

**Commercial Aircraft Corp of China Ltd**

## China steps up drive to break Boeing and Airbus grip on plane market

State-owned Comac opens offices abroad and pushes for overseas certification as it increases output of C919 jets



Comac's C919 is already flown on domestic routes by China's three big state-owned carriers © Wang Gang/China News Service/VCG via Getty Images

**Chan Ho-him** in Hong Kong YESTERDAY

China is stepping up its push to break the grip of Boeing and Airbus on the aircraft market, as the state-run maker of the country's first homegrown passenger jet seeks certifications for it to fly beyond the country's shores.

Comac's heavily subsidised C919, which made its maiden commercial flight in 2023, is already flown on domestic routes by China's three big state-owned carriers: Air China, China Eastern Airlines and China Southern Airlines. From this month, China Eastern will fly the C919 between Hong Kong and Shanghai, its first regular commercial route outside China's mainland.

Yang Yang, the company's deputy general manager of marketing and sales, told the Financial Times the company was aiming for the single-aisle plane to be flying in south-east Asia by 2026 and to gain European certification as early as this year.

"We hope to operate more of the jets domestically in China and to thoroughly identify any issues before . . . bringing them to south-east Asia," he said.

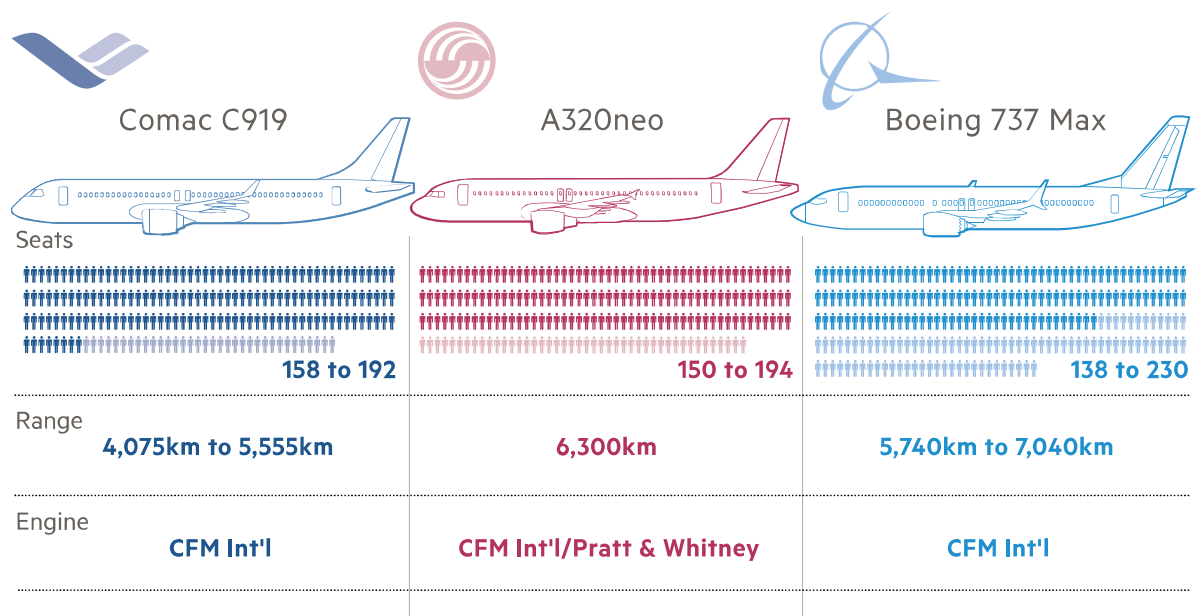
The C919 is a pivotal project in President Xi Jinping's drive for [China](#) to move up the technology value chain, with the ultimate aim of challenging the western duopoly of Boeing and Airbus.

Boeing's financial woes and delivery delays, as well as wider supply chain problems in the industry that have left it and Airbus facing engine and component shortages, have weighed on the global aviation sector and offered hope for newcomers.

The world will need 42,430 new aircraft over the next two decades, roughly 80 per cent of which will be single-aisle aircraft, according to an [Airbus forecast](#) in 2024. Aviation consultancy IBA predicts that Comac can raise its output of C919s — 16 of which have been delivered to Chinese airlines as of December — from one to 11 a month by 2040, by which time it can deliver almost 2,000 units of the aircraft.

## China's Comac aims to compete with Airbus and Boeing

The C919 has a shorter range and fewer seats than its rivals



FINANCIAL TIMES

Sources: Comac, Airbus and Boeing • Numbers may vary based on specific variants and different configurations

However, Jonathan McDonald, IBA's manager for classic and cargo aircraft, said that while Comac would eventually penetrate export markets, "for the foreseeable future Airbus and Boeing will be the main suppliers of narrow-bodies to most airlines".

Global certification and maintenance support remain significant hurdles to Comac's

ambition for the C919 to operate overseas.

In a move to boost its international presence, [Comac](#) opened new overseas outposts in Singapore and Hong Kong in October.

The new offices were necessary to help drive new aircraft orders from customers, according to Mayur Patel, head of Asia for OAG Aviation.

But Richard Aboulafia, managing director of AeroDynamic Advisory, said building “elaborate product support facilities in export markets is very hard and expensive work, and a necessary precondition for competing with Airbus and Boeing”.

While several carriers in Asia have expressed interest in the C919, some executives say privately that they remain hesitant.

“Maintenance support is the main issue,” said a person close to Indonesia’s TransNusa, which has already received three of Comac’s smaller ARJ21 aircraft and is considering flying the C919.

The path for Comac to gain overseas certification, particularly from the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, is also challenging, according to analysts.

“IBA does not expect the C919 to be certified in Europe in the immediate future,” McDonald said. “Europe has very strict certification parameters.”

Meanwhile, certification from the US Federal Aviation Authority is likely to be complicated by US-China tensions.

EU and US regulators are often the “gold standard” for other global authorities, according to David Yu, an aviation industry expert at NYU Shanghai.

In parallel with its push with the C919, Comac is also developing its first widebody aircraft, the C929. At one of China’s largest air shows in Zhuhai in November, the company announced that state-owned Air China had become the first airline to pledge to fly the jet, which is aimed at challenging the larger planes made by Airbus and Boeing such as the 787 Dreamliner.

Sash Tusa, a UK-based aerospace and defence analyst, said that while the C929 offered China another opportunity to prove its technological advancement in the aerospace sector, the country would still probably be reliant on overseas engines for commercial jets. IBA estimates that the C929 will not come into service before 2040.

For the C919, key components are still western-made. The jet’s engines are supplied

For the C919, key components are still western-made. The jet's engines are supplied by Franco-American venture CFM International while its auxiliary power units are made by US-based Honeywell.

“So far, [Comac is] building aircraft that are mostly western by value, but with Chinese structures,” said AeroDynamic Advisory’s Aboulafia. “That makes production ramps dependent on western willingness to continue providing systems, and, given a Trump presidency, there’s no guarantee of that at all.”

Comac would probably not be able to get any “fair share of the global market” within the next decade, Tusa said, but would provide an important “import substitution” for domestic Chinese airlines.

“Airbus builds in China. Boeing doesn’t,” he said. “So Comac comes in as the second supplier. Import substitution doesn’t make you a competitor. That makes you an act of state policy.”

*Additional reporting by William Langley in Guangzhou*

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