



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on August 15, 2011

China Bullet Train Project Slows

The Chinese Communist Party has exerted every effort to manage all high-tech activities within its borders. While the government has allowed the market forces more freedom, it has attempted to retain iron control over projects such as manned space travel and high-speed trains. Unfortunately for technology, the decision-making in these sorts of projects in China, critics maintain, is driven by politics, not science. Analysts note that invariably, government-controlled technology projects are inherently weak.



In July, after a Chinese high-speed train crashed into a stalled train, killing 40 people, [Xianfang Ren](#), chief economist for IHS Global Insight, noted: "If they are taking one step back to think again about these railway projects, more broadly it should have an impact on their overall planning of such projects ... It is not quite clear that stepping on the brake is the only viable option."

The decision-making in these sorts of projects in China, critics maintain, is driven by politics, not science. Liu Zhijun, Railway Minister until February, was fired amid charges of graft. Chinese state broadcasting has even showed residents in the eastern province of Anhui complaining about the noise and property damage that a bullet train line caused them, seeming to indicate that Communist Party support was backing off.

Zhao Jian, an expert in railways at the Jiaotong University in Beijing, and an outspoken critic of the high-speed rail projects, observes: "The government plays a leading role in all these public projects, which should really not be the case."

[CNN Travel](#) reports that Zhao and others are "not so sure high-speed railways are the best solution to ease the overcapacity that plagues China's transport network." The website added,

"The high-speed rail makes no sense to Chinese people," said Zhao Jian. ... "Why? Because it is too expensive. The construction cost is too high. The operation cost is too high. I don't think Chinese people can afford the price. At present, the high-speed rail is a big loss."

Zhao said the money spent to build one kilometer of high-speed rail could build three kilometers of traditional rail. He also said in some areas in the country, traditional railways have been closed, forcing passengers to take the more expensive trains.

Before the July crash, Zhao and others had asked Beijing to lower the speed of the bullet trains from 220 to 190 miles per hour. Zhao explained that this action, as well as recalling 54 high-speed trains currently used on the Beijing-Shanghai line, could provide some immediate help. He added: "I don't see any signs that the government is doing anything to expand this overhaul to other areas or even reshape its development plan."

There have been conspicuous failures of other Chinese projects as well. The mobile phone technology, for instance, much ballyhooed by the government, ended up a marketing flop. A cart-before-the-horse



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example of another failure of planning is that though China has 13 operational nuclear power plants with 28 under construction and set to come online soon, there are simply not enough trained technicians and engineers to operate all these new plants.

The Chinese government had hoped to build its Five-Year Plan around the export of high technology products such as nuclear power plants and bullet trains. Malaya, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia have been mentioned as prime potential customers. California has also been named a target customer for such trains. In his 2011 State of the Union address, President Obama used the Chinese high-speed trains as evidence that his plan to give 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail transportation within the next 25 years was realistic. Already, some customers were having second thoughts about buying these trains. Now the *Insurance Journal* has announced that production of the bullet trains has halted.

Even in light of the obvious difficulty in marketing high-technology products which are conspicuous failures (the mobile phone plan) or which cause death and destruction (bullet trains), the Chinese Communist leadership still has its eye on taking over the global market for high-tech projects.



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