

Israeli concerns about Chinese weapons in Middle East



A study published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University has reviewed the history of arms deals between China, some Arab countries and Iran.

China's arms exports to the Middle East began in the mid-1970s, and by 2017 it reached \$12.73bn. Most of the Chinese arms sales in this area, which amounted to \$8.8bn in total value, took place in the 1980s, during which China sold arms to both sides of the Iran-Iraq war. In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, China's weapon exports to the Middle East fell to \$1.8bn, mostly directed to Iran. This decline continued in the first decade of the 21st century, reaching \$1.4bn, with a majority of exports to Iran and Egypt.

The value of Chinese arms exports between 2010 and 2017 reached \$468mn, accounting for 3.7 per cent of China's total military exports to the world, which reached \$12.5bn. Thus, Russian and US weapon exports to the Middle East during this period amounted to \$6.1bn and \$30.1bn, respectively.

Chinese arms deal with Middle East countries

China signed the first security deal with a country in the Middle East, Egypt, in 1975. In the 1980s, the Egyptian authorities bought naval, items including submarines, missile boats and bombers Xi'an G-6 as well as fighter jets. At the turn of the 21st century, Egyptian military deals with China were focused on uncrewed aerial vehicles and the transfer of technology to manufacture such aircraft in Egypt. The two countries also signed an agreement to launch a second Egyptian satellite for surveillance.



Chinese missile in Iran (Archive – AFP)

Sino-Iraqi relations in the security field have begun in the 1980s, including deals where the Iraqi side bought fighter jets. This was done in parallel with other Chinese-Iranian deals, under which Iranian authorities also bought fighter jets during the Iran-Iraq war. The contracts also included Iraq's purchase of anti-aircraft launchers and missiles. In contrast, the Iranian state focused its investments on rockets. After the war, Iraq bought drones from China; while, Iran has exported Chinese technology to develop its missile industry. During the Second Lebanon War in 2006, a Hezbollah-launched sea-to-sea missile (SSM) hit the Israeli corvette, INS Ahi-Hanit, which Israel said was developed by Iran by Chinese C-802 missile technology. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), China has provided Iran with the necessary expertise in the manufacture of chemical weapons and chemical warheads for missiles, in addition to offering nuclear expertise.

Even though Turkey is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), China has also supplied arms to the Turkish authorities since the 1980s,

including missile launchers and 200 short-range ballistic missiles. In 2013, a Chinese company won a Turkish tender for the purchase of missile defence systems. The deal provoked a wave of anger among NATO member countries, and since then, there were no reports of other arms deals between Turkey and China.

China has made deals with Saudi Arabia, supplying it with missiles with a range of thousands of kilometres, mobile gun systems and uncrewed aerial vehicles.

The development of Chinese security industries

The study said that “the security industries in China are now working to improve the quality of their products in all fields, as well as their ability to produce, and are gradually equating them with the Russian and even Western countries’ industries in certain areas.” According to a Pentagon report, China’s production of ballistic missiles, guided missiles, surface-to-air missiles and air-to-air missiles for its military use and export has improved significantly in recent years. Most of China’s ballistic and guided missiles are close regarding performance to parallel products made by Western countries and Russia, some of which are destined for export.

China’s commercial and military air industries have developed in recent years, according to the study, and are manufacturing large cargo planes and fighter jets of the fourth and fifth generation, modern uncrewed aircraft for reconnaissance and attack, and helicopters.

China has also developed its naval industrial capabilities, including the construction of submarines, missile carriers, naval aviation and other maritime means through the development and expansion of shipyards. According to the US Department of Defence, China is the world’s largest ship manufacturer. Its warships are equipped with advanced anti-aircraft and anti-submarine protection, and it is developing offensive capabilities in this field.

According to a report by the US Department of Defence, China’s production capacity continues to progress in all areas of ground armies’ weapons, including modern tanks and artillery, but sometimes at the expense of its quality.

The study indicated that China’s interest in the Middle East is increasing, and its interests are expanding by energy considerations and the removal of terrorism from its borders, which means the expansion of its political and economic

benefits. The Middle East is China's primary energy source, as it is supplied with oil from Saudi Arabia and Iran. Also, the Middle East is a critical crossroads for the export of its goods.

Conflicts in the Middle East, following the "Arab Spring" and the conflict between Iran and Arab countries, have increased the demand for security imports. At the same time, the United States has begun to withdraw from the region, since President Barack Obama. The study said that this situation will increase the volume of China's security exports to the Middle East in parallel with the amount of Chinese trade and investment in the region, and that even China can compete with the United States, Russia and the West in certain areas, especially following Western countries' reluctance to sell weapons in anticipation of war crimes committed using these arms, and China has replaced them.

Israeli fears



Netanyahu and Chinese Vice President during his visit to Israel last year

The study considered that the expansion of China's security export to the Middle East would gradually pose an increasing challenge for Israel and the Israeli army for the following reasons:

First, China supplies weapons to Iran, which is an enemy state for Israel. Iran transfers that weapon or the weapon it develops by Chinese experience to Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which constitute resistance movements against Israel.

Second, most of the Chinese weapons that reach the region are used by the Chinese army mainly, and not widely deployed in the world. Therefore, “there is a challenge in identifying and responding to their technical, technological and performance capabilities.”

Third, unlike the US arms sales to countries in the region, China does not have the necessary legislation to maintain Israel’s qualitative military edge. China and Israel have no regular channel of dialogue on this issue.

Fourth, a growing Chinese export in areas where there is relative Israeli superiority, such as drones, increases competition for such an Israeli export to the world, including “pragmatic Sunni states.” The study concluded that “China’s arms production and security trade trends indicate that there is a possibility of change in this area and it requires increased Israeli follow-up. “The Israeli government should strive to open channels of dialogue with the Chinese government on the issue of security exports to the Middle East, through which it will be able to express its point of view and concern about the subject and try to reduce the risk that it might face. At the same time, the Israeli government and the Israel Security Agency should include this issue in the strategic dialogue with the United States, and reach common understandings on the development of these trends and the inevitability of its influence on the interests of the two countries, and the coordination of the actors of their policies regarding this subject.”

The research institute published the transactions in a book entitled *Sino-Israel Relations: Opportunities and Challenges*. The data attached to the study is based on information released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

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