific region.*<sup>36</sup>

Among the WikiLeaks cables published by El País, worth a special mention is the one numbered 32784 and dated 17 May 2005, which reveals that the then Spanish Minister for Defence, José Bono, used a speech to “announce his personal opposition to the lifting of the EU arms embargo on China” and that after the event he told the *Charge d’Affaires* at the U.S. embassy in Madrid privately that “he had made this statement to honor a request made by Secretary (of Defence, Donald) Rumsfeld”. Bono made clear that he wanted Secretary Rumsfeld to be informed that “he had “complied” with the request”.<sup>37</sup>

Business people in the Spanish defence industry regard the lifting of the arms embargo on China as a “political issue”, given that most security and defence companies in the EU would not be able to benefit from it because they are largely dependent on the cooperation of U.S. companies and cannot therefore sell their technology without the permission of the latter or without foregoing the lucrative U.S. market. Companies not subject to these restrictions have managed, even with the embargo, to increase arms sales to China, as can be deduced from the annual reports of the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports which, since 2002, has been specifying the countries or regions to which arms are exported and with which they have signed contracts; according to these reports, the destination countries for various consignments are China (continental), Hong Kong (China) and Macao (China).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> WIKILEAKS: Several European newspapers, including El País, and the U.S. *The New York Times* had access to more than 250,000 cables from the U.S. Department of State which were obtained by the WikiLeaks organisation. These reveal unpublished information on US diplomacy in every corner of the globe, especially in the more troubled regions, and lay bare U.S foreign policy. (Available at [http://elpais.com/elpais/2010/12/14/actualidad/1292318240\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2010/12/14/actualidad/1292318240_850215.html)).

<sup>37</sup> DOCUMENTATION PROVIDED BY WIKILEAKS, U.S. Embassy in Madrid, “Cable on the U.S.-Spain Council Meeting”, El País, 07/12/2010.

<sup>38</sup> SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute) compiles a list of all annual reports published by the UE on the arms trade. (Available at [http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/transfers/transparency/EU\\_reports](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/transfers/transparency/EU_reports)).

## CONCLUSIONS

China launched strategic partnerships at the height of its international isolation. The focus of the strategic club was to improve China's image in a changing world. Although the goals of the partnerships were not well defined, the idea was to open up the Chinese economy and modernise the country, while ensuring the peace and stability required to boost development.

The Chinese government stepped up its bilateral relations in order to promote a new world order and, initially, to get closer to Russia and the U.S., although it never managed to establish a strategic partnership, as such, with Washington. By the 21st century, with a thriving economy and a comfortable international position, it shifted from traditional reactive diplomacy to proactive diplomacy and undertook specific actions, such as that aimed at lifting the arms embargo with the EU. The European countries in favour of ending the embargo became strategic partners.

The case of Spain is a paradigmatic one. Despite being considered "China's best friend in Europe", economic relations between the two countries have been weak and not able to keep up the changes that occurred in the two countries; nevertheless Beijing put relations with Madrid on equal footing with those of its most important partners. Spain, clinging to the illusion of triangulation, saw this as a new opportunity for its business sector, but China took the geostrategic approach to try to build up support in Brussels. Its priority was to rally enough support to have the arms embargo lifted; Spain, during its presidency of the EU in 2010, gave China its full backing until the pressure exerted by the U.S. became too much to bear.

Ten years after the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Spain, the two countries claim they are satisfied with the way relations have developed during this period, even though their hopes – the lifting of the embargo and triangulation - have not been realised.

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- *Submitted: 22 december 2014.*

- *Accepted: 27 may 2015.*

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