

Motoring along: Chinese military vehicle exports

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China has become the third-largest exporter of weapons and military equipment in the world. James Bingham and Sam Cranny-Evans report on China's known export activities and its defence-industrial base

During 2012–16 China's share of the world defence market grew to 6.2%, putting it ahead of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. However, the country's estimated share of the defence export market is based on available transfer data and most likely represents an incomplete dataset. It is possible that China has reached many more countries with its military equipment than reporting agencies and the public are aware of.

In recent years China has had two primary export partners: Myanmar and Venezuela. During 2011–17 China exported an estimated 447 vehicles to these countries alone, with the platform types exported indicating that China is moving from being a supplier of equipment based on Soviet designs to a supplier of its own domestically developed export vehicles.



The VN4 is a popular Chinese export vehicle because it can be used for a variety of roles, including police and border forces as well as conventional military operations. (Norinco)

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MBTs

Apart from the Type 59 and Type 69 main battle tanks (MBTs), which are based on the Soviet T-54 and T-62 respectively, China's only truly successful tank export is the MBT-2000: an export-only vehicle designed in partnership with Pakistan. More than 325 MBT-2000s were delivered to Pakistan during 2001–17, Myanmar purchased 50 in 2009 that were delivered between 2012 and 2013, and Bangladesh also received 44 in 2013. The success of the MBT-2000 lies largely in its cost-to-performance ratio. Its nearest competitor is the Russian T-72, which is often sold with restrictions and can be expensive considering the capabilities it can deliver. Moreover, the T-72 is already a dated design that can require considerable upgrade work before it is able to perform effectively on a modern battlefield. By comparison the MBT-2000 carries a similar weapon to the T-72 – an automatically loaded 125 mm gun – but is powered by a Ukrainian engine, making the vehicle more mobile than most standard export T-72 variants. The mission system fit is also more advanced than that of standard T-72s, with the commander equipped with a panoramic sight and automatic target tracker.

For Pakistan the MBT-2000 selection is also political. China has dedicated considerable effort to building its trade relationship with Pakistan and the two countries worked together to develop a design that could be locally produced. Meanwhile, although the T-72 was available for local production, the cost was likely too high. Pakistan may also have wanted a vehicle that was markedly different to the T-72Ms that form the bulk of the Indian MBT fleet to enable it to conceal some of its capabilities.

China's exports of the MBT-2000 also tie in with its ambitions to gain power abroad through soft politics. For example, the sale to Myanmar is thought to be a result of the strong co-operation that started between the two countries in the 1980s. China is the main supplier of military equipment and support to the country and frequently encourages the Myanmar regime to promote internal stability to avoid upsetting Chinese trade interests and projects in the area. It was therefore natural for Myanmar to choose an export vehicle from one of its closest partners. Bangladesh made a similar decision that may be related to the fact that it was previously operating a fleet of Type 59 and Type 69 MBTs that were due for an upgrade. The MBT-2000s were delivered in the same year that upgrade work on the older vehicles started and it is possible that China used the opportunity to install common systems across all three platform families.

Following the success of the MBT-2000 programme, China developed a series of tanks for export based on systems that were in service with the People's Liberation Army (PLA). However, of the resulting collection of MBTs the only one to have successfully achieved any export orders is the VT4: a third-generation MBT that incorporates features from Western and Russian designs. The first export customer for this was Thailand after its deal with Ukraine for T-84s was postponed following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. For Thailand the purchase represents a continuation of its trade relations with China and provides its armed forces with a capable MBT at a lower cost than Western equivalents. Early this year there were reports indicating that the VT4 was undergoing trials in Pakistan, for which the vehicle would provide an economic way of acquiring a relatively future-proof third-generation MBT fleet.

Technology transfers are another reason that Chinese MBTs are attractive to potential export customers. The initial contract with Thailand for 28 VT4s included a technology transfer deal that will provide the country with the ability to domestically produce the vehicles in the future. China also provided a technology transfer to Pakistan after the development of the MBT-2000 was completed.

This has enabled Pakistan to manufacture and modify the vehicle domestically to suit its unique requirements.

Norinco also offers a series of upgrades for early T-series MBTs such as the T-55 and the Type 59. The full upgrade standard is known as the Type 59 Gai and includes a range of options including a 105 or 125 mm main gun (over the standard 100 mm weapon), a more powerful engine with up to 800 hp, and digital fire-control and targeting systems. The most visually obvious difference is in protection: explosive reactive armour (ERA) and spaced armour can be added to the turret in an arrow shape and additional armour is added to the glacis plate. This upgrade thus addresses the primary weaknesses of the T-series MBTs: weak armour on the turret and hull, obsolete firepower, and second-generation mission systems. Bangladesh and Tanzania are two notable customers that have procured this export package. For Tanzania the package has recapitalised its fleet of MBTs and it is now in possession of the most capable MBTs in its region, given that neighbours Kenya, Mozambique, and Zambia possess only Vickers Mk 3s and T-55s. For Bangladesh the upgrade has provided the opportunity to field low-level third-generation MBTs at an affordable cost, which has increased its deterrence capacity.

Another Norinco offering, the VT5 light tank, is believed to weigh 33 tonnes, is armed with a 105 mm rifled main gun, and is designed to operate in mountainous terrain.

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