

Viewpoint: Chinese rail cars would offer more risk than reward for WMATA



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By Erik Olson – Rail Security Alliance

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With more than 600,000 riders a day, Washington's Metro system is the transportation lifeblood of our nation's capital. Federal workers, military personnel, tourists, students and many others all depend on a safe, secure and reliable transit system to get them to work, school, home and everywhere in between.

In cities around the country, cash-strapped transit agencies have been turning to the ultra-low budget option of buying railcars manufactured in China. While untested and unproven in this market, the Chinese state-owned enterprise China Railway Rolling Stock Corp. (CRRC) has succeeded in winning over transit agencies in cities like Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and Los Angeles with its promises of cheap railcars, sometimes bidding as much as 50 percent below its competitors.

CRRC is a railcar manufacturing company that is state owned and operated by the government of China, and which has direct ties to Communist party leadership and the Chinese defense sector. The intrusion of a Chinese state-owned enterprise into our city's (and nation's) most critical public transportation system should be an alarming notion for any riders on D.C. Metro. As it has done in every urban rail transit

request for proposal issued across the United States since 2016, the Chinese state-owned enterprise CRRC will make a bid for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's new metro cars. Our nation's capital is home to some of the most sensitive data in the country, and that data could quickly be compromised if we were to allow CRRC unrestricted access to our vast Metrorail system.

The 8000-series cars will include numerous technologies integral to the safety and security of passengers — automatic train control, automatic passenger counters, surveillance cameras, Wi-Fi systems and more. Allowing a Chinese state-owned company to manufacture them could make them more vulnerable to cyberattack or hacking and will most certainly enable the Chinese government to maintain a distressing and unlimited level of access the Metro system and its riders, should they want it. What's more, the D.C. Metro carries tens of thousands of federal workers every day to sensitive sites such as the Pentagon, U.S. government offices and the Capitol. In fact, two separate lines travel within approximately two blocks of the White House. The security and integrity of these sites and their personnel should be paramount. Remote-operated and cyber components like closed-circuit cameras and wireless technology built into trains presents a significant risk that agents in China could be vacuuming up data from passengers.

By using Chinese government funds to underbid competitors, CRRC is winning local U.S. transit contracts and skipping "Buy America" provisions to import Chinese-made completed railcars. No oversight. No American manufacturing. No large-scale local hiring. You only have to look to MBTA in Boston to see the fully built Chinese shrink-wrapped trains coming into the Port of Boston. WMATA's new procurement, due to how it receives its funding, may not be subject to "Buy America" laws either – making it an even easier target for CRRC.

Despite winning four contracts in the U.S., CRRC has yet to deliver on any of them. In 2015, it was found that 70 percent of train parts produced by Chinese manufacturers failed safety tests. More recently, countries like the Philippines and Singapore have been forced to return CRRC-produced trains due to poor quality. WMATA has struggled in the past due to low funding and poor maintenance efforts, but it has recently turned around and showed signs of improvement. Turning to CRRC is not the right answer to keep that improvement moving forward. The D.C. area and our nation's most top-secret data deserves better.

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