



Aviation in China

Sky striker with delay problem

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China will soon be the largest aviation market in the world. Alone Airbus has sold nearly 1500 machines to China in recent years - and the number is rising. But fast growth has its price.

By Steffen root, ARD studio Shanghai

At the beginning of May this year at Pudong Airport in Shanghai: A white-blue-green painted machine is going up in the sky. It is the maiden flight of the C919, the pride of the Chinese aircraft industry. The twin-engine engine was developed and built by the state Comac group.

"Of course, it's important for China to develop its own aircraft," said Zhang Wuan of private Chinese airline Spring Airlines. "It's unacceptable that only overseas brands such as Airbus and Boeing are on the move in Chinese airspace, we need our own machines, but the road to them is long."



Drums for Airbus: Chinese musicians inaugurate the new A330 in Tianjin, China

Boeing plans stopped after Trump election

In just a few years, the C919 should go into production and compete with the Boeing 737 and the Airbus A320 series. Much more important, however, is the technical experience that Chinese aircraft engineers are gathering in the construction of the new machine, say experts such as Jeffrey Lowe of Hong Kong-based aviation consultancy Asian Sky Group.

"Before the C919, Airbus and Boeing have yet to be afraid, but before the model that comes after that, they'll have learned their lessons, all assume that the next Chinese aircraft model will bring the breakthrough for domestic manufacturers . "

So far, Airbus and Boeing share the Chinese aircraft market among themselves. The European aircraft group is doing somewhat better than the Americans: Airbus operates a delivery center for aircraft of the type A320 and A330 in Tianjin in northern China. Of course, that appeals to the government in Beijing, which ultimately decides on all aircraft purchases by the Chinese companies.

Boeing has also been planning a delivery center in China for some time. But since Donald Trump was elected president, Boeing has stopped the plans. A supposed transfer of jobs from the US to China is no longer considered politically correct.

Punctuality is a matter of luck

Back in Shanghai. An announcement rang through the hall. It does not bode well: The plane, which was supposed to fly from Shanghai's southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan, is late. How much the flight will delay exactly is not yet clear. But all passengers waiting at the departure gate know that it can easily be three, four or five hours. Domestic flights in China are like gambling when it comes to punctuality.

The fact that a plane takes off punctually in China is something that never happens, says Lowe. If you have an important appointment, you have to plan that from the outset.

Of the world's ten worst-delayed airports, eight are in China, according to studies. For example, at Hangzhou Airport, statistically speaking, six out of ten machines start late. The reasons for this are diverse. On the one hand, airports and airlines are working at the limits of their capacities. The timetables are therefore particularly tight clocked. If a machine gets stuck somewhere due to technical problems or does not play well with the weather, there is a chain reaction of delays. There is also a typical Chinese problem.



China is investing in aviation - and in the construction of new airports and other terminals, such as here in Beijing

"The US suspended in five years at the latest"

"In China, the military still controls the airspace, so you can not just fly from one point to another, there are fixed routes between the big cities, they have to be respected, if you want to get another route approved, that requires a lot of bureaucracy. "

These rigid military routes dictate that certain parts of China's airspace are regularly clogged. Other sections are almost empty. This mismatch leads to delays. Despite all the problems: China's aviation market continues to grow at an above-average rate and will overtake and abandon the US in four to five years at the latest.

Audio: Aviation in China: Innovation, growth and delays in deliberation

Steffen Wurzel, ARD Shanghai

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