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Georg Bossle is a German graduate holding a bachelor's degree in Global Governance, Economics and Legal Order from ESADE Law School in Spain and currently pursuing a Dual Master's degree in Asian and International Affairs at Renmin University of China and King's College London in the UK. During his undergrad he has also studied at Sciences Po in Paris, Tufts University in Boston, and Keio University in Tokyo. His interests lie in international security, defence policy, and geopolitics, with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific region. Before beginning his undergraduate studies, Georg completed a two-year vocational training programme in Hong Kong, which sparked his interest in Asian political and economic systems. During his final year in Beijing, he conducted research on China's security and foreign policy, further deepening his commitment to understanding global strategic dynamics.

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A few weeks into the War with Iran, reports increasingly came in that suggested that Iran used Chinese-origin commercial satellite imagery to improve its ability to identify and strike U.S. and allied targets in the Middle East, while U.S. Space Command has publicly acknowledged that Iran's use of such forced a major adjustment in how the United States operates in the conflict zones (Reuters 2026). These satellites are just the latest example of Chinese hardware being exported to its partners, active conflict zones, and across the global south. Under the growing tension between the US and China these exports should be understood not merely as commercial transactions, but as instruments of China's great-power ambition and its broader aspiration to shape a more Sinocentric order. The essay argues that China's transfers of weapons and dual-use technologies are driven by three mutually reinforcing strategic benefits: first, to stabilize partner states domestically to protect Chinese economic interests and overseas investments; second, to generate political leverage and draw recipient countries more firmly into China's sphere of influence; and third, to strengthen China's own defence-industrial capabilities by enhancing material learning, operational feedback, and opportunities for iterative weapons development.

China's Strategic Context: Arms Exports within Great-Power Diplomacy

Under the rule of Xi Jinping, the PRC has moved away from Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy dictum of "hide capabilities and bide time" (韬光养晦) and reoriented the Chinese foreign policy towards "great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色大国外交), reflecting a more assertive, confident and confrontational foreign policy approach (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2017). Rush Doshi contends that China's strategic objectives can be conceptualised as three sequential "strategies of displacement" directed against U.S. global leadership: blunting, the erosion of U.S. influence regionally and globally; building, the construction of regional and economic alternatives; and expanding, the establishment of China-centred institutions and capabilities with global reach (Doshi 2021). In a similar vein, David Shambaugh interprets Xi Jinping's foreign policy as seeking to broaden China's economic, diplomatic, and institutional presence through a multilayered approach spanning different regions, institutions, and mechanisms (Shambaugh 2013). These ambitions are more clearly laid out under Xi's three Global Security (GSI), Development (GDI) and Civilisation (GCI) Initiatives, which all aim at achieving Xi's ambitions towards a Sinocentric order, especially the GSI as a tool to centralise Beijing's position as a major world power (Green, Nouwens, and Nouwens 2024). Furthermore, China aims to build a world-class" (世界一流军队) military capable of winning "intelligitized" warfare by 2049 as a critical component of its foreign policy, since Beijing understands these capabilities as vital to fully and unrestricted pursue its foreign policy goals (Cordesman 2021 and Stanzel et al. 2023).

While these frameworks capture China's strategic objectives at the systemic level, they provide less insight into the practical instruments through which these aims are advanced. One increasingly significant yet underexamined mechanism is the transfer of arms and dual-use technologies. Through these exports, China can weaken U.S. influence, cultivate enduring relationships of dependence, and extend its geopolitical reach, as recipient states become embedded in long-term technological and security ties that serve not merely commercial purposes, but broader strategic ones (Raska and Bitzinger 2020).

I. Partner stabilization and economic interest protection

Unlike actors such as Russia, Turkey or Iran, the PRC does not benefit much from political volatility or open conflict in the Global South, since it views it as a crucial recipient of its investments and export of goods, services and technologies. The PRC has invested heavily into these regions which suffer of high levels of political volatility and conflict. In 2021 around 84% of BRI investments and a good portion of Chinese overseas workers were located in medium high-risk countries (Nantulya 2021). As China still lacks the political will, represented in its doctrine of non-interference, and arguably the ability to serve as a direct security provider, it must rely on either the host country's domestic security forces or the employment of Chinese private security actors, which are currently unable to provide capabilities beyond simple security tasks (Bossle 2025). When excluding all other options, the training and material support of local forces remains one of the most viable options for China, as evidenced by the destination of Chinese investment correlates with the main recipients of Chinese military exports (Rinaldi 2024; Devermont et al. 2021). A case in point here is Pakistan, which has been one of the cornerstones of the BRI with its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), spanning the country from North to South, which was also the recipient of 63% of Chinese overall military exports between 2020-2024 (George et al. 2025). Another example would be West Africa, which is a vital part of China's quest to secure and diversify its supply chains since countries such as Nigeria are the most resource-rich country in Africa. Interestingly, in Sub-Saharan, where several countries have increasingly strained relations with the West, and West Africa, China has emerged as the largest Arms supplier in recent years. The Region is grappling with rising pressure from Islamist Militants and faced with tight budget constraints has received 25% of its military imports from China in 2024 surpassing Russia as the largest supplier (George et al. 2025). Chinese arms supplies therefore operate as a form of indirect security provision, enabling Beijing to reinforce partner-state capacity to secure infrastructure, protect Chinese personnel and investments, and manage insurgent or criminal violence, while avoiding the political risks and normative contradictions of direct involvement.

II. Building leverage and strategic alignment

Beyond stabilising its partners and protecting its economic interests, the PRC likely employs arms exports to create long-term reliance and anchor the recipient country in its strategic orbit, given the rising security dependency on access, maintenance, and updates to its military equipment. The

current research states that there are several reasons for these higher or lower levels of strategic alignment and dependencies as the result of weapons imports; 1.) *Spare Parts, Maintenance & Sustainment*, since recipients often do not have the required technological or industrial capacity to sustain the equipment's state without long-term contracts with the exporting country (Yousif 2023); 2.) *Training and Doctrine Integration*, as the new equipment requires, with rising complexity, training and exercise assistance by the exporting country (Johnson 2020); 3.) *Cost of Diversification*, meaning that the acquisition of substitute equipment or diverse sources which states can choose to mitigate the dependencies and leverage, due to the inherent nature of the arms industry, with high capital investments and R&D costs, makes such efforts politically and financially often too costly (Yousif 2023); and 4.) *Technological interoperability*, the integration of sets of systems of different origin can be difficult or even impossible, and allegations have been raised that this is by design in the case of Chinese platforms, especially maritime ones (Maan 2025). Examples of this include the Type 54A and F-22P frigates acquired by Pakistan; the former plagued by flawed interoperability with Western systems, and the latter by persistent hardware and maintenance failures, leaving Pakistan stuck in a long-term lifecycle dependency (Maan 2025). Another example is the case of Chinese UAVs which highlight a switch from the dominant single transactional sales towards long-term capability-building partnerships, since UAVs can create long-term influence because they rarely end with the initial platform sale (Boyle 2026). They often generate follow-on relationships involving munitions, spare parts, training, maintenance, technical support, software updates, and further defence cooperation. Although not a Chinese case, Turkey's S-400 purchase illustrates the wider logic of arms-transfer dependence. By acquiring a Russian air-defence system despite repeated U.S. warnings, a NATO member disrupted interoperability with allied systems, triggered sanctions against it, lost access to critical military imports, and was removed from the F-35 fighter programme. The episode reportedly left Turkey with up to \$13 billion in sunk costs while delivering little practical military benefit from the S-400 system itself (Ghosh 2025). This showcases as mentioned above, military arms acquisitions tend to stabilise long-term relations or strategic alliances as their complexity and strategic importance rise while at the same time can be gaping vulnerabilities if relations turn sour (Kumar 2021, 57).

III. Operational learning and defence-industrial upgrading

One obstacle facing China's armed forces and defence industry is the PLA's lack of combat experience in modern multidomain warfighting (Stanzel et al. 2023). By contrast, the United States and Israel have gained repeated operational exposure in the Middle East and elsewhere, treating conflict zones as costly but irreplaceable laboratories for testing doctrine, equipment, intelligence fusion, and force protection (Ryan 2022; Jensen 2024). The most efficient model for a state to establish "combat feedback loops" can currently be observed in Ukraine's domestic defence-industrial ecosystem. Ukraine has developed a distributed observe–orient–decide–act (OODA) architecture at industrial scale, in which the feedback cycle between front-line operators and weapons developers has been compressed from years to weeks or days (Blank 2026). For states not engaged in active conflict, this process can be partially substituted through the direct import

of battle-proven equipment from actors such as the United States, Israel, Ukraine, or Russia (Evron 2025). For China, direct replication of this model is difficult: Beijing seeks to retain control over the interoperability, production, and technological development of its equipment, while avoiding the risks of direct intervention. As a result, one of the few remaining avenues for China to generate comparable combat feedback is the export or supply of its equipment to partner states, including those involved in conflict zones or active wars such as in Ukraine or Iran (Donovan and Ezratty 2026 and USCC 2024, 348). Through these deployments, China can learn indirectly from how its weapons perform under operational conditions. A key area for this has been the exports of UAVs, since 52% of it have been extensively supplied to conflict zones, functioning as testing grounds for its drone development (DroneSense 2026). These exports, as explained before, were used to create institutional dependencies and build feedback ecosystems that let information flow back to the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) to improve kill chains processes, operational cycles, and battlefield management. Furthermore, China offers its systems at much lower prices in a market which is dominated by only a handful, mostly western countries (Kallenborn 2020). In addition, exporting less capable weapons variants, such as the PL-15E, may allow Chinese manufacturers to recover part of the high R&D costs associated with advanced weapons, while still gaining insight into the operational performance, without increased risks of adversaries gaining better insights into the PLA used variants capabilities (Hoffmann 2025; Blank 2026). This is further showcased by Raska and Bitzingers research demonstrating that Chinas arms exports are deeply embedded within the development of a defence-industrial base, where increased production volumes, sustained by both domestic demand and foreign sales, provide the financial and industrial conditions necessary for continued innovation and technological upgrading. In this context, arms exports contribute indirectly to offsetting research and development costs (Raska and Bitzinger 2020). Because Chinese defence-industrial feedback mechanisms are opaque, the precise extent of this learning is difficult to verify; nevertheless, export deployments may provide indirect insight into reliability, maintenance, tactical use, and platform adaptation.

Conclusion

In sum, China's expanding transfers of weapons and dual-use technologies should not be understood anymore, as merely isolated commercial transactions, but as instruments embedded within Beijing's broader strategy of great-power diplomacy. They allow China to protect overseas economic interests, cultivate political leverage, and strengthen its defence-industrial base without replicating the formal alliance system of the United States. As this essay has shown, these transfers serve three mutually reinforcing functions: they help stabilise strategically important partner states, create long-term dependencies through training, maintenance, and technological integration, and generate operational feedback that can support China's military modernisation.

Yet the strategic effects of these exports should not be overstated. Arms transfers can create influence, but they do not automatically produce durable political alignment (Kumar 2021). Their impact depends on the complexity of the systems exported, the recipient state's ability to diversify suppliers, and the extent to which Chinese platforms become embedded in national security

institutions. China's arms exports are therefore best understood not as a substitute for formal alliances, but as a flexible mechanism for building selective, long-term leverage across the Global South and in strategically contested regions. Future research should therefore examine when Chinese arms transfers create enduring dependency or remain merely transactional or if consistent patterns emerge among recipient states in terms of geography, resource endowments, levels of Chinese investment, and exposure to conflict, as well as which Chinese systems are most likely to become embedded in active combat environments. This is especially important for assessing whether such exports are becoming a mechanism for defence-industrial learning, allowing Chinese firms and military planners to refine systems that could later be deployed in a Taiwan contingency or wider confrontation with the United States.

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