

**India and China are buying new tanks designed to fight on one of the world's highest battlefields**

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*Tanks pull back from the Pangong Tso lake region in Ladakh along the India-China border in February 2021. Indian Army via AP© Indian Army via AP*

*Three years after the first deadly clash on India's and China's disputed Himalayan border in decades, the region **remains tense**.*

*Repeated rounds of talks over disengagement **have failed**, and Chinese and Indian soldiers were wounded in another **brawl** in December. Both countries continue **to build up** military forces and infrastructure around hotspots on the border.*

*An important part of that buildup has been China's deployment of light tanks, which can maneuver well on mountainous terrain and deploy quickly in large numbers.*

*Their presence has exposed shortcomings in the Indian military's armored inventory, which relies heavily on main battle tanks that struggle in high altitudes.*

*Consequently, India is planning to developing its own light tank to level the playing field.*

**Light tanks**



*A US Army M24 Chaffee light tank near Bologna in April 1945. Galerie Bilderwelt/Getty Images© Provided by Business Insider*

*Light tanks are intended to provide direct support to infantry against enemy positions and light armored vehicles rather than square off against enemy tanks on their own. Their design puts an emphasis on speed and maneuverability at the cost of armor and firepower.*

*Interest in light tanks is growing and [isn't limited to India and China](#) — the US and Japan are also reinvesting in the concept — but China's and India's need is especially pronounced, as the terrain separating them is particularly difficult for main battle tanks.*

*This was [proved](#) in 2020 and 2021, when, as a result of a deadly border clash in Ladakh that killed 20 Indian soldiers and at least four Chinese soldiers, both countries deployed armored units to parts of the Himalayas with altitudes of 11,000 feet and higher.*

*The low air pressure at those altitudes hindered the performance of tank engines, and freezing temperatures forced soldiers to turn their armored vehicles on for up to 30 minutes every two or three hours to prevent engine components from freezing. Heavier vehicles also had trouble with the terrain.*

*Despite the difficulties for armored vehicles, neither side is willing to deploy troops to the area without them, largely because of the important role tanks still play on the battlefield.*

### ***The Type 15***



*A Type 15 tank on display at the Beijing Exhibition Center in October. NOEL CELIS/AFP via Getty Images© NOEL CELIS/AFP via Getty Images*

*China has coped with these issues by deploying its [Type 15](#) light tank, one of the few modern light tanks produced in the 21st century.*

*Unveiled [in 2016](#), the Type 15 — also known as the ZTQ-15 — is billed as a lighter, cheaper alternative to heavier, more complex tanks produced by Russia or Western countries. Weighing in at 33 tons to 36 tons, depending on its load, the Type 15 is considerably lighter than China's 41-ton [Type 96](#) tank and 55-ton [Type 99](#) tank and less than half as heavy as recent versions of the US-made M1 Abrams.*

*The Type 15 reportedly entered service in 2018, though it first appeared publicly as an [in-service](#) tank in 2020 during the military parade for the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. China's military is believed to have about 500 in service.*



*A Type 15 tank on display at the Beijing Exhibition Center in October. NOEL CELIS/AFP via Getty Images© NOEL CELIS/AFP via Getty Images*

*Its 105 mm rifled gun is equipped with an auto-loader and it has an ammo capacity of 38 rounds. Its secondary armament comprises a remotely operated 12.7 mm heavy machine gun and 40 mm automatic grenade launcher. It has a top speed of 43 mph on paved roads and 25 mph off-road.*

*The tank is made of standard steel but is fitted with explosive reactive armor blocks on its turret and sides. It can also **be equipped** with a Chinese-made active protection system.*

*The Type 15 is equipped with a suite of modern electronics, including a laser range finder, nighttime and thermal optics, a warning sensor system, satellite communications, and inertial and satellite navigation systems.*

*In addition to its weight, the Type 15 has other features that make it suitable for mountainous operations. Its hydro-pneumatic suspension allows it to aim its gun higher or lower than standard tanks, which is useful for targets at high elevations. It also has oxygen generators, which help the engine run at high altitudes.*

### ***Project Zorawar***



*Arjuna tanks in the Republic Day Parade in New Delhi on January 26, 2023. Ajay Aggarwal/Hindustan Times via Getty Images© Ajay Aggarwal/Hindustan Times via Getty Images*

*India's army hasn't had a light tank in service since its Soviet-designed PT-76 was retired in 1989. Instead, it relies almost exclusively on its heavily armored **T-90** and **T-72** tanks, which weigh 43 tons and 46 tons, respectively, and its **Arjun series** main battle tanks, which weigh between 58 tons and 68 tons. Those tanks were acquired with Pakistan in mind, and they are better suited for open plains and deserts.*

*India has tried on and off since 1983 to develop a new light tank but has never settled on a model. The Ladakh clash in 2020 — followed by a Chinese military buildup in*

which the Type 15 operated with comparative ease — prompted new action to acquire a light tank. (One retired Indian general even [argued](#) that a lack of light tanks hindered India's ability to deter Chinese aggression in the first place.)

In 2021, the Indian Ministry of Defense [requested information](#) from industry about the production of 350 light tanks, each weighing no more than 25 tons and crewed by two to three people. Additional requirements included an auto-loader, a remote-controlled machine-gun, the ability to fire "smart munitions" and anti-tank guided missiles, and the ability to add explosive-reactive-armor blocks.



*An Indian army convoy on a highway leading to Ladakh in June 2020.  
REUTERS/Danish Ismail© REUTERS/Danish Ismail*

Initially, there was speculation that India might buy the [2S25 Sprut-SD](#) from Russia, which has [repeatedly offered](#) to transfer the technology needed to build it. But the Indian government has indicated that it wants a domestic design, in line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Make in India" policy.

Late last year, India's Ministry of Defense approved the purchase of 315 tanks, which will compose seven regiments. Indian media has [reported](#) that India's army may increase the order to nearly 700 tanks.

Indian multinational firm Larsen & Toubro [was announced](#) as the government's development partner in September, and the company was [awarded](#) the contract for the first prototype in April. It will feature an 800-horsepower engine made by a German subsidiary of Rolls Royce and a 105 mm gun turret made by a Belgian firm.

Indian officials have [said](#) that the first tanks will be ready for trial testing by the end of this year and that the initial order will number 59 units.

In what may be a reflection of the opponent the Indian army has in mind for its new light tank, the effort has been called "Project Zorawar," in reference to Zorawar Singh, a general who conquered Ladakh from Chinese rulers in the early 19th century.