

Chirac defends planned EU arms sales to China to nervous Japan



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TOKYO (AFP) - French President Jacques Chirac indicated he would press ahead to lift the European Union ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) arms embargo on China, telling a nervous Japan the move would not entail transfers of sensitive weapons or technology.



[AFP Photo](#)

Chirac, the prime proponent of lifting the 16-year-old EU ban, acknowledged that Japan was worried about arms sales to its neighbor and growing rival but said Beijing's demands were "legitimate."

"The prime minister told me of his concerns. He asked me for explanations," Chirac told a joint news conference after talks with Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

"I indicated to him that the decision of the European Union does not imply a change in exports of sensitive arms or technology to China as they are subject to rules which cannot be broken," Chirac said.

"Hence the decision does not mean things would change. It's a political decision," he said.

"We believe that this lifting is legitimately sought by China and that's why we have taken this decision."

Chirac has vowed to push ahead to lift the embargo by an original European Union goal of the end of June, when the presidency of the 25-member bloc shifts from Luxembourg to Britain.

Britain had suggested that the end of the weapons sale ban could be delayed after China on March 14 gave its army legal power to invade Taiwan if the island seeks formal independence.

Japan and the United States -- which has some 40,500 troops in Japan, most of them on Okinawa near Taiwan -- have agreed to work together to oppose the lifting of the ban.

"We told the president that we are against it," Koizumi said of the end to the embargo, which was imposed after China's bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in 1989.

"In China military spending had seen double-digit growth for more than 10 years. As for Japan, the defense spending has been on decline over the past three straight years," Koizumi told the news conference.

"Japan does not regard China's economic growth as a threat. Rather we regard it as an opportunity. However, in relation to security concerns such as the Taiwan issue Japan has been asking for a peaceful resolution," Koizumi said.

A Japanese foreign ministry official said Chirac told Koizumi that he saw the lifting of the embargo not as a major military measure but as a politically symbolic move for China which wants to boost its international image.

Japan and France also made no headway on their dispute over which country will host a ground-breaking multi-billion-dollar nuclear reactor.

Chirac said the Japanese leader made proposals "which seem to be of a nature that could allow an agreement" on the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) -- seen as a testbed to create clean, inexhaustible energy before 2050.

But Koizumi said: "Japan has no intention to withdraw its bid to invite ITER."

"With President Chirac, we have agreed to continue our discussions to reach a mutually agreeable solution," Koizumi said.

The Japanese foreign ministry official said Koizumi and Chirac agreed in principle for an EU delegation to visit Japan before April 18, when the Europeans will hold a meeting on ITER in Brussels.

One area of agreement between the leaders, however, was on a less controversial idea: the need for sustainable development.

Chirac earlier Sunday became the first foreign leader to visit the six-month World Expo, a mixture between a futuristic city and an amusement park which opened to the public Friday in central Japan's Aichi prefecture.

The theme of the 21st century's first World Expo is sustainable development, with Japan showing off new technologies and France highlighting its efforts at its pavilion.

"Sustainable development is probably one of our century's most crucial problems," Chirac said during his 45-minute stop at the French pavilion.

"This century is certainly the last in which we can either react or abandon it (the goal), with all of the consequences that could entail," he said.

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