***Un Dialogue de Sourds:* (Failed) Securitization in the Transatlantic Debate on the China Arms Embargo**

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**Abstract**

*During 2003-2005, the EU contemplated lifting its arms embargo imposed on China following the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. Ultimately, the embargo remained; yet the issue has not been resolved within EU-China relations. Absent resolution, the embargo retains the capacity to create strains not only in the latter, but alos in EU-US and US-China relations. Previous studies of the embargo debate have predominantly been euro-centric, rendering the US as an external actor impacting on the EU’s internal debate. Such perspectives overlook the vociferous contestation that threatened to drive a wedge in the transatlantic alliance. This raises an important question: why was the EU not persuaded by the US’s arguments against lifting the embargo from the outset? Delving into the transatlantic debate, we can construct an understanding of the strategic importance of the issue within the context of the US-EU-China triangle in the post-Cold War international arena. By employing Securitization Theory, I argue that the embargo’s status became securitized by US policymakers; a process that was not replicated within the EU. Consequently, the two sides ended up engaged in a dialogue of the deaf.*

**1. Introduction**

The status of the European Union’s arms embargo against the People’s Republic of China remains unresolved. This creates problems for the management of their strategic relationship, as China insists that its removal is a precondition for closer political ties. The embargo has already caused one significant and very public dispute with the US - the EU’s most important strategic partner – and could yet cause another that would further debilitate the transatlantic relationship. The EU – as a collective foreign policy actor – has yet to find a solution that would produce a positive outcome in one significant external relationship without simultaneously producing a negative outcome in another. The status quo is seemingly untenable, with China repeatedly reiterating demands for the embargo’s end; previous success in playing EU Member States against each other in other issue-areas entails that the embargo remains ripe for exploitation. That US and EU policymakers have been content to sweep the issue under the carpet for over a decade has not closed the gap between their positions. Further, the academic literature has largely failed to present compelling explanations for why the transatlantic partners’ preferences regarding the embargo diverged in the first place or why they failed to effectively communicate their respective positions during the ensuing fifteen-month debate. This paper offers new insights that address these remaining puzzles and could potentially enlighten future academic and policy debates over the embargo issue and the divergent transatlantic responses to the rise of China more broadly.

Harnessing the analytical leverage of Securitization Theory, I argue that the embargo became securitized within the US’s domestic security space, but no parallel process not transpired within the EU. When the US attempted to articulate the security threat posed to its allies and itself by the removal of the EU’s embargo, it was unsuccessful in securitizing the latter. In the absence of a shared security narrative, US policymakers’ arguments conveyed to European counterparts were ineffective, as the latter still regarded the embargo as a ‘normal’ political issue, rather than tied to exceptional security concerns. The EU Member States abandoned their plans not because of the success of US securitization moves, but due to China’s adoption of the Anti-Secession Law altering European assessments of the appropriateness of the *timing* of policy change. US threats of punitive measures were a last-ditch effort, but did not sway EU Member States. The EU’s 2010 and 2011 flirtations with the idea of revisiting the embargo’s status serve as a reminder that the issue still resides within the political, rather than security, domain. Contributing to ongoing theoretical debates, I propose that we can conceptualise a *transatlantic security space*, in which securitization moves can be pursued by actors from either polity with the relevant authority to influence security considerations in the other. In this respect, the embargo represents a case study of an attempted - albeit ultimately unsuccessful - securitization move within this space.

The subsequent section briefly contextualises the embargo debate and summarises academic analyses thereof. Following that, section 3 outlines the theoretical framework and its influence on methodology and source selection. Next, we move to the empirical analysis of the evolution of the embargo case within the EU (section 4) and the US’s securitizing moves in response to the proposal to lift (section 5). Section 6 weighs the implications of diverging responses to the rise of China for the transatlantic relationship. This paper illustrates that while the US and EU engaged in substantive private and public debate, the former’s attempts to influence the course of the latter’s internal deliberations was unsuccessful because the concerns raised – predicated on the identification of an emerging security threat posed by China’s developing military capabilities – were not persuasive to the European audience that largely continued to conceptualise the embargo as a political and symbolic instrument, and of China as largely non-threatening to their interests.

**2. The Embargo Debate**

In December 2003, the EU Member States stated to contemplate lifting the arms embargo that had been imposed upon China in response to the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. The attempt was effectively abandoned in March 2005, but issue has not yet been put to bed, as China has continued to raise the issue in bilateral meetings. In early 2010 and again in 2011, the prospect of revisiting the issue briefly resurfaced within the EU - albeit quickly extinguished in each instance. Soon after the 2016 ‘Brexit’ referendum, Chinese commentators reportedly saw an opportunity to revisit the embargo, given that the UK was perceived as a key opponent to policy change (Stanzel in ECFR, 2016: 5.13–5.27). In the wake of Donald Trump’s election, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations floated the idea that the embargo’s status could be used as a ‘threat’ to remind the new President of Europe’s importance to US interests (Leonard, 2016). Writing in China’s *Global Times*, Liu Jianxi (2017) called for the “outdated” embargo to be lifted. In its 2014 and 2018 EU policy paper updates, the PRC reiterated the call for the embargo to be lifted “at an early date” (MoFA, 2014; Xinhua, 2018). Today, the embargo lies just below the surface of EU-China relations, and by extension EU-US and US-China relations.

The embargo’s return to the EU’s agenda would reopen the old wound in transatlantic ties; the sensitivity in the US to the technological challenge posed by China has grown considerably in recent years. Participants at the Council on Foreign Relations’ (2017) workshop on Chinese investment in critical US technology warned that “a powerful rival has gained or could soon gain access to sensitive and, in some cases, critical technologies that underpin American military superiority and economic might”. In early 2018, the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities held a hearing on ‘China’s Pursuit of Emerging and Exponential Technologies’, during which witnesses described the security challenges posed by China’s pursuit of high-end technology with military applications (Carter, 2018; Cheng, 2018). Although EU exports of dual-use technologies are regulated[[1]](#footnote-1) by common control rules, such items were of central concern to US policymakers during the embargo debate, and would undoubtedly constitute a central element of objections to any proposed policy change. Understanding the nature of the transatlantic dispute is vital to fully articulate the significance of the embargo in the US-EU-China strategic triangle. Serious analysis of the debate’s discursive trajectory is necessary to illuminate the potential pitfalls that would lead policymakers on a journey back down the same path should the issue be revived.

The embargo issue has been subjected to extensive analysis by scholars interested in the impact on EU foreign policymaking and/or the development of EU-China relations. It has often been highlighted in the literature as a key obstacle to the development of a truly strategic relationship (Scott, 2011). Yet the literature has largely overlooked the importance of the resultant transatlantic debate: euro-centric perspectives are predominant (Kreutz, 2004; Vennesson, 2007), with some rendering the US as an external actor impacting upon internal EU deliberations (see Stumbaum, 2009; Casarini, 2009). Privileging these dynamics necessarily precludes in-depth analysis of the EU-US debate; this article redresses the imbalance, offering a more nuanced and theoretically-informed understanding of the debate’s significance, and why we witnessed an outcome where the embargo remained yet left all sides essentially dissatisfied.

Broad studies of EU-China relations routinely touch upon the embargo issue, with a tendency to identify the US’s objections as the causal factor in the EU abandoning its plans (e.g. Ruan, 2008). This has translated into ‘received wisdom’, as demonstrated by a recent media article claiming that the policy was kept “only after *last-minute intervention* by President George W. Bush’s administration” [emphasis added] (Brands, 2018). This oversimplifies the empirics, as US opposition was explicit from the outset and, even when arguments intensified, did not prevent the EU from closing in on consensus around lifting. Shortly after assuming the rotating Council Presidency, the Dutch Prime Minister was told by the US ambassador that the issue was “quickly rising to the top of the US-EU agenda” (US Embassy Netherlands, 2004Xa). Attributing the EU’s ultimate retention of the embargo to US pressure is problematic given the delay of approximately fifteen months from the initiation of the transatlantic debate to the cessation of the movement towards lifting. The value of Securitization Theory is demonstrated in relation to analysing the divergence in US and EU positions in relation to the embargo, and also with respect to Western policymakers’ perceptions of - and policy preferences in response to - the ‘rise’ of China more broadly.

**3. The Transatlantic Security Space as a Venue for Securitization**

In keeping with much of the securitization literature, discourse analysis is employed here as the methodological approach. The embargo debate in itself constitutes a single case study, but one that is layered: the status of the EU’s embargo was successfully securitized within the US’s domestic security space, but not the transatlantic security space. Treating ‘securitization’ as the explanandum (or dependent variable), we have the opportunity to explore why we see a negative outcome in the main venue of interest, despite a preceding positive outcome in another. It is necessary to set out that US policymakers regarded the retention of the EU’s embargo against China as an imperative for US security interests.[[2]](#footnote-2) The paper contributes to the section of the securitization literature that demonstrates its theoretical utility for foreign policy outcomes without falling to the common selection bias of choosing a case study on the basis of a positive value for the dependent variable (Balzacq, 2011: 34). The timeframe of the study concentrates on the 2003-05 period - the duration of the substantive transatlantic debate. Although the issue remains alive (albeit dormant), the US effectively ceased securitization moves because the EU was clearly not going to lift the embargo any time soon. Thus the urgency of getting the European audience to accept their security concerns (formally, what we would consider ‘successful’ securitization) diminished. The paper underscores the continued non-securitization of the embargo within the EU via examination of instances when the issue has been reopened.

The utility of discourse analysis with respect to securitization processes lies in its capacity to facilitate the “[mapping of] the emergence and evolution of patterns of representations which are constitutive of a threat image” (Balzacq, 2011: 39). Here, I examine the patterns of representations used by US policymakers to construct a threat image of China in order to persuade their intended audience - EU policymakers - to retain the embargo and EU responses to these. The substance of the discourse was analysed by drawing on a variety of primary and secondary sources; government documents, press releases, and other publicly available output were obtained through comprehensive online searches. Leaked diplomatic cables that were made available by the WikiLeaks website serve as a ‘fresh’ resource in analysis of the debate. A total of 121 cables mentioning the EU’s embargo were analysed to obtain considerable new insights into the US’s perspective and the substance of the efforts made to persuade EU policymakers. Media output provides direct quotations (speech acts) by relevant actors that were not recorded elsewhere. Discourse analysis is complemented by drawing on semi-structured interviews with US and EU policymakers that I conducted during 2010. At the time, I did not have this particular paper in mind, but nevertheless the insights are clearly relevant.

Rather than rehash Securitization Theory’s precepts[[3]](#footnote-3), my priority is to set out its current application, defining the key actors and processes. The theory is employed to shed light on why the embargo moved from a political to a security issue in the US, but not in the transatlantic security space when the US undertook a series of securitization moves. This outcome transpired in spite of the two sides imposing similar policies at the same time, for the same reason, and with the same objective. The “necessary and sufficient conditions for securitization” to occur identified by Balzacq (2011: 32) are the “*shared critical salience* of an issue marked by the *imperative of acting now*” [original emphasis], which informs the empirical analysis. Floyd (2016: 684) provides a clear framework for ascertaining when securitization can be deemed successful:

(1) the identification of a threat that justifies a response (securitizing move) is followed by (2) a change of behaviour (action) by a relevant agent (that is, the securitizing actor or someone instructed by the same), and… (3) the action taken is justified by the securitizing actor with reference to the threat they identified and declared in the securitizing move.

I will demonstrate in subsequent sections that these criteria were met in the US domestic context, but not the transatlantic security space. To illustrate that US policymakers’ securitization moves did indeed fail to effect change in the EU, it is useful to map out what a *successful* securitization would have looked like. For this counterfactual, I assume that the US’s approach remained the same and only EU policymakers’ receptivity to security claims and subsequent behaviour differed. Such a reaction where US securitization moves - speech acts - were effective would entail EU policymakers being persuaded that the security threats posed by the removal of the embargo were substantive and consequently policy change could not be countenanced. Within the EU’s structures, those who have purview over the determination of its foreign policy – the European Council and the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) – would need to accept the US’s arguments and bring an end to the process of preparing to lift the embargo. This may initially occur at the working-level, with the preparatory work in the EU institutions - particularly, the Political and Security Committee[[4]](#footnote-4) (PSC) - being brought to a halt. Ultimately, we would need to see at a minimum the process end at the level of the European Council, and possibly the legal reinforcement of the embargo in response to the threat.

Although cessation of the lifting process is a necessary condition, it is not sufficient in itself to indicate successful securitization: the relevant EU policymakers would need to justify the change in direction (in this case, continuity or reinforcement) with explicit reference to the threat conveyed by US policymakers’ securitizing moves: that lifting the embargo would expedite China’s military build-up and threaten US - and thereby transatlantic - security interests. For diplomatic reasons, EU policymakers may be reluctant to be so direct in public, but nevertheless we would expect to see that reasoning conveyed in the leaked diplomatic cables, and potentially in media coverage (at the time) through anonymous sources. Although the lifting of the embargo did not occur, it is evident from both public and private statements from EU policymakers that US’s securitizing moves had not been decisive; instead, calculations regarding the political environment had shifted. The EU’s position remains that the embargo constitutes a political rather than military/security policy tool, and will be lifted at some undefined point in the future and is a political rather than military/security issue.

Following the framework established by Hayes (2013), I move beyond the strictures of treating the state as the political unit in which securitization processes occur. Instead, the *security space* is invoked as a heuristic device; this “concept is an effort to systematically understand the ways of social and political structures influence security outcomes. The security space frames the socio-political field in which security actors operate” (Hayes, 2013: 4). As Neal (2009: 335) points out, “securitization is not reducible to speech acts alone”, but rather the wider conditions need to be analysed. I argue that we can conceptualise the *transatlantic* security space as the relevant frame of reference to fully understand the US-EU discursive engagement on the embargo in context. Although the application of the terminology from Hayes (2013) to the US-European domain is (to my knowledge) new, it is essentially predicated on the idea of the *transatlantic security community*. Rather than constituting a defined geographic boundary, the community’s size has changed over time, with waves of enlargement for two of its key institutions: the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Hellmann et al (2013: 3) made a compelling case for treating ‘the West’ as a securitizing entity, selectively invoked in specific contexts rather than a “pre-constituted political space, ready-made and waiting for social scientific inquiry” and used to differentiate from the ‘non-West’ (i.e. the Othering of other states such as Russia and China - the examples used by the authors). This serves as a demonstration of theoretical application of securitization to a non-state entity predicated on shared identity. By defining the *transatlantic* security space, we can identify with greater precision the relevant socio-political boundaries in which agents operate and undertake securitization efforts (Hayes, 2013: 19). The ‘transatlantic’ designation excludes the Pacific-based members of the West[[5]](#footnote-5) and more accurately captures the geographical, political and security contexts in which the EU’s proposal of revoking its embargo was contested by the two main actors.

NATO is the obvious example of the significant degree of institutionalisation in transatlantic relations - and has been a focal point for the security communities literature (e.g. Williams and Neumann, 2000; Adler, 2008) - but is far from the only component. In 1990, the Transatlantic Declaration (US-EC, 1990) formalised diplomatic ties and established regular high-level and working-level consultative frameworks. The framework for cooperation on global challenges was expanded under the New Transatlantic Agenda, which promised deeper “commercial, social, cultural, scientific and educational ties” (US-EU, 1995). The bilateral relationship features a range of formal mechanisms for consultation and cooperation on an extensive range of issues, operating across multiple levels of governance. McGuire and Smith (2008: 36) took this up in their analysis of what they termed the “Euro-American system”, concentrating “the patterns of relations that have grown up and persisted between the societies of the North Atlantic area since 1945 and (initially Western) Europe”. They argued that while the system was changeable rather than static, in the contemporary setting the ‘Euro-American system’ is essentially “identical to the “US-EU system” (McGuire and Smith, 2008: 37).

Beyond US and EU respective policies towards each other and their continuous interactions, McGuire and Smith (2008: 53) argued that, while lacking a “single centre of authoritative decision-making” or “consistent mechanism[s] for the coordination of policies at a comprehensive level”, there is a distinctive transatlantic level of policymaking in which “both formal and informal means of regulating common problems and achieving policy convergence” across the diplomatic, economic, and security/defence domains are possible. It is exactly the institutional framework established by the Transatlantic Declaration and New Transatlantic Agenda that McGuire and Smith (2008) identify as the location of such policymaking processes. The system is described as “mixed actor”, in which state, transgovernmental, and transnational actors participate in policymaking. The two sides host annual high-level summits, sectoral dialogues, working groups, and have a multitude of bilateral agreements ranging from aviation, to organic products, to data privacy, to terrorist finance. There are clear and substantive formal and informal institutional parameters to the transatlantic relationship that allow us to conceptualize a defined security space in which actors on either side can attempt securitization moves, particularly in light of extant bilateral security arrangements.

Given the ontological starting point of security as a social construct, security spaces properly defined are constituted primarily around shared identities (Hayes, 2013: 20-1), defined by the presence of an ‘ingroup’ in juxtaposition to ‘outgroups’. In Hayes’ (2013) analysis of US foreign policy, the ‘ingroup’ is defined as democracies and the ‘outgroup’ as the non-democratic Other. It is the “meaningful similarities” between democracies that “contribute to a shared security space” (Hayes, 2013: 20)[[6]](#footnote-6). The concept of a transatlantic identity is well-established within IR scholarship, focussing on shared values of democracy, the rule of law, and/or significant shared cultural traits (Risse-Kappen, 1996; Hampton & Sperling, 2002). The transatlantic security space’s ‘ingroup’ consists primarily of the US and the EU and its Member States[[7]](#footnote-7). Rather than a binary transatlantic-ingroup/non-transatlantic-outgroup distinction, we can delineate between different outgroups; however, with respect to the embargo, our outgroup focal point is China - defined by its closed authoritarian political system and non-Western culture diametrically opposed to democratic, open polities. Even the considerable extent of economic interdependence with China cannot paper over the gap between their political identities. China’s - or at least its ruling elites’ - authoritarian character with scant regard for human rights (considered as universal by the democratic powers) was heavily critiqued in 1989 when the transatlantic players implemented their embargoes following the Tiananmen massacre.

Within the transatlantic security space, there is a plethora of prospective securitizing actors; depending on the circumstances, officials from states or the EU institutions may attempt securitization. In the present case study, US administration officials assume this role. Their efforts were directed at persuading European counterparts to maintain the embargo, thus policy elites within the EU and its Member States constitute the ‘audience’ on the receiving end of US securitizing moves (speech acts). This approach is consistent with that of focussing on *elite* rather than *popular* audiences in Securitization Theory (Balzacq et al, 2016: 500). As the EU foreign policymaking model is remote from the average citizen, key players at the national and supranational levels constitute the targets of securitizing moves. This is reflected in the US’s approach: although public statements were frequent, it is clear that they were not directly addressing the European populace, the primary targets of their securitizing moves were EU and Member State officials.

Sections of the elite audience may potentially become securitizing actors themselves if the initial securitizing moves prove successful. However, it must be specified that the embargo’s status could only be modified by the foreign ministers (in the Council of the EU) or the heads of government/state (in the European Council), and thus are the only actors who would have been able to securitize the embargo through explicit acceptance of the claims in the US’s securitizing moves. Lower level actors, such as in the PSC, were part of the elite audience, but could not – by themselves – ultimately securitize the embargo as they lacked the authority to affect change. At most, if they accepted the security arguments, they could communicate their shared threat perceptions to the senior officials. As we will see, the failure of US securitizing moves over the duration of the debate entails that the roles of securitizing actor and audience remained stable throughout - there was no point at which individuals within the EU took on the role of securitizing actors after being persuaded by US officials.

The referent object - that which needs to be secured - is the transatlantic community of states with emphasis on, in the first instance, the US itself. In addition, the threats would extend to the US’s regional allies, particularly Taiwan, that would in itself be considered as detrimental to the US’s security. The implicit assumption underpinning US arguments regarding the detrimental impact of lifting the embargo for US security interests was that European actors would perceive this as detrimental to European security interests - a loss of security for one would also be a loss of security for the other, underscoring their security interdependence. The absence of the embargo would not, in itself, constitute the security threat, but rather China’s unchecked rise and expedited military modernization was the primary concern for the US policymakers. Ending the embargo would undermine the US’s ability to provide security in East Asia and, potentially, the global system. Therefore China constitutes the referent subject, painted as a security threat by US policymakers in their claims that the EU must maintain its embargo.

The point of departure from ‘mainstream’ Securitization Theory here is that securitizing moves are ordinarily conceptualised as concerned with affecting some policy change to deal with the identified extant threat (moving the issue beyond ‘normal’ politics), but in this instance the securitizing actors’ intention was to *prevent* a threat from emerging by ensuring policy continuity. This is due to the underpinning logic of the embargo having shifted for US policymakers: in the first instance, the embargoes were political symbols rather than measures to increase or maintain American/European security, but by 2003 the security rationale had taken priority. US actors sought to bring EU Member State preferences into line with their own perspective that the security interests would be served by maintaining the embargo. The policy itself would remain constant, but its underpinning rationale would be moved from the non-security domain to the security domain. This approach accords with Floyd’s (2016: 678) observation that “in liberal democracies, securitizing actors do not always revert to exceptional security policies when they address a threat”. Thus, maintaining the embargo would be regarded as the end result of a successful securitization process *if* EU actors had revealed that they accepted the threat identified by the US and subsequently altered their preferences.

A final point on the theoretical approach: it may appear counterintuitive to make the case for the *transatlantic securitization space* by examining a failed attempt at securitization. I contend that this is not necessarily problematic. Securitisation Theory is not subject to confirmation/falsification on the basis of whether securitisation actually takes place or not. Rather, what is important here is that there are securitisation moves undertaken by actors that believe that their actions can produce the desired outcome – shifting an issue from the political to the security domain. The attempt, then, is what is important for my purposes – the detection of securitisation moves opens up the opportunity to conceptualise a securitisation space.

**4. European Perspectives on Lifting the Embargo**

Understanding the rationale for the imposition of the EU embargo and the political context in which its removal was considered is a necessary step towards explaining the gap between European and American perspectives that contributed to securitization failure. The embargo was not originally conceived of as a means to protect the EU from a threat posed by China. Instead, the embargo was a *political* tool used to signal the EU’s displeasure with violations of Chinese citizens’ physical security and the disregard for human rights norms valued by Europeans. The objective was to prevent EU states from providing China with materiel that may ultimately be used for internal repression. Implementation was left to Member States, with no review process established; consequently, there was no need to revisit the issue at the EU level.

The events of June 4th, 1989 at Tiananmen Square are well-documented elsewhere (e.g. Suettinger, 2003) and do not need to be recounted here. European and American policymakers were quick to condemn the government’s violence against protesters. The European Council (1989: 17) censured the Chinese government for the “brutal repression”, requesting the “end to the repressive actions against those who legitimately claim their democratic rights”. The measures adopted included suspension of ministerial/high-level contacts, reduction of cooperative projects, and a commitment to raise human rights issues in international forums. The declaration stipulated the “interruption… of military cooperation and an embargo on trade in arms” (European Council, 1989: 17). With no reference to specific arms, related materials, or enforcement mechanisms, the embargo relied upon political commitment rather than legal force, and Member States were left to determine the scope and enforcement at the national level.

The prospect of repeal was raised in the December 2003 European Council, representing the culmination of warming political relations between the EU and China over the course of the year. The two had announced their ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ in October, securing one of the objectives set out in the *European Security Strategy* (European Council, 2003). China’s EU policy paper explicitly requested the removal of the embargo to facilitate “greater bilateral cooperation on defence industry and technologies” (MoFA, 2003); government officials also linked the issue to the development of the broader political relationship. Receptivity to China’s overtures was evident when, in June, France’s Defence Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie had proposed softening the embargo to facilitate exports of “sensitive military technology” (Evans-Pritchard, 2003). That EU policymakers were willing to affect policy change to advance the strategic partnership – a vague political declaration with limited short-term gains – underlines the absence of security concerns pertaining to the embargo or China’s rise more generally.

Although some Member States retained concerns over human rights, they were not prominent within the internal deliberations – none opposed lifting the embargo in principle. Despite persistent problems, proponents of lifting concluded that China’s progress meant that the original rationale no longer held (Interview, 2010a). It is evident, however, that the decision to review the embargo was not taken on this basis alone; the wider context of China as an increasingly significant political and economic power – and thereby attraction – was key. These factors were used to argue that China required special consideration and that human rights could not be the relationship’s determining factor. A common argument repeated within EU policymaking circles and in direct exchanges with US officials was that China’s status as a strategic partner meant that it was inconsistent to maintain an arms embargo against it – unlike Burma, North Korea or Zimbabwe, who lacked such importance (e.g. US Embassy Netherlands, 2004a; US Embassy Ireland, 2005X). Irrespective of these arguments’ merits, they reveal that the EU’s internal deliberations were predicated primarily on political and economic incentives, with less concern about the embargo’s origins. Security considerations were, as we will see below, conspicuous by their absence.

Despite the close security relationship between the US and the EU, the latter did not communicate the intention to introduce the embargo to the agenda to the former. French President Jacques Chirac – a key instigator of the move – concluded that the US would be unlikely to challenge the EU due to its weakened position following the controversy surrounding the Iraq war (Interview, 2010b). Other French and German officials had hoped they could “get away with [lifting] without too much protest from Washington” (Interview, 2010c). The UK’s primary concern was the possibility of being blocked from trade-related opportunities with China if it adopted an adversarial stance (Stumbaum, 2009: 172), thus backed the review. The failure – or missed opportunity – to open a transatlantic dialogue ahead of the public announcement meant that EU policymakers were not exposed to the US’s emergent rationale for the importance of the maintenance of the embargo. While it is unclear that such engagement would have changed either side’s position, it would have potentially curtailed the extent to which the transatlantic dispute became public in nature, as securitization moves would have been initiated through diplomatic channels earlier.

At the January 2004 GAERC, all Member States bar France agreed to maintain the embargo pending further review (Evans-Pritchard and Broughton, 2004). The key issue was timing, rather than the principle of policy change (Smith, C. 2004). Early on, a general sense emerged that the embargo’s end was inevitable. After a fourteen-year absence, its return the EU’s agenda revealed that policymakers still conceptualised its relevance to be grounded in the original reasons for imposition. These lost salience in the intervening years as a result of the expanding economic and political opportunities to be gained from closer relations with China. Essentially absent from the internal deliberation were references to the changed security environment in East Asia, the threat potential of China’s military development, or the US’s perceived interests. Consideration of lifting in itself is indicative of a lack of securitization taking place with respect to the EU’s China policy - an inference that is consolidated by close examination of the transatlantic discourse around the proposal.

**5. US Securitizing Moves in the Embargo Debate**

The US consistently opposed the EU’s proposed policy change during the review process through both public pronouncements and private diplomatic channels. Contrary to the deliberations among EU Member States, the US’s position was heavily informed by security considerations. This strategy of pressing the security implications for the US reveals that a securitization process had occurred within the domestic security space. The rationale for imposing the US’s own embargo had been human rights concerns, but in 2003 the maintenance of both its *and* the EU’s embargoes was regarded as crucial to its own direct regional and global security interests. The crux of the US’s argument was a potential scenario in which following the embargo’s removal, access to European military technology would lead to China’s expanding capabilities destabilising the East Asian region, with negative consequences for the US and, by extension, the EU. Thus, the EU would be partly responsible. This section analyses the discourse that unfolded in the transatlantic security space via primary and secondary sources. The evidence demonstrates that US actors undertook explicit securitizing moves (speech acts) in order to convince EU and Member State policymakers (the elite audience) that the embargo’s continuation was a security imperative.

The first public statements of opposition emerged in early 2004, although leaked documents reveal that demarches were sent to (at least some) EU governments in late 2003 – notably, delivering these to officials with responsibility in the area of arms transfer/control (e.g. US Embassy Netherlands, 2003). Diplomatic channels were used to convey that the retention of the embargo was considered crucial for broader regional stability. During the debate, European diplomats acknowledged that the US administration had “quietly lodged a series of formal protests” at both the national and levels (Pan, 2004). With the leaked cables, we now have insights into the substance of the arguments presented. For example, in March 2004, US officials met with representatives of the EU’s Asia-Oceania Working Party[[8]](#footnote-8), expressing “firm opposition” predicated

“both on [the] assessment that China's human rights record had not improved sufficiently and on our assessment that lifting the embargo would upset the strategic balance in the region. If the US were some day obliged to come to the assistance of Taiwan in response to a Chinese attack, we would not want to be faced with advanced weaponry supplied by our European allies.” (USMEU, 2004Xa)

EU policymakers’ arguments indicated that US concerns regarding regional stability writ large had not been communicated clearly in preceding years. Although US actors pressed the point in private, EU officials – including some closely involved in transatlantic discussions regarding East Asian regional politics –failed to register the extent of these anxieties. In two illuminating exchanges, a Dutch official had suggested that US arms sales to Taiwan were potentially a factor in explaining China’s military rise (US Embassy Netherlands, 2004X), and a Spanish official claimed that the China-Taiwan relationship “only heats up when the Taiwanese heat it up” (US Embassy Spain, 2004X). Needless to say, these do not reflect US perceptions of cross-strait dynamics. Double-digit annual increases in military spending, signalling threats to Taiwan (cf. 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, which David Lampton (2001: 46) defined as a major turning point for US-China relations in the post Cold War era), and alleged nuclear espionage (cf. 1999 Cox Report) are a few examples of security-related manifestations that have encouraged the propensity for US policymakers to employ security-centric lenses when processing new developments.

The importance of the introduction of security as a consideration for the Tiananmen-era embargoes is evident when we consider that Australia lifted its China arms embargo in 1992 without US objections. Australian officials even made this point to US counterparts during the EU’s deliberations, explaining that they had opted not to join US demarches in EU capitals as they were concerned that such moves would “risk weakening US… arguments”, although they now shared US concerns regarding “the introduction of any new destabilising armaments or technologies in the Asia Pacific region” (US Embassy Australia, 2005). Without direct regional presence, European policymakers were not engaged in similar interpretive practices as the US and Australia; in turn, US policymakers apparently failed to recognise this. The potential effectiveness of securitizing moves during the transatlantic debate was consequently limited.

Linked to concerns over China’s military expansion and regional stability was the matter of credible commitments to regional allies – arrangements that are critical to the US’s enduring self-perception of responsibility for continued stability in the Asia Pacific (Interviews 2010d, 2010e & 2010f). US policymakers are sensitive to potential shifts in regional distributions of power and interpret political and economic developments through the prism of security. This led to their dismissal of European claims that lifting the embargo would not alter the regional security dynamics or increase the quantity or quality of weapons technology available to China as insufficient or even baseless (Interview, 2010f). Even though both France and the UK had bilateral security dialogues with China (Casarini, 2009: 124), the US essentially considered Europe’s understanding of regional geopolitics to have coincided with the end of the UK’s regional presence following Hong Kong’s retrocession (Interview 2010g).

US policymakers hypothesised that post-embargo European transfers of military-related technologies to China could be used against US forces in future conflict (Interview 2010h; USMEU, 2004Xa). Another scenario was that China’s force modernisation would be expedited by European technology could catalyse an arms race that would fundamentally alter - if not destabilise – the regional security environment. US policymakers reasoned that these could not be actual EU objectives, inferring that security implications simply had not been considered up to that point (Interview, 2010i). Notwithstanding disagreements over security issues such as the Iraq war, US policymakers anticipated that with respect to China European views would still largely reflect their own. The assessment that security issues did not feature in early European deliberations was correct, but the assumption that raising them bilaterally - in other words, initiating a securitization process - would suffice to change European preferences proved to be mistaken. Essentially, the salience of China-related security threats within US policy discourse created an expectation that once the nature of the threat was explained, then Europeans would accept then and opt to retain the embargo.

Despite public statements and direct communication between high-level officials, EU actors remained undeterred. Evidently, the US’s early efforts to convey security concerns were not having the desired effect. Reasons for lifting were qualified in an attempt to allay US misgivings; the EU’s High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana stated to the press in mid-March that the motivation was to improve relations with China, not “contribute to increasing arms in the region” (cited by Agence Europe, 18/03/2004). The EU maintained that removing the embargo was to be a political gesture, rather than substantively affecting China’s military capabilities. The Bush administration remained unconvinced, intensifying diplomatic efforts to press its case. US policymakers were aware that their initial securitizing moves were ineffective; a State Department official commented that “to the extent that we’ve told [the EU] that this is a bad idea and they’re still considering it, that’s a concern to us” (cited by Spiegel, 2004).

The administration’s arguments conveyed a commitment to maintaining its own *and* the EU’s embargoes, but moreover that the very logic underpinning their continuation had shifted. Per Floyd’s (2016) criteria for ‘successful’ securitization, we can see that these were met within the US domestic security space: (1) US policymakers identified the (future) absence of the EU’s embargo as contributing to a wider threat to its regional security interests, justifying a response. The subsequent change of behaviour (2) took the form of a response that operated on two levels: first, the articulation of the administration’s opposition to the EU’s proposal revealed the *de facto* securitization of the US’s *own* embargo - since its status had not been considered in the intervening years, there had been no reaffirmation of its importance; second, the initiation of the securitization move within the transatlantic security space. The response was justified (3) by US administration officials (the securitizing actors) with explicit reference to the threat posed to national security interests and regional stability in East Asia.

Ahead of the EU’s PSC April meeting, the Council Secretariat circulate a demarche submitted by the US to outline their objections.[[9]](#footnote-9) This constituted a key component of the US’s securitizing moves – articulating the security implications of removing the embargo to a group of actors that could affect the review process by accepting the US’s arguments and then persuading the politicians in the Council. This effort not only failed to minds, it backfired. One British official recounted that the ambassadors perceived it as “heavy-handed and hubristic attempt to influence the PSC” (USMEU, 2004Xb). The démarche evidently had little discernible impact, as PSC ambassadors agreed that lower-level working groups would submit an issue paper to the Council for consideration. The cable summarised where a number of Member States were on the issue, with references to remaining human rights concerns outnumbering references to regional stability twice as frequent. Where Member States raised the issue of regional stability, they sought further research on possible implications – no Member State opposed lifting the embargo or expressed alignment with the US threat assessment. Outlining the state of play, the cable’s author commented that while momentum to lift had slowed, US efforts “have not killed this idea outright” (USMEU, 2004Xb). Even when US officials had gone so far as to produce a document explicating the administration’s objections and distributed it to EU officials, their audience was still not receptive to the security-based arguments.

US opposition further intensified in June, with Secretary of State Colin Powell publicly warning that lifting the embargo would result in Member States being “denied access” to US military technology (Webster et al, 2004). By this point, US policymakers evidently realised that concentrating on prospective security threats was on its own insufficient and began to introduce warnings of damage to the transatlantic relationship – effectively resorting to coercive tactics. Yet, even though many Member States rely on access to and cooperation with the US’s defence industry, these new warnings – coupled with the continued insistence regarding the threat posed by China – did not have the desired effect. Effectively highlighting this, Italian officials privately argued that the embargo was “applied strictly on the basis of human rights concerns… [US] arguments that emphasize strategic considerations are not directly relevant” (US Embassy Italy, 2004X).

The UK resisted a final decision prior to the impending US presidential election due to the issue’s sensitivity (Webster et al, 2004) but did not advocate abandoning the review. Underlining the extent to which the US’s security-based arguments were falling on deaf ears, in June the UK participated in its first joint naval exercise with China, (August, 2004). One US cable based on interactions with an official from Japan’s Mission to the EU relayed a UK official’s position that US fears over the embargo being lifted were “exaggerated” (USMEU, 2004X). The UK was not alone in seeking to advance political and military ties at that time; Dutch officials had indicated that lifting was necessary as “the EU can't [otherwise] have a relationship with the Chinese military” (US Embassy Netherlands, 2004b). This undoubtedly reinforced concerns, as embassy officials thereafter adopted a strategy of raising “specific concerns… i.e. potential Chinese re-engineering and re-export of EU origin systems” to make their case, combined with human rights and regional stability arguments given previous Dutch support for US non-proliferation goals (US Embassy Netherlands, 2004b).

US officials were invited to an informal meeting of the PSC ambassadors and high-ranking EU officials in July to brief their concerns with respect to the embargo. According to a subsequent cable, the US official delivering the briefing

relayed an impressive amount of detail about China's military modernization program, and at the same time demonstrated how it was oriented toward acquiring the ability to defeat Taiwan, and the US forces protecting Taiwan, in a cross-straits conflict. He also explained how China was seeking (through industrial espionage and military-commercial partnerships) advanced weapons and dual-use technologies from the West to support this modernization (USMEU, 2004Xc).

Despite this direct exchange and questions about China’s military modernisation from attendees, it was subsequently acknowledged that the briefing “did not change any minds” (USMEU, 2004Xc). This meeting, and the opportunity of the US to engage in direct communication with key officials in one room, constitutes arguably the clearest example of a securitizing move – indeed, in itself a microcosm of the fifteen month process – whereby speech acts were directed at the audience with the intention of changing preferences to reflect security threats, but ultimately unsuccessful in prompting Europeans to re-evaluate the implications of policy change.

EU policymakers pushed to accelerate the decision-making process in the autumn. The US concentrated efforts on engaging with officials from the Netherlands as the current Council Presidency holder. US officials directly argued against lifting on the basis of the “enhanced threat posed by possible increased EU technology transfers” and the unsatisfactory proposals to replace the embargo, and underlined that US concerns were “broad and bipartisan” (US Embassy Netherlands, 2004Xc). In a series of bilateral meetings, Deputy Assistant Secretary Greg Suchan stressed concerns over military and human rights issues, making the case that “assurances that lifting the ban would have no material consequence were hard to believe… because market pressures and lobbying by Beijing would make it very hard for member state regulators to deny sales to China without the political cover of an arms embargo” (USMEU, 2004X). Member State representatives responded that they were taking the US position seriously, but countered that China had changed since 1989, and insisted that the US and EU had to proceed on the basis of mutual trust, respecting autonomy on foreign policy (USMEU, 2004X). In short, the Europeans acknowledged the US position but were not influenced by it.

Beyond potential material impact, US officials warned that the “symbolism of [lifting]… at a time when China was behaving in a threatening manner vis-a-vis Taiwan would clearly send the wrong signal” (US Embassy Netherlands, 2004Xc). Here, the attempt to advance the securitizing move linked material capabilities and symbolism as constituent elements of an emergent threat. Dutch officials expressed doubt that the embargo mattered to China’s capabilities, and Foreign Minister Bernard Bot subsequently told Ambassador Clifford Sobel that there was no doubt between that the embargo would end (US Embassy Netherlands, 2004Xd). Chirac publicly promised “to obtain the swiftest possible lifting” as the embargo was “of another time, and no longer corresponds to today's realities” (cited by The Economist, 2010). The gap between EU and US assessments of ‘today’s realities’ was underscored by Chirac commenting that “our American friends have strong reservations” without offering any concessions to these (cited by Dombey, 2004a). Yet Suchan subsequently stated that the US was “not pessimistic about the reaction we are going to get from EU governments” (cited by Dombey, 2004a). Both statements reflect an inability to appreciate the distance between their positions, and by extension the continued failure of the US’s securitizing moves.

The US stepped up its efforts in early 2005, continuing with coercive language in an effort to underline the gravity of the matter. One senior official warned that “a failure to understand the significance of this issue is going to result in major problems for transatlantic arms procurement” (cited by Dombey and Fidler, 2005). Newly-installed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (2005a) denied transatlantic disagreement, claiming shared “concerns about how to deal with the prospect of a China that is economically rising very quickly, and of course… the political power… [and] the regional power that goes with that”. Although not directly referencing security threats that were being communicated via private channels, the statement is nevertheless illustrative of the failure of the US to identify and address their divergent assessments of China’s rise. Following talks with high-level EU officials, Rice (2005b) reported that the US was “being listened to”, but also emphasised apprehensions “about the military balance in that region and… [the impact of] technology transfers”, linking these to the embargo’s status.

The positions of Chirac and Bush were laid bare on the public stage when the two met. Chirac stipulated that the EU would lift the embargo, a political issue which constituted one of the “last obstacles to… relations with this great power of the 21st Century” (cited by Rennie, 2005a). Bush, by contrast, stressed security: “the transfer of weapons would be a transfer of technology to China, which would change the balance of relations between China and Taiwan” (cited by Rennie, 2005a). Chirac claimed that the embargo would only be lifted following transatlantic cooperating to define the necessary conditions (Bumiller, 2005), yet these diplomatic overtures did not translate into action. Despite persistent US efforts, all indicators pointed to an imminent unconditional lifting. The EU’s intentions only changed when China adopted the Anti-Secession Law (ASL), the significance of which lay its explicit reference to “*non-peaceful means* *and other necessary measures* to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity” vis-à-vis Taiwan (PRC Embassy US, 2005 [emphasis added]). US policymakers seized upon this as evidence of the very security threats that they had been communicating to the EU, pressing this point to an EU delegation that had arrived in Washington that same day to persuade Americans to drop their opposition to the embargo’s lifting.

The ASL constituted an inflection point for the EU’s deliberations, creating an opportunity for US policymakers to redouble their efforts to link the embargo to emergent security threats. Rice warned publicly that the EU “should do nothing to contribute to a circumstance in which Chinese military modernisation draws on [EU] technology. It is [the US], not Europe, that has defended the Pacific” (cited by Watts and Watt, 2005). Directly articulating the security threat perceived by the US to emanate from the end of the embargo, Rice departed from her previous assertion that the US and EU were essentially congruent in their outlooks. The intent was to remind the European audience that of their differing international roles, ostensibly creating a situation in which the US has authority to decide what constitutes a security threat. Implicitly, Rice also repositioned the debate by framing the transatlantic relationship as hierarchical: the line was delivered as a command, rather than a request.

Despite increased efforts to persuade and growing signals of readiness to resort to coercive measures, EU actors’ public and private statements indicated that the embargo was still not securitized. The US Mission to the EU (2005X) reported that contacts were conceding that Member States “might be persuaded… to postpone their decision”. Most European proponents of lifting recognised that US political pressure was now too great (Interview, 2010j), concluding that lifting would have to be postponed - but, importantly, not aborted (US Embassy Austria, 2005). Although the EU’s behaviour changed (stepping back from ending the embargo), there was no reference to the security reasoning utilised by US actors within their securitizing moves. That the EU continued to signal that the embargo would eventually end further reinforces the failure of efforts to shift the issue from the political to the security domain in the transatlantic security space.

This securitization failure is most evident when the post-ASL positions of France and the UK are considered. These two states - with the greatest global presence and power projection capabilities among the EU members - should have been the most receptive to arguments pertaining to security threats. Advisor to France’s Defence Minister, Bertrand Besancenot, told Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt that the US’s security concerns were misplaced and France remained committed to lifting (US Embassy France, 2005a). Prime Minister Raffarin even stated that the ASL was “compatible” with France’s interpretation of the one-China policy, a view challenged by US officials (US Embassy France, 2005b). The UK opposed immediate policy change, but did not express support for indefinite retention; Foreign Minister Jack Straw stated that there was now a “difficult political environment” (cited by USMEU, 2005a) and Blair wanted to avoid the responsibility during the upcoming UK Council Presidency (Rath, 2006: 51).

With the effective end of the serious effort to lift the embargo in March 2005, what can be said about the success or failure of the US’s securitization moves? That the outcome was what the US wanted could be interpreted as the success of the securitization process. I argue that this was not the case. EU policymakers reconciled themselves to the reality that the timing was inappropriate, but continued support from some – including France – indicated that there had not been a shift in the underpinning logic of the embargo. As the Spanish Director General for Foreign Policy put it in December 2006 to US officials, “today's China is not the same as the China of Tiananmen Square and has changed for the better. Spain views China as a conservative power that has not taken a destabilizing or threatening posture in world affairs” (US Embassy Spain, 2006). That month, the GAERC (2006: 9) reiterated its “willingness to carry forward work towards lifting”, albeit with no specified timeframe. This could have been written off as merely a diplomatic statement to accommodate China’s preferences, had it not been for the short-lived revivals of the issue in 2010 and 2011, where the actors involved revealed preferences predicated on forging closer political and economic ties with China. The Spanish Council Presidency’s attempt was thwarted by the insistence of the new High Representative, Catherine Ashton, that it was no longer within the rotating Council presidency’s remit to unilaterally set the agenda (Interview. 2010k)

At the time, the Secretary of State (2010) instructed embassy officials to communicate continued opposition to lifting, stressing “serious implications for the security and stability of the Pacific region”, warning that “the Code of Conduct and 'toolbox' of export controls cannot replace the embargo”[[10]](#footnote-10). The feedback relayed to the State Dept from Member State contacts (US Embassy Bulgaria, 2010; US Embassy Latvia, 2010; US Embassy Poland, 2010), the EU’s Mission to China (US Embassy China, 2010) and the Commission (USMEU, 2010) revealed that there was little support for reigniting the debate primarily due to human rights concerns. One French contact stated that although they did not expect the issue to appear on the agenda, the government’s position remained that it was no longer “a useful tool” (US Embassy France, 2010). Tellingly, a Slovakian official commented that arguments regarding security implications were less compelling than human rights for Europeans (US Embassy Slovakia, 2010).

 German and British officials stated that the timing was inappropriate; while the UK acknowledged both security and human rights issues, neither expressed outright opposition to the eventual lifting (US Embassy Germany, 2010; US Embassy UK, 2010). The emphasis on human rights and ‘timing’ indicates the continued lack of securitization of the embargo within the EU. Granted, the US had not maintained its securitization moves beyond 2005 – yet even as China’s military rise continued apace, European thinking on the embargo remained devoid of threat perceptions. Ashton’s own attempt in late 2010/early 2011to reopen the debate – with support from Spain – was opposed by the UK and France for fear of the implications for the transatlantic relationship (Brown, 2018: 201-2). Even so, there is no evidence of an attempt by these governments to securitize the embargo or reverse the commitment to eventual lifting from 2006.

Applying Floyd’s (2016) criteria for ‘successful’ securitization in light of the interactions within the transatlantic security space from 2003 onwards, we must conclude that the US’s securitization moves ultimately failed. The US identified the potential creation of a threat by the EU lifting its China arms embargo, deemed this to justify a response (initiation of a securitizing process) in the transatlantic security space. The US’s behaviour towards the EU evidently changed; however, its aim of effecting change in the EU’s behaviour - abandoning consideration of lifting the embargo - was not realised insofar as the substance of the US’s objections (securitizing moves) did not ultimately persuade the EU to end the process. EU policymakers (the elite audience) did not securitize the embargo. The action taken in March 2005 - ending the process that would enable lifting within months – was not predicated on acceptance of the threat identified by the US in its securitizing moves. The embargo at that time - and in the present - remains decidedly non-securitized. Cables show that, over the years, US officials have consulted with European counterparts whenever there is speculation that the issue may be revived. Consistently, EU actors assert that they understand the US’s security concerns, yet explain that the embargo will remain as the timing is not right in light of continued problems in China’s human rights record.

**6. Implications for Transatlantic Responses to China’s Rise**

The transatlantic embargo debate cannot be compartmentalized from the wider context of the US’s and EU’s responses to the rise of China, or indeed their bilateral relationship. Yet, the literature has rarely linked the issue to the broader trajectories of their respective foreign policies. Recent scholarship has, somewhat understandably, moved on from the embargo given its absence from the EU’s agenda. However, we miss important insights pertaining to understanding the differences between US and EU responses to the rise of China and the consequential challenges posed to potential US-EU cooperation on managing China’s integration with the status quo order - a goal consistent with their overarching strategic goals (Brown, 2018: 5). Here, I briefly outline some of the insights that a securitization lens can add to our understanding of the wider implications of the transatlantic divide over the embargo.

The debate highlighted the variation in the salience of security as an overarching concern with respect to China’s rise in the US and EU. Their explicit foreign policy objectives had been consistently framed around strategies of engagement to facilitate China’s integration with the international system. China’s economic development fostered perceptions of opportunity, but the implications of its expanding military power and potential to exert influence in East Asia were felt most sharply by the US due to its regional presence and ties to various regional actors. Devoid of such presence or responsibilities, Eruopean policymakers’ perceptions of the positive aspects of China’s were not qualified by security concerns as with those of their US counterparts. The perceived implications for the US’s regional and broader national security interests presented by China’s rise facilitated an environment within its own domestic security space where securitization of issues previously confined to the domain of ‘ordinary’ politics was both feasible and largely uncontested. US media coverage of the embargo, commentary from analysts, and domestic policy discourse revealed no opposing narrative to the government’s position (and thereby securitization moves) – a seemingly rare instance of unity in the Washington policy community.

EU policymakers failed to anticipate the initial US reaction or its intensification over time. On the US side, key actors apparently expected the proposal to be dropped relatively quickly following articulation of their security concerns. The main strategy for attempting to persuade the Member States to maintain the EU-level embargo was to convince policymakers that the move would have negative ramifications for security interests. The construction of this narrative was evident from the outset, even as the original *political* reasons for the embargo were discussed by transatlantic interlocutors. The failure of persuasive efforts was clear as US policymakers resorted to coercive language, threatening to retaliate to the embargo being lifted by cutting off defence sector access. The failed securitization moves indicates that although we can talk meaningfully of a transatlantic alliance and, indeed, a transatlantic security space, these are no guarantees for the success of securitization moves. This is true of any given security space, but that it happened at the transatlantic level against the background of the fallout over the Iraq war only served to reinforce the wider narrative of a transatlantic rift in the post-Cold War environment. Post-debate, the US and EU agreed to establish a bilateral East Asian Strategic Dialogue, with some EU officials conceding that this would be necessary prior to lifting (US Embassy Spain, 2005X). However, the evidence does not suggest that transatlantic perspectives had converged – when the embargo has been touted to return to the agenda, EU officials have tended to focus on the problem of timing, particularly given China’s human rights situation. Outright opposition to lifting predicated security concerns has not emerged. As such, the potential for reigniting the debate remains real.

The debate also reveals the securitization of China’s occurring within US institutions; this in itself was not new, but arguably the administration’s public rhetoric throughout| made this clearer than previously had been the case. Yet, few scholars have approached the US-China relationship by utilising securitization as a theoretical perspective on specific events or developments – Hayes (2013) being a notable exception. Hayes’ (2013: 159) observation that “powerful economic ties are not sufficient to keep relations… out of the realm of security”. Although realist perspectives essentially dominate the US-China relations literature and Securitization Theory has predominantly been employed by European scholars, there is scope for ‘doing more’ by bringing the two camps together. In contrast, the EU-China relationship has not seen the same processes of securitization, instead embodying “unconditional engagement” (Fox and Godement, 2009).

The paper’s theoretical contribution is confined to the novel conceptualisation of the transatlantic securitization space, which could be leveraged elsewhere in the Securitization Theory and the transatlantic studies literatures. Concentrating on the transatlantic embargo debate via Securitization Theory provides a nuanced explanation of how the underpinning rationales of diverging preferences produced a protracted debate, demonstrates the embargo’s status as outside of the security domain for the EU, and points to the continued relevance of the issue in the context of the so-called US-EU-China strategic triangle. The findings suggest that Securitization Theory might offer scholars alternative angles from which to approach US and EU responses to the rise of China. For instance, it could offer new insights into China’s short-lived involvement in the EU’s Galileo satellite programme, given the US’s objections that China to obtain Western dual-use technologies. Other examples could include US and EU responses to China’s 2007 anti-satellite test, aggressive approach to the South China Sea territorial disputes, the Belt and Road Initiative, investment in infrastructure projects around the world, or rapidly expanding quantum communications and computing technologies.

Understanding how China’s rise affects US and EU conceptualisations of the international order in the post-Cold War era could also be investigated by employing Buzan and Wæver’s (2009: 257) model of *macrosecuritizations*, defined as

securitizations that speak to referent objects higher than those at the middle level (for example, 'universal' religions or political ideologies; one or more of the primary institutions of international society) and which aim to incorporate and coordinate multiple lower level securitization.

Macrosecuritizations “such as the Cold War, will impose a hierarchy on the lower level ones incorporated within them” (Buzan and Wæver, 2009: 257). The evidence from the embargo debate is insufficient on its own, but with the salience of ‘China threat’ and ‘power transition’ narratives in US political discourse, there is scope to investigate whether this would constitute the (attempted) securitization of China’s rise as a threat to the US, the transatlantic alliance, the ‘West’, or the international order more broadly.

**Conclusion**

The protracted nature of transatlantic debate over whether the EU should remove or retain its arms embargo against China stemmed from divergent understandings of the implications of policy change. Securitization Theory illuminated how US policymakers treated the issue as a security threat, and in the transatlantic security space attempted to justify to the EU audience that maintaining the embargo constituted an imperative for security. The failure of US policymaker’s securitization moves resulted in a dialogue of the deaf, with the EU essentially operating in a different context wherein political and economic opportunities dominated preferences for policy formation towards China. The empirical evidence illustrated that security narratives were invoked by US actors in public and private forums, but their EU interlocutors remained unreceptive. The end of the EU’s efforts in March 2005 cannot be seen as caving to US pressure; rather, China’s adoption of the Anti-Secession Law impacted European deliberations over the appropriateness of the timing - but not the principle or implications - of lifting. The 2006 Council Conclusions and the EU’s 2010/11 (brief) dalliance with the notion of revisiting the embargo’s status underline the failure of securitization in the EU and, by extension, the transatlantic security space writ large.

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1. Regulation (EC) No 428/2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. By extension, I surmise that the US’s own embargo was simultaneously securitized, though its status was never up for discussion (nor has it been subsequently). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a recent overview of Securitization Theory and a critical reflection on its contributions, see Balzacq et al (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The ambassadorial-level preparatory body of the Council [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A caveat: Japan made clear its preference that the EU should retain its embargo, but mostly confined its efforts to private diplomatic channels, rather than engaging in the public debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hayes uses the US, Germany and France as examples of different variants of democracies but still connected through the underpinning similarity that is their status as democratic states. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Others - such as Canada, non-EU European states, and NATO - may also be regarded as part of the ‘ingroup’; however, as non-participants in the embargo debate they do not require consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A preparatory body of the European Council [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The full text of the démarche was not included in the cable. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Code of Conduct became legally binding in 2008, but evidently was regarded as problematic in Washington. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Interviewee affiliations noted at time of interview, not publication. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)