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Research Report

The Growing Preference for Chinese Arms in Africa: A Case Study of Uganda and Kenya

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POLICY POINTS

African states should

anticipate and prepare for an era of more marked alliancing efforts by major arms exporters, particularly the US and China.

A multilateral regime needs

to manage arms exports in Africa, the Arms Trade Treaty is a natural candidate.

Streamline bureaucracy in the

US arms procurement process under the Foreign Military Assistance program.

US & China need to work as

partners to contain Russian dominance in African arms sales.

The Growing Preference for Chinese Arms in Africa: A Case Study of Uganda and Kenya

Elijah N. Munyi

IN THE PAST DECADE, THE RISE IN THE GLOBAL SHARE of Chinese defense sales has elicited both academic and policy interest on the impact on global and regional security. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) as of 2019, China was the second largest arms producer and was fifth in terms of its global defense exports, with a global 5.2 percent share behind the US, Russia, France, and Germany. One of the regions driving the rise of Chinese arms exports is Africa, where China's share of arms exports rose by 55 percent between 2012 and 2017. Likewise, the total share of African arms imports coming from China rose from 8.4 percent to 17 percent in that period. Between 2009 and 2018 the share of African arms imports from China has grown to 20 percent (US\$ 3.2 billion) of China's overall arms exports.¹ This policy brief is based on research examining the growing preference for Chinese arms. Looking at military procurement preferences of two African states – Uganda and Kenya, the policy brief gives (a) a clarification on the non-strategic nature of Chinese arms exports to Africa, (b) the motivations behind the preference for Chinese arms, and (c) policy implications and recommendations for state actors involved.

BACKGROUND: ARMS SALES AS A TOOL OF FOREIGN POLICY

ARMS EXPORTS ARE AN IMPORTANT FOREIGN POLICY TOOL. The rise of Chinese arms exports in the past two decades to rival Russia and the US as a preeminent arms supplier has raised questions about the trends in the balance of military influence, often associated with arms exports, by these powers in Africa. While acknowledging the importance of military sales as a foreign policy tool with particular reference to the US, John Sislin contends that, “one justification for US arms transfers is that the United States can manipulate its arms exports to make the recipient state comply with American wishes.”² While some observers have deemed China's arms exports as more “transactional than an instrument of foreign policy” in line with China's noninterference policy, others have noted the inadvertent political and military impact of Chinese arms supply when China supplies these arms to enhance a state's ability to withstand external influence.³ Mathews and Ping noted that, “China's arms export model operates according to a carefully-crafted strategy based on three principles: promoting the

legitimate self-defense capability of the recipient country; strengthening the peace, security and stability of that country and region; and non-interference in its internal affairs.” Thus, even though perhaps less direct in their strategic objectives, China’s arms supply has direct military and international ramifications on the relations of the receiving state with other states.⁴

Beyond expanding the influence of the supplying state on the procuring state, arms transfers as latent power by the supplier state leads to a lurking apprehension among great powers about “who is supplying who” with arms. Exclusive supply by one state to another means the potential for inordinate military influence of that supplying state on the purchasing state. The “who is supplying who” concern arises when powers with ambitions of hegemonic influence seek a share of the pie in state and regional military provisions. For example, an emerging international impacts of growing Chinese arms sales is the recent relaxation by the US of its own existing restrictions on the sale of some types of military equipment, such as drones, in order to allow the US to compete in this market. Thus, arms supply also has an impact on the balance of power amongst great powers in the procuring state. It is the recognition of the foreign policy impact of arms supply in these two broad ways that has raised an interest in the drivers of the preference for Chinese arms in Africa, as well as political and military ramifications of the rising share of China as a supplier state.

CHINA AS AN ARMS EXPORTER TO AFRICA

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS AFFIRM that Chinese arms exports are primarily transactional rather than strategic. This means that unlike the US and Russia whose arms sales in Africa are concentrated on and influenced by the regional security concerns of their major clients’ states, China is in fact not a dominant arms supplier to top tier African arms importers. As Table 1 shows, among the top five top importers of arms in Africa, the share of Chinese exports between 2014-2019 as a percentage of the total volume is in the minority, compared to the US and Russia.

Table 1: Chinese Arms Supply to Africa 2014-2019

Country	Total Arms Imports (in TIV US\$ millions*)	Top Supplying Countries				Chinese Imports as % of Total
Egypt	8,816	Russia (2,980)	France (2,971)	US (1,434)	China (430)	0.48%
Algeria	6,766	Russia (4,444)	China (864)	Germany (707)	Italy (306)	12.7%
Morocco	1,792	US (1,126)	France (643)	Italy (10)	-	0
Angola	736	Russia (501)	Lithuania (60)	Belarus (40)	China (37)	5%
Nigeria	573	Russia (216)	China (115)	US (82)	-	20%
Sudan	396	China (163)	Russia (125)	Belarus (87)	-	41%
Tunisia	364	US (192)	Dutch (134)	Turkey (29)	-	0
Cameroon	176	China (85)	Russia (38)	France (11)	-	48%
Senegal	153	France (70)	China (36)	Slovakia (10)	-	23.5%
Zambia	138	China (65)	Italy (35)	Russia (14)	-	47%
Ethiopia	130	Russia (69)	Ukraine (26)	Israel (10)	-	0
Tanzania	87	China (35)	France (32)	Dutch (20)	-	40%

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database. *TIV stands for Trend Indicator Value which reflects the military capability price of military equipment. It combines financial value as well as capability of the procured equipment.

On the other hand, Chinese arms supplier’s market share appears to be consistently higher and captures a majority of the market among second-tier importing states (numbers 6-12 in Table 1). Thus, growing Chinese arms exports to Africa seem to be driven by an innocuous commercial imperative that avoids engagement with big importing states who may be involved in regional conflicts. The drivers behind the demand for Chinese arms are mostly second tier sub-Saharan buyers, that are not involved overt regional inter-state conflicts. It is noteworthy that apart from Morocco, which has an outright alliance with the US in its regional rivalries with Algeria, Russia is the leading supplier of arms to all the other top four arms importers – Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, and Egypt. The arms supply race among the top five

exporters is really therefore between Russia and China, and not between the US and China.

PREFERENCE FOR CHINESE ARMS

WHEN PROCURING ALIKE MILITARY products, albeit each with their own specificities from either the US or China, I found procurement considerations were primarily driven by: (1) Cost, (2) Perceptions of US or Chinese interference or oversight on end user, (3) Financial incentives or aid attached to the purchase, (4) State of political relations between the two states, (5) State of military relations between the two states.

1. Cost: The relative cheaper price of Chinese equivalents to similar Russian or American arms is a big driver for Chinese arms, particularly because the chief drivers of Chinese demand tend to be the second-tier buyer states who are less developed and who may not need as sophisticated equipment.

2. Supplier state's end-user oversight: Coming in a close second in states' considerations of where to purchase their arms from is the perceived willingness of the selling state to "simply" sell, without undue interest or pressure on how those weapons will be used. This is really the achilles heel of the US in its competition with China. The US was noted as the only major arms exporting state which maintains an active end-user monitoring team from the Department of Defense in buyer states. Referred to as the Security Cooperation Organization, the job of these security diplomats is to oversee end-user commitments and possible violations. Perceptions of China's nonchalant attitude to how arms will be used, contested as it may be, is a crucial incentive behind its commercial approach to arms exports in Africa.

3. Financial incentives attached to arms purchase: The most attractive financial incentive mentioned was the extended window under which the supplier provides free repairs and parts, as well as free installation of other devices to increase or improve the equipment's inter-operability. While US arms are considered to be of higher quality than Chinese, the perception of US unwillingness to alter their equipment to increase inter-operability is a disincentive. The Chinese were seen as more willing to alter the original formats of the equipment to install devices as desired by the buyer at no substantial cost. This is a major boon to the commercial success of Chinese aircraft sales.

4. Political and military relations between purchasing and selling state: Political and military relations between the purchasing state and either China or the US are not very important considerations in the procurement process. These two

considerations only become crucial in situations where a state (Morocco for example) is involved in actual or potential interstate conflicts with states whose arms supply are perceived as coming from rival alliances. Political and military relationships only matter in cases where there is an alliance between an African state and either US or Russia. China seems to not be favored as a great power bulwark in these alliances. Thus, any overt political alliance would tend to disadvantage China's arms sales. This finding also highlights the paradox of US military diplomacy. In spite of agreement between Kenyan and Ugandan procurement officials about the greater role that US military operations play in enhancing regional security- a greater recognition of US military diplomacy compared to China's- recognition did not translate to a commercial advantage for the US.

KEY POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. More marked alliances in arms procurement in Africa.

As China moves towards a more assertive global foreign policy and the United States' Africa policy (announced in 2018) moves to assert a more deliberate commercial imperative in US-Africa relations, military sales in Africa are likely to become more politicized. African countries, as well as China and the US, should be cognizant of the emergence of this alliancing imperative in arms procurement. African countries should be more conscious that their military procurement preferences are likely to be interpreted through the lens of the emerging Great Power Competition between China and the US. China should be aware that in terms of arms exports, overt military alliances in Africa have tended to favor the US and Russia because of their perceived willingness to become overtly involved in regional interstate rivalries. *China should thus deescalate this alliancing imperative as much as possible in order not to compromise the benefits accrued from African states' generally positive perception of Chinese non-interference.*

2. A multilateral regime needs to manage arms exports to Africa.

The US desire to compete commercially with Chinese arms exports in Africa suggests that the US is likely to relax some of its human rights/end-user considerations when approving arms sales to African states. A purely commercial imperative by these great powers could unleash an adverse arms race in Africa, particularly in North Africa, with the potential of escalating interstate flashpoints. The Arms Trade Treaty, which seeks to create common international standards for trade in conventional arms, would be an ideal platform for such regulation. At least 26 African states, including many of the top-tier arms importers,

such as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan are not party to the treaty. *As the preeminent state party to the Arms Trade Treaty, China should promote greater embrace of this treaty by both African states and major arms exporters. If untenable at the multilateral level, a more limited agreement between the US, China, and the African Union could be pursued.*

3. Streamline bureaucracy in the US procurement process.

If the US is going to be more competitive in arms sales to Africa, particularly Government-to-Government agreements under the Foreign Military Sales Program, there needs to be enhanced pre-agreement cooperation and consensus between the State Department, the Defense Department, and Congress before African states and the US enter into procurement agreements. Current bureaucratic oversight and redundancy among these three departments is a serious disincentive for procurement from the US, in spite of the general positive view of the quality of US arms.

4. US and China are partners in containing Russian dominance in African arms sales.

China's rise, and the concerted efforts by the US to contain China's rise, has given way to a fierce rhetorical and policy battle between the two states that sometimes blinds areas of potential cooperation. As of 2019, Russia remained the predominant arms exporter to Africa with a commanding 49 percent share of the total. Growing Chinese arms sales to Africa does more to diminish Russian dominance than does the effect of the US share of arms exports. *Washington and Beijing need to rethink the need for cooperation to increase their arms exports to Africa to balance Russian dominance.* A possible path towards encouraging African states towards greater procurement from

both the US and China is through incentivizing African states to adopt government-to-government procurement which favor the US and China, while Russia relies more on commercial sales from private manufacturers. ★

ENDNOTES

1. Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers 2018," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, SIPRI Fact Sheet March 2019: 5.
2. John Sisslin, "Arms as Influence: The Determinants of Successful Influence," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 38, no. 4 (1994): 665-689.
3. Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Meia Nouwens, "Are arms exports a tool of Chinese foreign policy?" *EastAsiaForum*, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/07/07/are-arms-exports-a-tool-of-chinese-foreign-policy/>.
4. Ron Mathews and Xiaojuan Ping, "The end game of China's arms export strategy" *EastAsiaForum*, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/09/27/the-end-game-of-chinas-arms-export-strategy/>

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