



Chinese Arms Cost American Lives

by Richard D. Fisher, Jr.



FOR OVER A year, U.S. officials have been complaining to their Chinese counterparts about the shipment of Chinese-made or Chinese coproduced weapons to Iraqi insurgents and to the Taliban in Afghanistan, largely via Iran. The requests to stop the flow of arms into the hands of insurgents who are killing U.S. and coalition troops has fallen on deaf ears. Far more than just the latest irritant in U.S.-China relations, Beijing's arming of these insurgencies fits into the long-term trend dating back to the Korean and Vietnam Wars of using proxy conflicts to bleed the American superpower.

Chinese involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan dates back to the 1970s and '80s. In Afghanistan, China became an active arms supplier to mujahideen forces, at that time in cooperation with Washington, fighting Soviet occupiers. In Iraq, from the late 1990s up until about 2001 China was engaged in a "hot" proxy war with U.S. air forces seeking to enforce the United Nations sanctioned "no fly zone." The now famous computer company Huawei helped

Saddam link his anti-aircraft guns and missiles with modern fiber-optic systems, making them more dangerous to American pilots. According to one former U.S. Air Force source, the U.S. had to regularly bomb these Chinese-built and rebuilt command-and-control nodes.

Just before 9-11, China and the Taliban were reportedly on the verge of establishing a formal diplomatic relationship. French reports noted that China was a regular customer for the Taliban's collection of American weapons, such as Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and parts of Tomahawk cruise missiles used against Taliban bases. In 2002 Bill Gertz of the Washington Times reported that prior to 9-11 China trained Taliban forces in cooperation with Pakistan's powerful ISI intelligence service. This relationship very likely persisted in some form—in 2005, Afghan of-

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ficials were still complaining that Chinese weapons were making their way into the hands of the Taliban.

The most recent exercise in this proxy warfare was reported in the U.S. and British press in June 2007. "Americans are being killed by Chinese-supplied weapons, with the full knowledge and understanding of Beijing where these weapons are going," an anonymous Defense Department official told Mr. Gertz.

Pentagon sources indicated that China was in some cases shipping weapons directly to the Taliban, but that most weapons were going to the Taliban and to Iraqi insurgents via Iran. Both Washington and Tel Aviv had long been focused on Iran's role in training and arming Shiite factions in Iraq and the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon. Iran's proxy role in providing Chinese weapons to Hezbollah was again evident during the violent but inconclusive Israel-Hezbollah clash of July 2006.

When Iran's role as a provider of Chinese weapons to forces killing Americans emerged in early 2007 Washington could not come to a consensus about what it saw or what to do. Were the weapons left over from prior American and Chinese military aid to the Afghan mujahedeen fighting the Soviets in the 1980s? Were the weapons made in Iran, meaning that even if they were Chinese designs, they were not technically Chinese? U.S. intelligence had detected that Iran had been requesting Chinese state-controlled arms companies to remove serial numbers on weapons to better hide their origin. And finally, was the Beijing government actually in control of these weapons transfers, or were they conducted by corrupt officials or criminal elements beyond government control?

The list of Chinese weapons ending up in hands of Iraqi and Taliban insurgents includes guns, armor-piercing ammunition, rocket-propelled grenades, mines, .50-caliber antimaterial rifles and HN-5

shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles. Armor piercing rounds counter the vast investment in personal armor for U.S. and coalition soldiers, while the .50-caliber rifles enable very long-range sniping. The HN-5 may be only a first-generation anti-aircraft missile, but it has been upgraded and could pose a real threat to coalition helicopters and increasingly critical unmanned surveillance aircraft.

China also has many options for increasing the deadly effect of its exports. It has sold Iran the means to produce an upgraded version of its QW-1 shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missile called the Misagh-1, which can strike targets at far higher altitudes than the HN-5. The Misagh-1 has been used at least once against U.S. aircraft by Iraqi insurgents in 2004. In late September 2007 the U.S. Army accused Iran of giving the Misagh-1 to Iraqi insurgents.

At the 2007 IDEX arms show in Abu Dhabi I saw China's Poly arms trading company reveal a new rocket-propelled grenade round with a powerful thermobaric warhead. Thermobarics kill with intense blast pressure and heat, and the new Chinese weapon could easily collapse a small house. Should Iran come to produce this weapon, how soon before it also ends up in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon?

By the summer of 2007, coalition partners like the British and Canadians were suffering losses to Chinese arms as well, prompting increasingly vocal concern. By September 2007 London went public with complaints about Chinese weapons, and Washington sent Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte to carry complaints to Beijing. Then in October 2007 the U.S. Treasury introduced sanctions against the Quds Force, the organ Iran uses to train and arm foreign insurgencies.

On May 16, Mr. Negroponte addressed a question on whether Chinese weapons were still being sent to insurgents in Iraq

and Afghanistan: “Just the other day, Monday [May 12], when I was in Beijing, this was one of the issues I raised—concern about Chinese weapons or Chinese-designed weapons showing up in some of these battle areas, be it Iraq or Afghanistan.” He then added that the Chinese had assured him “they have scaled way back their sale of conventional weapons to Iran.”

But throughout all of the year in question, 2007, the Chinese Foreign Ministry denied selling weapons to insurgents, explaining that its arms sales policies were “beyond reproach” and that customers cannot re-transfer weapons without permission from Beijing. On May 20, Patricia McNerney, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and NonProliferation, told the U.S.-China Economic Security Review Commission, “China appears to accept at face value the end-use assurances and pledges against

retransfers it receives from its customers, despite the fact that some of its customers have links to terrorists and have records as unreliable end-users, such as Iran.”

Washington evidently is not eager to press the issue. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State McNerney says, “We will continue, as warranted, to impose sanctions against Chinese entities engaged in proliferation and will continue to highlight our ongoing concerns about China’s proliferation record with the Chinese government.”



A visitor looks at a Chinese-made QW-2 portable air defense missile at an exhibition in Zhuhai, China.

REUTERS

In mid-2008 the Taliban insurgency is gaining ground, winning skirmishes in the south of Afghanistan and freeing about 400 of their fighters from a prison in Kandahar on June 14. To succeed the Taliban requires external support. Last January British guards found two HN-5 missiles near Afghanistan’s Kandahar Airbase, where it was feared they were targeting

British Tristar transports that normally carry about 200 troops. The loss of one such aircraft would instantly double Britain’s Afghan casualties, and possibly lead to a catastrophic loss of public support for British involvement in the anti-insurgency fight.

China seems to take no more notice of Western concerns about the arms flows to Taliban than of earlier queries about proliferation of nuclear and missile technology to Pakistan. They appear to have learned that Washington, at least, is deeply reluctant to turn this into a major issue, lest

a diplomatic spat endanger cooperation on other fronts, such as North Korea.

Wisdom there may be in proceeding slowly, calmly and on the basis of the soundest information only. But the point comes when facts must be faced, however unpleasant they are. If Beijing is the ultimate source of the weapons that are costing American and allied lives in the Middle East, as so much evidence indicates, then this is an issue best joined and resolved immediately. ■