



**RETHINKING BANGLADESH'S ARMS
IMPORT STRATEGY: CURBING
RELIANCE ON CHINA**

BY **KHANDAKAR TAHMID REJWAN**

Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan
(tahmidrezwan94@gmail.com) is presently working as a Research Data Analyst at the Bangladesh Peace Observatory under the Centre for Alternatives (CA) and previously was a Research Associate-STT at the World Bank.

Recently, reports about the [poor quality](#) of Chinese-imported arms and weapons have been on the rise among the Armed Forces of Bangladesh. These issues pose serious threats to military readiness and are detrimental to the national security of Bangladesh. Beijing is proving to be an [unreliable source of military hardware](#), which has serious consequences for the efforts to modernize the Armed Forces of Bangladesh (AFB). Against such backdrops, Dhaka must seriously consider its overreliance on Chinese weapons and initiate efforts to diversify defense imports to fulfill its desired "[Forces Goal 2030](#)" to modernize the AFB.

The recent collapse of the authoritarian regime of [Sheikh Hasina](#) and the introduction of fresh and [rejuvenated leadership](#) in Dhaka led by Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus makes the requirement of diversification of arms imports a vital defense priority. Therefore, steps must be taken by the relevant policymakers in Dhaka to look outside of the dragon's armory. Already, efforts to increase weapons import from allies like [India](#) and [Turkey](#) have been accelerated. Yet, these are not enough. Dhaka should strategically target its arms imports from friendly western states like US, UK, and France who are already established arms exporters. It must also look into emerging arms manufacturers with

whom it has warm economic and political ties, like South Korea and Japan.

Absence of significant indigenous arms manufacturing

Bangladesh is the [second-largest destination of Chinese weapons](#), according to the latest data published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Chinese armaments account for more than [two-thirds](#) of the total inventory of the AFB. Critical weapons systems like [Ming-class submarines](#) or [MBT-2000 tanks](#) are of Chinese origin. Such proliferation of Chinese weapons can be attributed to factors like [long-term familiarity](#) with using Chinese arms by AFB, [cheap price](#), and no direct political conditions attached. Other major arms exporters to Dhaka include Turkey, the UK, and Russia.

Additionally, Bangladesh lacks an effective or large defense industrial base. So, the arms production capability of Bangladesh is very limited. It only produces [small arms](#), explosives, and various utility vehicles domestically for the use of its military. Most of the [domestically produced equipment](#) is Chinese licensed and acquired through Transfer of Technology (ToT). These arms manufacturing industries don't produce any heavy or significant weapons systems like tanks, artillery systems and interceptor jets. Previously, Bangladesh developed [patrol vessels](#) in its indigenous shipyards for the Navy. These are lightly armed and lack the seafaring capabilities unlike corvettes or frigates. Therefore, indigenous defense manufacturing and production of Dhaka are far behind self-sufficiency, which lacks technical maturity, production capability, and technological competence. Overall, Dhaka, in the foreseeable future, lacks any ability to manufacture or produce major defense systems unless they are licensed through ToT and thus will heavily rely on arms import for modernizing its forces.

Contemporary necessity of modern armaments

Besides cheap and low-quality equipment, reliance on Chinese inventory is suicidal due to the geopolitical realities surrounding Bangladesh's

neighbors. India has been a close ally, and [relations improved](#) after the Sheikh Hasina regime took power in 2009. That leaves Myanmar to be the only adversarial state with whom relations are [strained](#) after the [2017 Rohingya crisis](#). Interestingly, Myanmar's [major arms supplier](#) is China. Beijing shares a very cozy relationship with the Naypyidaw. Therefore, China will not supply any major weapons, which might give Bangladesh an edge over Myanmar.

Given such drawbacks, contemporary developments in internal and external environments require Bangladesh to strengthen its armed forces. It won a major victory against [Myanmar](#) and [India](#) in 2012 and 2014, respectively, in the international tribunals, and secured a large chunk of the maritime boundary in BoB. Under such circumstances, it plans to develop a [blue economy](#) utilizing the natural resources like natural gas, minerals, and fisheries of the BoB. This requires bolstering the security of the BoB by placing a capable Navy including deploying large ships like Frigates. Currently, Bangladesh has [few such ships](#), which are not sufficient to serve such purposes. Naval modernization is also resonated by the situation of civil war in Myanmar. Events like Tatmadaw ships [bombarding the rebels near Saint Martin's Island](#) detached the island from Bangladesh. It [took the Bangladesh Navy weeks](#) to send ships and bring in the supplies from the mainland.

There have also been [several violations](#) of airspace by the Tatmadaw [in recent years](#). They have previously [opened fire](#) inside the sovereign territory of Bangladesh. To prevent such incident Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) relies outdated Mig-29s acquired [from Russia in 1999](#), and obsolete Chinese F-7BGI interceptors to secure its airspace. In comparison, Tatmadaw has exported much modern [Su-30 fighter jets from Russia](#) recently. This reflects an imbalance in air power existing between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Additionally in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) there has been an insurgency led by the [Kuki Chin National Front](#) (KNF), which has shown relentless efforts to sabotage [peace talks](#), attack [public infrastructure](#), and conduct [remote violence](#). The [success](#) of Myanmar's Chin-based Kuki rebels and

the [tensions prevailing](#) in Kuki communities in India's Manipur may also inspire the KNF insurgents in Bangladesh. They operate under the guise of treacherous terrain in the CHT. This necessitates the Army acquiring modern reconnaissance vehicles and scout helicopters to conduct counterinsurgency operations in the remote areas.

Alternate sourcing and diversifying arms import

Given these scenarios, Dhaka must be forthcoming in understanding the need to diversify arms imports and materialize the Forces Goal 2030. The traditional Beijing-based arms dependency must be supplanted or complimented by procuring weapons from alternative sources. Due to the war in Ukraine, traditional western sources like the US and UK will not be able to supply the required equipment in time. Nevertheless, Dhaka must [continue robust defense cooperation](#) and agreements with Washington and London. Given the current geopolitical rivalry, the arms trade can deepen the ties between the US and UK with Bangladesh. This can further curb Beijing's influence over Dhaka. Besides, France remains a potential seller, as it has become [the second-largest arms exporter](#) recently. Paris already has previously [signed letters of intent](#) in 2021 on defense cooperation with Dhaka, which should be utilized by the GoB.

Supplementing efforts to gain western sources can be reinforced by establishing ties with major arms manufacturers in the global south. India, Turkey, South Korea, and Japan remain the [most viable options](#) in this regard. Bangladesh has accelerated its defense procurement with India with a new batch of APCs recently delivered last month. Turkey has already [supplied drones, rocket artilleries and missiles](#) to Dhaka. Defense diplomacy with both New Delhi and Ankara is being expanded by Dhaka through [seminars](#) and [dialogues](#). These must be strengthened further in order to acquire license production by acquiring ToT of Indian and Turkish arms domestically to develop a DIB in Bangladesh.

Finally, warm relations with East Asian states like Japan and South Korea must be leveraged to diversify equipment sourcing. Tokyo is recently

considering [exporting arms to Dhaka](#), which presents a significant opportunity to access the Japanese inventory. Moreover, South Korea has become a [significant arms exporter](#). Bangladesh purchased one of its modern frigates, named [BNS Bangabandhu](#), which was manufactured by South Korea in 1999. Therefore, steps must also be taken to rejuvenate such defense ties with Seoul. Materializing the initiatives above will contribute to making the AFB a capable 21st-century military.

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