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China's "One-and-Done" Arms Buyers

Richard A. Bitzinger

SYNOPSIS

*China's leading weakness in its arms exports lies in its relative lack of repeat buyers. **RICHARD A. BITZINGER** explores whether this weakness is due to poor quality and capability.*

COMMENTARY

What is the secret to success as an arms exporter? Repeat business.

Countries buy arms from certain suppliers for specific reasons: performance, reliability, cost, alliance politics and so on. An important sign of success as an arms producer is building up a large and reliable overseas customer base – countries that return, year upon year, to buy additional weapons.

Here is where China has always suffered as an arms exporter. True, it consistently accounts for around 5% of the global arms-transfer business, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). This scale of business puts it in roughly the same position as Britain, France, Italy and Germany – but far behind Russia and the United States (those two states [account](#) for 16% and 40% of total arms exports, respectively).

As it stands, China remains pretty much a niche player in the global arms market. It sells most of its weapons to a very small number of countries. Over the past 20 years, for example, more than 60% of *all* Chinese arms sales went to just three countries: Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Pakistan.

Beijing has had several customers who bought Chinese weaponry – in some cases, quite a lot – for a period of time but then ceased doing so. Examples include Algeria, which between 2014 and 2016 purchased US\$900 million worth of arms from China but then largely halted further buys. Egypt, Iran, Sri Lanka, and Turkey all acquired Chinese weaponry during the 2000s but then stopped buying in the 2010s and 2020s.

In comparison, over roughly the same period (2003–2022), there were more than three dozen countries that consistently purchased (that is, almost every year) arms from the United States.

This begs the question: if Chinese weapons systems are really that good, then why is their appeal so limited? Why is their traditional customer base still so small? In fact, one might infer from the large number of one-shot sales that most Chinese arms, while certainly better than what they used to be, are still no more than good enough, and that other foreign weapons systems – Western, Russian, and Israeli – still outclass Chinese arms in most respects.

Going back to the 1980s and 1990s, anecdotal evidence has abounded about the inferiority of Chinese weaponry. A Western military writer visiting Thailand in 1989 [revealed](#) that Chinese-made Type-69 tanks in that country's inventory sported crude welding, suspect steel quality and a smoky, oil-gushing engine; more critically, the tank's fire-control system and gun were not stabilised, causing the gun to wander and degrading firing accuracy.

During that same period, [Western journalists](#) who toured Chinese aircraft production facilities found "rough lap joints", "sloppy cockpit transparency sealing" and "coarse rivet finishing" in various types of Chinese fighter jets.

Chinese weapons systems in the 21st century might be of better quality, but [they still have their problems](#). In the mid-2000s, for example, Nigeria bought 15 F-7 fighter jets (Chinese versions of the Soviet MiG-21) from China. Since then, [several have been lost to accidents, while seven had to be sent back to China for "deep maintenance and repair"](#).

The Chinese-made radar on JF-17 combat aircraft sold to Myanmar [reportedly](#) have poor accuracy, and the aircraft itself lacks the capacity for beyond-visual-range missile interception. This shortcoming and structural cracks have led to the grounding of JF-17s in Myanmar's air force.

Bangladesh, another major customer for Chinese arms, has experienced [problems](#) firing ammunition loaded into its Chinese-built K-8 light attack aircraft. Moreover, two Ming-class submarines delivered to the Bangladeshi navy are considered unusable and unserviceable, while the country's air force sent back Chinese-made Y12 and MA60 transport aircraft.

Other examples include Chinese-made armoured personal carriers sold to Kenya that were subsequently found to offer little protection to soldiers riding in them, and Chinese-made C-705 antiship cruise missiles in Indonesia's navy that [failed](#) to hit their targets during military exercises.



Chinese-made C-705 antiship cruise missiles supplied to Indonesia's navy failed to hit their targets in military exercises. Indonesia is not the only one facing problems with Chinese arms, which have garnered a reputation for their unreliable performance and have failed to attract repeat buyers. *Image by Wikimedia Commons.*

Even Pakistan, Beijing's largest and most consistent customer, has experienced considerable frustrations with the weapons it has acquired from China. In the mid-2000s, Pakistan bought four Chinese-made F-22P frigates; these were delivered with a variety of [technical problems](#) with the ship's engine, air-defence systems, and radar. In particular, the Pakistanis discovered the onboard imaging infrared sensor on the ship's key air-defence missile was defective, making the missile unable to lock onto its targets.

In addition, a Pakistani tank co-developed with China, as well as a Chinese-built howitzer sold to Pakistan, [failed](#) firing trials and other testing, forcing a delay in acquisitions.

Moreover, in many cases, Chinese was uninterested in making right the poor quality and performance of its weapons systems. Islamabad could not get Beijing to repair and overhaul the frigates it had bought from China, so it contracted out the upgrade programme to Turkey.

Overall, few countries are lining up to buy Chinese weapons systems, or, if they are, they are throwing out Chinese parts and replacing them with Western systems. This is because China's defence industry is still very weak when it comes to key technologies like jet engines and electronics. Algeria, for example, bought corvettes from China but subsequently outfitted them with French radar and communications gear. Meanwhile, Thailand turned to Saab of Sweden to upgrade its Chinese-built frigates, while Pakistani JF-17 jets use a Russian engine and a British ejection seat.

China's strengths as an arms exporter remains, as it had for decades, at the low end of the business, offering basic equipment at rock-bottom prices with few strings attached. In particular, Beijing tries to dominate those types of armaments that could be considered "commodities" – where cost, as opposed to technology or capability, is often the key determining factor. Examples include small arms, ammunition, artillery rounds, and light armoured vehicles. China has also carved out a particularly lucrative niche for itself in selling armed drones.

Even then, factors like quality, reliability, and performance will continue to affect Chinese sales, especially in terms of securing follow-on orders. If China cannot improve in these areas, many of its first-time customers will drift away. They will truly be “one and done”.

Richard A. BITZINGER is an Adjunct Senior Fellow with the Military Transformations Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg