

## Analysing China's Arms Sales to South Asia

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It is not well known that 60 per cent of China's conventional arms exports in the last decade has been to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka; with Pakistan now the largest importer of Chinese arms<sup>1</sup>. Exports to the region include fighter aircraft, warships, submarines, missiles, and tanks amongst others and have amounted to more than USD 9.6 billion between 2008 and 2018<sup>2</sup>. This paper analyses the sale of Chinese arms to these neighbours of India and evaluates the objectives they could be driven by. It will also examine the security concerns this could have for India and the impact on the geopolitical balance in the region. In conclusion, the paper will argue that China has been using arms exports as a foreign policy tool to expand its influence in South Asia for two main reasons: primarily as a facet to ensure the success of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as all of the four countries are crucial outlets to the Indian Ocean for China to circumnavigate the Malacca Strait and ensure a smooth supply of energy resources from the Middle East, and secondly, by arming India's neighbours, Beijing has ensured that New Delhi is restricted in its ambitions to become a larger Asian power and a direct challenge to China.

### China's Defence Industry

The People's Republic of China has been heavily investing in the modernisation of its arms

industry since the 1970s. One of the three pillars of the country's military modernisation which took place under Deng Xiaoping was the transformation of the defence industry. An important aspect of this was to become self-reliant in the production of weapons and technologies. Following this, for several decades, Chinese arms manufacturers produced low-cost weapons which were not able to compete with the more sophisticated weapons and market dominance of the Western arms manufacturers. Recent advances in technology and manufacturing, however, have enabled Chinese defence contractors to close the gap with Russian and Western companies to compete more effectively by providing lower prices—making Chinese arms an increasingly attractive choice worldwide<sup>3</sup>. Since then, “China's military modernisation has been striking for the speed of development and breadth of its ambition to modernise the People's Liberation Army by 2035 and create world-class forces by 2049”<sup>4</sup>. The volume of Chinese arms exports grew by 275 per cent between 2000 and 2017 while its arms imports decreased by 56 per cent<sup>5</sup>. A successful and thriving defence industry has not only allowed China to become increasingly self-reliant but has also enabled the country to become the fifth-largest arms exporter globally<sup>6</sup>.

Historically, there have been four major motivations for Chinese arms exports: ideological

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motivations through the 1950s and 1960s; geopolitical motivations through the 1970s and early 1980s; commercial motivations through the 1980s to the 2000s; and competitive motivations during the present-day<sup>7</sup>. To give an idea of how far China has come with its defence production, in 2019 the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), based on estimated arms sales placed the three largest Chinese arms companies, the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO), and the China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC) in the top 10 largest defence companies globally<sup>8</sup>. This includes manufacturing weapons for China's own armed forces which had an enormous estimated budget of USD 181.1 billion in 2019, behind only the United States (U.S.)<sup>9</sup>. This successful military-industrial complex has enabled China to sell weapons globally, including in Latin America, albeit modestly, and across Africa. Between 2008 and 2018, China exported USD 15.7 billion worth of conventional weapons across the globe<sup>10</sup>. Chinese arms exports are only limited by the fact that four of the top ten arms importers between 2014 and 2018, India, Australia, Korea, and Vietnam do not procure Chinese weapons for political reasons<sup>11</sup>. Chinese weapons have become even more appealing to countries with limited defence budgets since China is willing to finance arms sales with large loans along with few restrictions on the end-use of its weapons<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, China has also made the most of market opportunities. With the U.S. restricting the export of its Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), China has made its UAVs available to countries which have traditionally

bought American or Russian weapons such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Serbia<sup>13</sup>. Looking at South Asia, most of China's exports are sold to countries closer to the mainland. These countries, with small military procurement budgets, have favourably viewed Chinese weapons and systems.

### **Pakistan**

Founded on shared hostility with India, military relations between the 'all-weather friends' China and Pakistan go back to the 1970s when China was instrumental in enhancing Pakistan's nuclear programme. To effectively summarise China's relationship with Pakistan in the past, Andrew Small has stated that "if the military relationship lies at the heart of China-Pakistan ties, nuclear weapons lie at the heart of the military relationship"<sup>14</sup>. This statement accurately explains the importance of China helping Pakistan's nuclear programme and sets the stage for the flourishing relationship in conventional arms in the succeeding years. China not only provided highly enriched uranium, ring magnets for processing the uranium, and educating its nuclear scientists, but also provided Islamabad with nuclear-capable M-11 (Ghaznavi) missiles having a range of 290 km<sup>15</sup>. The underlying political objective behind China's bolstering of Pakistan was and continues to be to foil India's regional ambitions.

Furthermore, Pakistan is also an important part of China's ambition to become a global power through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With the Gwadar port being developed by China, the CPEC through Pakistan provides Beijing with a route to the Arabian Sea, thereby

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extending its reach in the Indian Ocean. In effect, this has successfully kept India preoccupied with a nuclear Pakistan on its western border and a nuclear China to its east. Pakistan's relationship with China has been strengthened due to American sanctions which have caused Islamabad to lean closer to Beijing. Pakistan's souring relations with the U.S. has led to the Trump administration suspending USD 2 billion in security assistance which included a USD 300 million cut in military aid in 2018<sup>16</sup>. This makes China a natural partner to Pakistan to challenge American dominance in the region and replace American arms exports. Thus, close military ties between China and Pakistan have paved the way for the latter to become the largest importer of Chinese arms.

Political objectives often underlie these transactions as growing cooperation between Beijing and Islamabad on counter-terrorism initiatives led to arms sales surging from USD 250 million in 2008 to USD 758 million in 2009<sup>17</sup>. Since 2009, sales to Pakistan have averaged USD 584 million annually<sup>18</sup>. In the largest arms deal to date between the two nations in July 2015, China is to provide eight stealth attack submarines to Pakistan in a USD 5 billion deal with four submarines expected to be delivered by 2023 and the remaining four to be built in Karachi by 2028<sup>19</sup>. This is crucial for Pakistan's nuclear capabilities and will enable Islamabad to have a limited sea-based deterrent. In March 2018, the sale of sophisticated optical tracking systems were announced that could be used for nuclear missiles with multiple warheads<sup>20</sup>. Other deals have included the co-developed JF-17 aircraft, which the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has four squadrons of, China's ongoing construction

of the Type-054 AP class warship for the Pakistan Navy, Type-59 tanks, Type-531 armoured personnel carriers, and missile boats<sup>21</sup>. In the past decade, Chinese arms have accounted for almost 70 per cent of Pakistan's arms and ammunition<sup>22</sup>.

The JF-17 multirole aircraft has boosted the PAF's capabilities and China's instrumental help in developing the aircraft has also enabled Pakistan to triple its arms exports by exporting it to Myanmar and Nigeria. China has also provided A-100 Multiple Rocket Launchers, VT-1A tanks, and HQ-16 medium-range surface to air missiles (SAM) to the Pakistani military<sup>23</sup>.

In addition to being Pakistan's largest arms supplier which has amounted to USD 6.4 billion between 2008 and 2018, China is using the flourishing relationship to enhance its strategic outreach in the region. By bolstering Pakistan over time through a continuous flow of weapons exports and technologies against India, China has kept New Delhi occupied within the region, constraining its aspiration to become a major power in Asia. From Beijing's perspective, if India were able to subordinate Pakistan, New Delhi's position would be strengthened against China thereby reducing its power and influence in South Asia<sup>24</sup>.

## **Bangladesh**

Similar to Pakistan, Bangladesh provides an outlet to the Indian Ocean through the Bay of Bengal for China and is also part of the BRI. In Beijing's wider geostrategic goals, growing ties and arms exports to Bangladesh play a dual role in revenue from sales, along with checking Indian ambitions in South Asia. China has provided 71.8 per cent of Bangladesh's military procurements

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between 2008 and 2018 amounting to USD 1.93 billion<sup>25</sup>. The main reason for China's dominance in Bangladesh's arms procurement is that Dhaka has been able to make these purchases supported by generous loans and competitive prices<sup>26</sup>. With a defence budget of USD 3.87 billion in 2019-20, a budget arguably too low to procure arms from the wider global market, Chinese weapons are a lucrative option. All three arms of Bangladesh's military have benefited from Chinese weapons. The Bangladesh army has procured 44 Type-90-II (MBT-2000) tanks from China in 2011 and further signed a contract for 44 VT-5 light tanks in 2019. Anti-aircraft missiles, hand-held anti-aircraft missiles, and PF-98 anti-tank rockets have also been purchased<sup>27</sup>. The Navy has procured two Type-056 corvettes which were commissioned in 2016 with another two being delivered and awaiting commissioning. The Navy has also acquired two anti-surface warfare capable Durjoy-class patrol vessels with five more under construction along with two used Type-035G Ming-class submarines for just over USD 100 million each in 2013<sup>28</sup>. The submarines have antagonised India with analysts stating that their procurement, taking into consideration Bangladesh's economic situation combined with being surrounded by India on three sides is an act of provocation since submarines are offensive weapons of sea denial<sup>29</sup>. On the other hand, China's ambassador to Dhaka stated that these submarines would help bring stability in the region<sup>30</sup>. The Bangladesh Air Force has procured three squadrons of Chengdu F-7BGI fighter aircraft, 23 K-8W intermediate training jets, various radar systems, and in 2011 the air force inducted its first surface-to-air missile system, the

short-range FM-90<sup>31</sup>. China has also supplied Bangladesh with the majority of its small arms which has amounted to over 16,000 rifles and 4,100 pistols<sup>32</sup>. With 70 per cent of Bangladeshi procurements being Chinese from 2008-2018, Beijing has dominated the Bangladeshi arms market and the latter has invariably become dependent on China for supplies and spares in the future<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, China will also be involved in building a naval facility in Bangladesh by helping the country construct its first submarine base<sup>34</sup>. This raises questions for India's national security as there is the possibility of the base being used by the Chinese Navy.

## Myanmar

China's relationship with Myanmar goes back to 1949 when Burma was the first non-communist country to recognise the People's Republic of China. In January 2020, the country deepened its ties with China signing 33 agreements as part of the BRI<sup>35</sup>. In an attempt to reduce dependence on the Strait of Malacca for energy supplies, Myanmar's geographic location plays an important role for China and is thus important for Beijing to gain more influence in the region. The two countries have signed the development of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor which will link the Yunnan province in China to Kyaukpyu on the Bay of Bengal where the co-developed deep-sea port project has been under construction. Once completed, this will provide China with direct links to oil supplies from the Middle East as Kyaukpyu is at one end of an oil and natural gas pipeline running to the Yunnan province<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, access to Myanmar's ports provides China with

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strategic influence in the Bay of Bengal and the wider Indian Ocean region.

Going by China's strategic ambitions, providing Myanmar with arms is an important aspect of the warming relations between the two countries which pre-date the BRI. Since the 1990s, Myanmar's armed forces have "attempted to develop limited conventional-warfare capabilities, and have brought into service new armoured vehicles, air-defence weapons, artillery, combat aircraft and ships procured mainly from China and Russia"<sup>37</sup>. Additionally, China began to supply Myanmar with arms as a way to win allies following the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, since Myanmar at the time was also internationally condemned for its human rights record<sup>38</sup>. Arms exports since then have only increased with Beijing selling USD 1.2 billion worth of weapons between 2008 and 2018. Most of Myanmar's weapons are Chinese and the country is China's third-largest market having imported USD 720 million since 2013<sup>39</sup>.

Since 1989, China has supplied the country with fighter jets, armoured vehicles, and naval vessels apart from training all three arms of the Burmese armed forces. Till date, the Myanmar army has procured the VT-1A, Type-69-II, and Type-62 tanks and the Type-85, Type-90 AFV, and WZ551 armoured personnel carriers from China<sup>40</sup>. Procurements also include the Type 84 and Type 653 armoured engineering vehicles. The SY-400 and Norinco SH1 artillery guns are also part of the Myanmar army along with the KS-1A air defence medium-range surface to air missiles and the HN-5A portable surface to air missiles<sup>41</sup>. The Myanmar Navy which started its modernisation programme in 2001 procured two Type-053H1

class frigates from China which were significantly upgraded with new missiles and sensors<sup>42</sup>. The navy also operates Hainan-class naval patrol boats and radar equipment from China. The Myanmar Air Force's combat aircraft are predominantly Chinese, operating multiple squadrons of the Nanchang Q-5, Chengdu J-7, Shenyang J-6, and the JF-17 which was jointly developed by China and Pakistan. Additionally, the air force operates the Shaanxi Y-8 and Harbin Y-12 transport aircraft from China along with the Hongdu JL-8 trainer aircraft<sup>43</sup>. Thus, in its entirety, between 1990 and 2016, China provided 120 aircraft, 696 armoured vehicles, 125 artillery units, 21 naval vessels, and 1,029 missiles to Myanmar<sup>44</sup>. China has also provided Myanmar with numerous small arms and ammunition in addition to major weapon systems. Similar to Pakistan and Bangladesh, China's arms exports to Myanmar complicate the security scenario for India. Besides, with the development of the Kyaukpyu port, Beijing has made significant inroads into the country which could complicate India's maritime strategy for the Bay of Bengal since China's exports to Myanmar are often linked with the interest of establishing military bases in the country<sup>45</sup>.

## **Sri Lanka**

The island nation of Sri Lanka is an important pearl in Beijing's Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), the maritime arm of the wider BRI. The country's position just above the major sea lines of communication and only 50 km away from the Indian mainland provides sufficient geostrategic and geopolitical incentives for China to cultivate relations with Sri Lanka. President Mahinda

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Rajapaksa's tilt towards China during his tenure between 2005 and 2015 is a success of the Chinese strategy. China has been the largest supplier of arms to Sri Lanka since the 1950s which has seen the transfer of small arms, ammunition, landmines, naval vessels, tanks, and aircraft. Cooperation was intensified during Sri Lanka's bloody civil war and in 2007 a presidential visit to China yielded a USD 37.6 million deal to purchase six Chinese J-7BS/G fighter jets, anti-aircraft guns, JY-11 3D air surveillance radars, armoured personnel carriers, and other weaponry<sup>46</sup>. This was the result of an arms embargo by western nations and India who refused to sell weapons to Sri Lanka due to accusations of human rights violations by the country's military against the Tamil minority population during the civil war. Beijing, making the most of the situation capitalised on the market opportunity and filled the void left by the traditional arms exporters, providing USD 1 billion worth of military equipment<sup>47</sup>.

Continuing the exports of weapons to the island nation, China has helped the modernisation of the Sri Lankan armed forces and in July 2019 gifted a Type-053 frigate to Sri Lanka to enhance the Sri Lankan Navy's surveillance capabilities. Beijing has also agreed to provide USD 14 million for the procurement of Chinese-made counter-insurgency equipment along with providing the Sri Lankan police force with 150 vehicles<sup>48</sup>. The Sri Lankan army has procured the Type-69, Type-59, and Type-63 tanks, and Type-89, Type-85, and Type-63 armoured personnel carriers from China<sup>49</sup>. Amongst the artillery provided by Beijing, the Type-56 field gun, Type-66 howitzer, and Type-60 howitzer are also used by the army<sup>50</sup>. The navy,

apart from the frigate gifted by China, operates Haizhui class and Shanghai II class fast gunboats, and Yunnan class amphibious warfare vessels. The island nation's air force over the years has procured the Chengdu F-7 fighter aircraft, the Harbin Y-12, and Xian MA60 transport aircraft, and the Hongdu JL-8, Nanchang CJ-6, and Chengdu J-7 trainer aircraft<sup>51</sup>. China's strategy of providing aid and loans for the procurement of arms is similar to the country's strategy in Bangladesh and other nations who are unable to directly afford weapons and systems. Taking into account Sri Lanka's limited defence budget of USD 2.5 billion, it would be difficult for Colombo to make substantial procurements without assistance. This approach has ensured a footprint in Sri Lanka and also allows for deeper penetration of the Sri Lankan military procurement market. Looking beyond military exports, China's other investments and projects related to the MSRI are also capable of having strategic angles. This includes the Hambantota Port which was handed over to China on a lease for 99 years due to the inability to repay loans and raises questions of the Chinese Navy (PLAN) having unrestricted access to it.

### **Security Concerns for India**

The procurement of weapons always has a security impact on the surrounding nations. From an Indian perspective, Chinese arms exports to its neighbours are one of the facets of Beijing's wider strategic goal of furthering its footprint in the region and limiting India's position in South Asia. This results in a threefold security concern for India. Firstly, it leads to increased militarisation of the South Asian region. Secondly, the importing

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countries become dependent on China for additional arms, training, and maintenance which can be used as leverage, and finally, the export of arms as a foreign policy tool has ramifications for India.

Taking into account the different weapon systems China has exported to India's neighbourhood over the years, there is no doubt that China has added to the militarisation of the region which has led to further instability to an already delicate region. Aiding Pakistan with its nuclear programme has not only bolstered Pakistan's resolve against India regarding Kashmir but has also contributed to an increase in cross-border violations under the threat of the nuclear umbrella. Similarly, the export of submarines to Pakistan and Bangladesh have added to New Delhi's maritime security concerns as they are offensive weapons of sea denial and enable Pakistan to have a limited nuclear deterrent at sea. Bangladesh's acquisition of submarines has also puzzled India as the country did not have a dire need for them and could hamper India's maritime efforts in the Bay of Bengal. China's arms exports to India's neighbours have thus increased the militarisation of South Asia, adding to an already contested space with new weapons systems. This has also led to a security dilemma, with the increased militarisation being a hindrance to peace in the region.

China's arms exports to South Asia have also enabled Beijing to use them as leverage over the recipient states. Although China does not dictate the use of weapons, it does hold a certain amount of leverage over future arms sales, supplies, and spares to countries that are dependent on it. A prime example is Pakistan not criticising China for

Beijing's treatment of its Muslim Uighur community in Xinjiang. Although drawn from the 'all-weather friendship' between Islamabad and Beijing, there is no doubt that arms exports to Pakistan were in the minds of its leaders when deciding not to criticise China<sup>52</sup>. China is, therefore, able to build up political leverage and weapons dependency through its arms exports. Arms exports also lead to dependence on China for training and maintenance of the weapons and systems. When China sells heavy arms like fighter aircraft and submarines to a country, the importing country becomes reliant on China for a long time for training, maintenance, repairs, and spares. This reliance inevitably results in a certain degree of influence on the importing country<sup>53</sup>. Furthermore, it is expected that Chinese personnel are deployed along with the arms as trainers and field service representatives to the recipient countries, creating an additional strategic footprint on the ground. For India, this leverage can play out against it if China chooses to do so in either political or diplomatic scenarios.

Combined with China's arms exports, Beijing has also sought more intimate relations in both military and economic terms with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Against the backdrop of China's increasing relations with South Asia, it is important to examine the link between the growing arms exports and the BRI as a way of securing greater geopolitical influence in the region. There is no doubt that China's BRI initiatives in South Asia have challenged India's strategic interests and national security. Coupled with China's growing arms industry and arms exports, the vital question is whether weapons sales have become a new foreign policy tool for China<sup>54</sup>.

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In South Asia, China has killed two birds with one stone as it not only provides a market for its products but also manages to check Indian ambitions by using arms exports to shift the balance of power by increasing the capabilities of India's neighbours. China has therefore successfully used arms transfers to strengthen countries against states that are Beijing's rivals<sup>55</sup>. Thus, although these exports may not be a direct foreign policy tool, with the hostilities within South Asia, it inadvertently becomes a foreign policy tool against India compromising its national security; "China has been quietly checkmating India's regional dominance in South Asia through its arms sale in countries bordering India"<sup>56</sup>. Additionally, from a Chinese strategic perspective, "it leverages strong client-state relationships and in the process bolsters Beijing's influence, particularly among neighbouring

states"<sup>57</sup>. It, therefore, is easy to see how China's arms sales to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka indirectly act to contain India.

China's arms exports to India's neighbourhood will only increase in the future. What India needs to pay attention to are the underlying factors that have driven these weapons exports and the effects they have on the regional geopolitical balance. China has been strategically limiting India's ambitions in South Asia by investing heavily in its neighbours under the BRI umbrella. Chinese weapons exports play a similar role in not only expanding Beijing's influence in the region as it creates a dependence on China and enables exports to be used as leverage, but also by strengthening India's neighbours to keep India occupied and not be able to focus on being a direct competitor to China in Asia and the wider Indian Ocean region.

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