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Is the West Grounding China's C919? Geopolitical Power

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Plays Masquerading as Safety Concerns?

August 07, 2025

Is the West Grounding China's C919? Geopolitical Power Plays Masquerading as Safety Concerns?

China's COMAC C919, a narrowbody jet challenging Airbus and Boeing, faces significant delays in obtaining EASA and FAA certifications, limiting its international operations. Since its 2023 debut, 16 C919s have

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domestically, with 1,200 orders, primarily from Chinese airlines. Its clean safety record and successful inspections are overshadowed by reliance on Western components, like CFM LEAP-1C engines, subject to U.S. export controls in 2025. EASA's three-to-six-year timeline and FAA inaction suggest geopolitical motives, including protecting Western aerospace giants and countering China's "Made in China 2025" strategy. Allegations of intellectual property theft fuel distrust. China counters by developing the CJ-1000A engine, targeting non-Western markets like Brunei, and pushing for EU trade concessions. Similar resistance is evident in semiconductors, telecommunications, and high-speed rail, where Western restrictions blend safety,

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revealing a pattern of geopolitical containment.

Flying on China's Mysterious COMAC C919



**C919: Domestic Performance and Safety
Record**

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traction in China's domestic market since its commercial debut in May 2023. "The C919 is a cornerstone of China's aviation self-reliance," says Zhang Yiwu, aviation analyst at Peking University [1]. By December 2024, 16 aircraft were operational with China's "Big Three" airlines—Air China, China Eastern, and China Southern—each ordering at least 100 units, contributing to over 1,200 orders, mostly domestic [2]. "This shows strong state-backed demand," notes Li Wei, a Shanghai-based aerospace consultant [3]. The aircraft carried over one million passengers by December 2024, with a 40% utilization surge during the 2024 Lunar New Year [4]. "Its \$50 million price undercuts Airbus and Boeing's \$110–\$120 million jets," says Chen Guang, Aviation Week

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2024, targeting 30 in 2025 and 75 annually by 2029 [6]. “The C919 could capture 25% of China’s market by 2042,” says Wang Tao, CAAC official [7].

The C919’s safety record is clean but limited. “No major incidents have been reported in nearly two years,” says Liu Fang, former ICAO secretary-general [8]. A 4,200-hour test flight program preceded CAAC certification in 2022 [9]. “The first C919 passed a rigorous A-inspection in May 2024, validating critical systems,” says Zhang Lei, China Eastern Airlines’ chief engineer [10]. However, “Western regulators need long-term data to ensure reliability,” notes John Hansman, MIT aeronautics professor [11]. The C919’s use of proven LEAP-1C engines reduces risks, but

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sticking point,” says Sarah Klein, EASA consultant [12]. “Safety isn’t the issue; trust in the process is,” says Richard Aboulafia, AeroDynamic Advisory managing director [13].

International Adoption and Certification Challenges

Internationally, the C919 is in early stages. “Flights to Hong Kong since January 2025 mark its first international routes,” says Yang Mei, COMAC spokesperson [14]. Brunei’s GallopAir ordered C919s in 2023, but “regulatory approval could take until 2026,” says Tan Sri Tony Fernandes, AirAsia Group CEO [15]. COMAC targets Southeast Asia and Saudi Arabia, with test flights planned in Indonesia [16]. “We’re eyeing Vietnam and Cambodia for

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marketing director [17]. However, EASA and FAA certifications are critical. “EASA’s 2028–2031 timeline is standard but feels prolonged,” says Patrick Ky, former EASA executive director [18]. “The FAA hasn’t started due to geopolitical tensions,” says Robert Mann, R.W. Mann & Co. president [19]. Unverified X posts claiming certifications from Canada or Russia lack credibility [20].

Certification delays blend safety and geopolitics. “EASA requires test flights in European conditions and component verification,” says Florian Guillermet, EASA executive director [21]. “Three to six years is typical for new manufacturers,” adds Luc Tytgat, EASA strategy director [22]. Yet, U.S. export controls on engines in 2025 signal trade

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rise,” says Greg Waldron, FlightGlobal’s Asia editor [23]. “Protecting Airbus and Boeing is a factor,” admits Michel Merluzeau, AIR consultancy director [24]. Allegations of cyber theft, like stealing Airbus A320 roadmaps, amplify distrust. “These claims, even if unproven, justify delays,” says Scott Kennedy, CSIS senior advisor [25]. “The C919 could take 25% of Asia’s market by 2040,” says Geoffrey Thomas, AirlineRatings.com editor [26].

Geopolitical vs. Safety Considerations

Geopolitical motives often outweigh safety concerns. “The C919’s LEAP-1C engines are certified for A320neo and 737 MAX, so extra scrutiny seems excessive,” says Sash Tusa, Agency Partners analyst [27]. “Delays align with

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Schonland, AirInsight partner [28]. The EU's stance mirrors this. "EASA's rigor is standard, but the timeline suggests Airbus protectionism," says Bjorn Fehrm, Leeham News analyst [29]. China views this as containment. "The West is stalling our aviation ambitions," says Wu Guanghui, C919 chief designer [30]. China counters with the CJ-1000A engine, non-Western markets, and diplomacy. "The 2025 EU-China summit pushed certification talks," says Wang Yi, China's foreign minister [31]. "COMAC must open its processes to EASA," says David Yu, NYU Shanghai finance professor [32]. "More domestic flights will generate data," says Brendan Sobie, Sobie Aviation consultant [33].

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Resistance

China faces similar Western resistance in several high-tech industries, driven by a mix of security, economic, and geopolitical concerns, mirroring the C919's challenges. Below are key examples:

1. Semiconductors:

- **Resistance:** The U.S. has imposed stringent export controls on advanced semiconductor technologies, targeting companies like Huawei and SMIC. In 2022, the Biden administration banned sales of advanced chips and semiconductor manufacturing equipment (SME) to China, citing national security risks [1]. “The U.S. is

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stop China's rise," says Miles Evers, University of Connecticut professor [1]. The CHIPS and Science Act (2022) allocated \$280 billion to bolster U.S. semiconductor production, aiming to reduce reliance on Chinese supply chains [2]. The EU and allies like Japan and the Netherlands have aligned with U.S. restrictions, limiting China's access to EUV lithography machines critical for sub-5nm chips [3]. China's SMIC achieved 7nm chips in 2021, but "high-volume production lags behind TSMC by five years," says Intel CEO Pat Gelsinger [4]. [1].atlanticcouncil.org [2].lawfaremedia.org [3].lawfaremedia.org [4].lawfaremedia.org

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“Semiconductors are the heart of U.S.-China competition,” says a Foreign Policy report, with China consuming 60% of global chips but producing only 13% [1]. U.S. controls aim to prevent China’s “Military-Civil Fusion” strategy from enhancing military capabilities [2]. “China’s progress threatens Western dominance,” says Dan Wang, Counterpoint Research analyst

[1].foreignpolicy.comfpri.orgitif.org

- **China’s Response:** China has invested over \$150 billion in semiconductors since 2014, targeting 70% self-sufficiency by 2025 under “Made in China 2025” [3]. “Huawei’s 7nm Kirin

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says a CSIS report [\[\]](#). China also restricts rare earth exports, critical for chip production, as retaliation [\[\]](#). [cfr.org/foreign-policy/comlink.springer.com](https://www.cfr.org/foreign-policy/comlink/springer.com)

2. Telecommunications (5G and Equipment):

- **Resistance:** Huawei and ZTE face bans in the U.S., EU, and allies like Australia and Canada over espionage and security concerns. “Huawei’s 5G dominance raises fears of data leaks,” says Inu Manak, CFR trade policy fellow [\[\]](#). The U.S. added Huawei to its Entity List in 2019, restricting access to U.S. chips and software [\[\]](#). The EU’s “de-risking” policies limit Chinese telecom

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“Western bans are about containing China’s tech influence,” says Paul Triolo, technology analyst

[\[\].cfr.orglawfaremedia.orgrhg.com](#)

- **Geopolitical Motives:** China leads in 5G patents and infrastructure, posing a threat to Western telecom giants like Nokia and Ericsson [\[\].](#) “The U.S. fears China setting global tech standards,” says a Carnegie Endowment report [\[\].](#) Alleged IP theft and forced technology transfers exacerbate tensions

[\[\].itif.orgcarnegieendowment.orgcfr.org](#)

- **China’s Response:** Huawei develops its HarmonyOS and domestic chips to bypass restrictions [\[\].](#) “China’s telecom

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Jianguo, CAS president [1]. China also promotes its 5G tech in Belt and Road countries, gaining market share in Africa and Southeast Asia [2].
[3].americanaffairsjournal.org
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3. High-Speed Rail:

- **Resistance:** China's CRRC, the world's largest rail manufacturer, faces scrutiny in the U.S. and EU over subsidies, security, and unfair pricing. The U.S. banned CRRC from federal contracts in 2019, citing espionage risks [4]. The EU investigated CRRC's below-cost bids in 2021, imposing restrictions to protect Alstom and Siemens [5]. "Western markets are wary

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Piet, Amundi Institute fellow

www.lawfaremedia.org
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- **Geopolitical Motives:** China's high-speed rail success, with 45,000 km of track and global projects, threatens Western manufacturers [\[1\]](#). "The West sees CRRC as a tool of China's geopolitical influence," says Peter Fuhrman, China First Capital CEO [\[2\]](#). Concerns over state subsidies and IP theft mirror aerospace issues [\[3\]](#).
www.itif.org
www.lawfaremedia.org
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- **China's Response:** CRRC expands in non-Western markets, securing contracts in Turkey, Thailand, and Africa [\[4\]](#). "China's rail exports are a

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Gates, Seattle Times aerospace
reporter [.itif.org](https://www.itif.org)[lawfaremedia.org](https://www.lawfaremedia.org)

Common Patterns and China's Strategy

Across aerospace, semiconductors, telecommunications, and high-speed rail, Western resistance combines security concerns, economic protectionism, and geopolitical containment. "China's state-led model distorts markets," says a CFR report, citing subsidies and IP theft [\[1\]](#). The U.S. and EU use export controls, tariffs, and regulatory hurdles to slow China's rise, protecting firms like Boeing, TSMC, and Siemens [\[2\]](#). "The West's strategy is to maintain technological choke points," says Elbridge Colby, former U.S. defense official [\[3\]](#). China counters with massive

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Western market expansion. “Self-reliance is our answer to Western barriers,” says Xi Jinping, Chinese president [1]. However, “China’s ecosystem still lags in cutting-edge innovation,” says Alex Macheras, aviation analyst [2].

[1].cfr.org [2].fpri.org [3].lawfaremedia.org

Critical Reflection

The C919’s certification delays and similar resistance in semiconductors, telecommunications, and high-speed rail reveal a Western strategy blending legitimate concerns with geopolitical containment. Safety and security are valid: the C919’s short operational history and China’s alleged IP theft in tech industries justify scrutiny. “New manufacturers face intense regulatory

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editor [34]. In semiconductors, “China’s military-c consistent fusion raises real risks,” says a CSIS report []. Yet, the scale of restrictions—U.S. export bans, EU tariffs, and prolonged certifications—suggests economic protectionism. “The West is protecting its tech giants,” says Mike Yeo, Defense News correspondent [35]. The C919’s LEAP-1C engines, already certified elsewhere, face redundant scrutiny, mirroring bans on Huawei’s proven 5G tech [27,].fpri.orgcfr.org

Geopolitics dominates as the U.S. and EU counter China’s “Made in China 2025” ambitions. “Export controls are a weapon to slow China’s rise,” says Evers []. The CHIPS Act and EU de-risking policies prioritize Western firms like TSMC and Airbus, risking global

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on Western technology, from C919 engines to EUV lithography, is a vulnerability exploited to maintain dominance. “The U.S. controls semiconductor chokepoints,” says Colby [1].

However, China’s 7nm chip progress and rail exports show resilience [2]. “China’s not sitting idle,” says Triolo

[3].lawfaremedia.orgrhg.comlawfaremedia.org

Ethically, the West’s selective rigor raises fairness concerns, applying stricter standards to China than to established players.

Conversely, China’s subsidies and alleged IP practices invite distrust. “It’s a cycle of mutual suspicion,” says Jon Ostrower [36]. This rivalry risks a fragmented tech ecosystem, stifling innovation. China’s push for self-reliance—CJ-1000A engines, HarmonyOS, CRRC’s global bids

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credibility requires Western approval,” says Macheras [37]. For now, geopolitics overshadows technical concerns, threatening a zero-sum tech war where global cooperation and innovation suffer.

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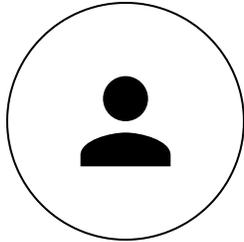
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