MILITARY

China filling arms gap in Africa left by Russia, France

Manufacturers expand their reach in the Sahel region with fast deliveries of affordable weapons

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China is stepping into a weapons supply breach in parts of Africa's Sahel as authorities in the region cut ties with former colonial power France and Russia struggles to replace its depleted stocks.

The buyers include Burkina Faso's military junta which took delivery of 116 infantry carriers and six assault vehicles from China in 2024 alone, according to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

By contrast, France's last delivery – six Bastion armoured vehicles – arrived in 2019-20, while the US supplied only engines in 2021.

> [These countries seek] defence partners who don't normally impose political conditions
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> ILARIA CARROZZA, PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE OSLO

Observers say Burkina Faso's growing interest in Chinese weaponry is driven by the need to diversify security partners, following the deterioration of relations with France and the United States.

In 2022, Ibrahim Traore mounted a coup, which saw French troops expelled from the West African nation as part of the broader collapse of Operation Barkhane, Paris' counterterrorism mission in the Sahel. At the same time, Russia, which has been a top supplier of arms to many West African countries such as Mali, has been slowed down by the war in Ukraine.

This has allowed Beijing to expand its military reach in the region, with China's largest weapons manufacturer, China North Industries Group Corporation, or Norinco, growing its presence in West Africa through sales offices in Nigeria and Senegal.

As recently as January this year, Burkina Faso received a large quantity of Chinese-made armoured vehicles from Norinco.

David Shinn, a China-Africa specialist and professor at George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, said France had lost market share in countries such as Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso as a result of strained relations.

Mali and Niger severed long-standing security ties with France after military coups and the junta in Niger also cut military ties with the US, which had been involved in counterterrorism operations.

The presence of Russia's paramilitary Wagner Group and Africa Corps in the region had also played a role but since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, "Russia has decreased its arms transfers to sub-Saharan Africa, and China has taken advantage of this situation and moved ahead of Russia", Shinn said.

"China will increase market share because it offers a large variety of weapons of reasonable quality at low prices and has important economic relations with many African countries," Shinn said.

Like Russia, China offers affordable, rapidly deliverable equipment well-suited to the counter-insurgency needs of places such as Mali and Burkina Faso, without demanding reforms or human rights commitments, according to Ilaria Carrozza, a senior researcher at Peace Research Institute Oslo.

Carrozza said that as relations with the West became more strained, the Sahelian countries were seeking "defence partners who don't normally impose political conditions".

"Their presence also aligns with a broader geopolitical effort on the part of China and Russia to fill the vacuum left by a retreating Western military footprint," Carrozza said.

Liselotte Odgaard, a senior fellow at Hudson Institute, said China had steadily expanded its military footprint in Africa by pairing economic influence with arms exports to become a top supplier for West African nations.

For example, in September, the junta in Mali, where China's Ganfeng Lithium has a lithium processing plant, signed a deal with Norinco for military equipment, training, and technology transfer in key areas of defence to bolster its fight against terrorism.

Likewise, China wants to deepen military ties with Niger, where mainland firms have vast oil interests and others are eyeing rich uranium deposits.

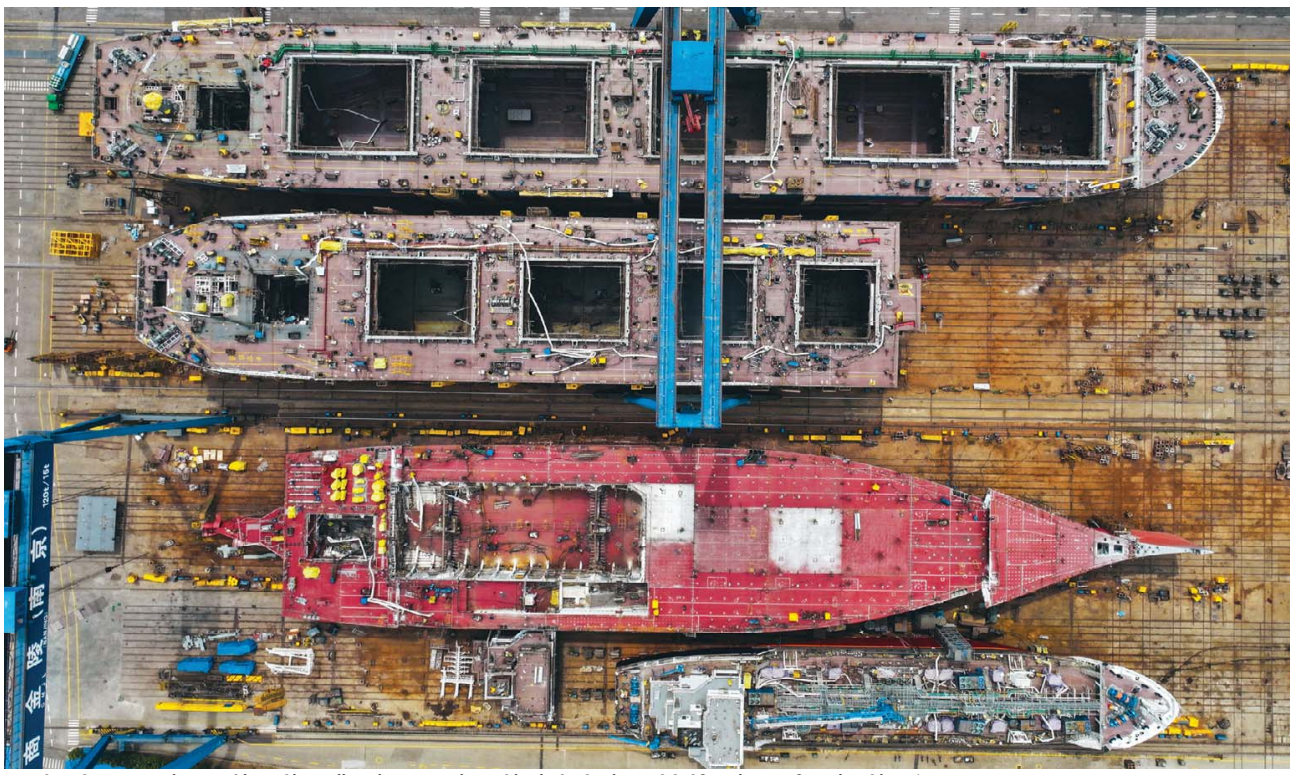
"Russia alongside China is the largest arms supplier to West Africa," she said, noting Moscow's role in aiding governments against insurgents and coups. "China can fill gaps where Russia is running short … as a result of its war, such as supplying fighter jets instead of Russia," she said.

Nigeria's 2019 deal with Norinco to combat Boko Haram – and talks on local arms production – highlighted Beijing's growing leverage.



A Chinese armoured vehicle supplier's stand at a trade exhibition in Tshwane, South Africa in September last year. Photo: Getty Images

SHIPPING



Vessels under construction at a shipyard in Nanjing, Jiangsu province. China is the dominant global force in manufacturing ships. Photo: Getty Images

BEIJING WARNS IT WILL HIT BACK AT 'DISCRIMINATORY' PORT FEES

Levies expose protectionist US policies and undermine rules-based trading, commerce ministry says

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The Ministry of Commerce has pushed back against fresh US port fees targeting vessels owned, operated or built by Chinese firms, vowing to retaliate against measures it says expose protectionist American policies.

The ministry said on Friday that the measures were "typical non-market practices with obvious discriminatory characteristics" and Beijing was "strongly dissatisfied [with] and firmly opposed" to them.

"The US measures fully expose the unilateralist and protectionist nature of its policies," it said.

"They seriously harm the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese companies, disrupt the stability of the global supply and production chain, violate World Trade Organization rules, and undermine the rules-based multilateral trading system and international economic and trade order."

The comments came after the administration of US President Donald Trump on Thursday finalised port fees on Chinese vessels docking in the US as part of efforts to buoy the domestic shipbuilding industry and curb Chinese dominance in the sector.

Chinese operators and shipowners will have to pay US$50 "per net ton" for vessels entering US ports from October 14. The fee will increase annually to US$140 by April 2028 and apply regardless of where the ships were built.

Chinese-built vessels will face lower port fees, starting at US$18 per net ton or US$120 per container from October 14.

The ministry also urged the US to "respect facts and multilateral trade rules … stop shifting blame and correct its wrong practices".

China would resolutely take necessary measures to safeguard its rights and interests, it said.

The China Shipowners' Association – comprising owners, operators and managers of Chinese-registered vessels – also protested at the US move, calling it an "abuse of trade protectionist tools to disrupt the order of the global shipping market".

The association noted that Chinese shipowners had abided by international trade rules and offered reliable logistics services for the import and export of goods for countries including the United States. The US measures, it said, would raise logistics costs and harm the interests of most American shippers, companies and global consumers.

"The abuse of trade protectionist tools will eventually backfire. [The] short-sighted policies will not only fail to solve its own industrial problems but will also backfire on the interests of the US economy and consumers," it said.

The American measures have added a new layer to the deepening trade war.

Trump has imposed tariffs of 145 per cent on Chinese imports so far this year, bringing the effective tariff rate to about 156 per cent. A fact sheet released by the White House states that China now faces tariffs of up to 245 per cent, a total that includes tariffs ranging from 7.5 per cent to 100 per cent that predate the second Trump administration.

Beijing has meanwhile retaliated with new levies on US goods that have risen to 125 per cent, also on top of tariffs that were imposed earlier.

Amid the heightened rivalry, Trump on Thursday said that Washington and Beijing were talking and expressed confidence that a deal on tariffs would be reached soon.

SCIENCE

Most-cited paper paved way for AI tools

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The most-cited scientific paper of the 21st century was written by four Chinese researchers in 2016 and it is on track to become the most-cited paper of all time, according to an analysis by British scientific journal Nature.

The paper's findings helped to pave the way for artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT and AlphaGo.

Analysis released by Nature's news arm last week examined the 25 papers published since 2000 with the most citations across five academic citation databases.

The leading paper received 103,756 to 254,074 citations, depending on the database consulted. Published at the 2016 IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition, the paper deals with ResNets, or deep residual learning networks.

Titled "Deep residual learning for image recognition", the paper was written by He Kaiming, Ren Shaoqing, Sun Jian and Zhang Xiangyu – all members of Microsoft Research Asia then.

When neural networks are made very deep, their performance can worsen because the learning signal gets weaker as it goes through more layers.

ResNet is a type of deep learning neural network that creates what are essentially short cuts that allow information to bypass some layers, allowing it to learn more effectively.

He, now with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), said before their framework, "deep learning was not that deep", according to Nature. The residual connections outlined in the paper are now used across modern deep learning models. China-born He worked at Microsoft from 2011 to 2016 before joining Facebook AI Research. In February last year, he became an associate professor at MIT's electrical engineering and computer science department.

His work mainly relates to computer vision and deep learning, and his online profile says his current research focuses on building computer models that can develop intelligence, with the goal of augmenting human intelligence with more capable AI.

Ren received his doctorate in 2016 under a joint programme of the University of Science and Technology of China and Microsoft Research Asia. Ren was supervised by Sun, who died in 2022.

At the time of his death, Sun was chief scientist of Beijing-based AI firm Megvii Technology, which develops image recognition and deep learning software.

Zhang is the co-founder and chief scientist of StepFun, an AI firm founded in 2023 by former Microsoft Research Asia chief scientist Jiang Daxin.

TOURISM

Russian visitors flock to beaches in Hainan with relaxation of visa rules

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In Sanya, a resort city on the southern tip of Hainan province, you are now more likely to hear Russian spoken on the streets than English.

Signs in both Chinese and Russian line the streets of Dadonghai, a popular local seaside hotspot. The menus in nearly every restaurant come with Russian translations – sometimes alongside English.

The number of Russians visiting Sanya has surged dramatically over the past year, helping the local travel sector recover from the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Visits from Russian tourists soared elevenfold year on year in 2024, according to the Sanya Tourism Board, and Russia was the top source of foreign guests staying at local hotels.

The upswing has been driven by a general recovery in Russian outbound tourism, as well as a series of Chinese moves to relax its visa policies to attract more foreign travellers.

Last year, China introduced special rules allowing citizens of 59 countries to spend up to 30 days in Hainan province without needing to apply for a visa. It also allowed 144-hour visa-free entry for nationals of any country with diplomatic ties to China, as long as they travelled as part of a tour group from Hong Kong or Macau.

Russian tourists, who have been a feature in Sanya for well over a decade, have been quick to take advantage of the new rules. Evelina Malova, 23, is one of them. She had travelled to the city with her mother for a nine-day break, she said.

"I've never been to China before, and this is my first stop," said Malova, while sitting on Dadonghai beach and enjoying the cool ocean breeze.

Malova had come to Sanya seeking tropical weather and seaside charm, and so far it had been a "good vacation", she said. The fact that so many locals spoke some Russian had been an unexpected bonus.

"Some people here speak Russian, which is the most surprising thing for me," she said, adding that the friendliness of the people in Sanya had made her feel welcome.

China has emerged as one of the most popular destinations for Russia's tourists since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, with only Turkey, Georgia, Kazakhstan and the United Arab Emirates receiving more visits last year, according to Russian media reports.

The influx of Russian travellers has given local businesses in Sanya a much-needed boost. Visitor numbers and spending by international tourists in the city recovered to about 80 per cent and 70 per cent of 2019 levels, respectively, last year, according to the Sanya Tourism Board.

Beijing aims to turn Hainan into the world's largest free-trade port, allowing the island province to draw in investors, businesses and tourists through reduced taxes and looser visa rules. The region is set to launch its own separate customs framework by the end of the year.

Hainan, which began to allow some visa-free travel in 2018, welcomed 1.11 million international visitors in 2024 – an increase of 115.6 per cent compared with the previous year, according to local media.

For Marina, a 52-year-old Russian national, the appeal of a trip to Sanya not only lay in the city's beachside scenery, but also in the chance to sample traditional Chinese medicine.

"I came here because a friend recommended traditional Chinese medical treatments, so I wanted to give it a try," she said.

SPACE

US cuts may give Tianwen-3 Mars mission an edge

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White House moves to cancel Nasa's flagship Mars sample return programme amid sweeping budget cuts would leave China's Tianwen-3 mission – set to deliver around 600 grams of Martian material to Earth by 2031 – alone in the race.

The White House recommended ending funding for the mission, already subject to major cost overruns and delays, in its 2026 budget proposal which is expected to be finalised by Congress and the White House in coming months.

"While the United States and China are battling on Earth for leadership in the global economy, the US is giving their leadership role in space to China," said Yuqi Qian, a planetary geologist at the University of Hong Kong.

Qian, who works with international collaborators to study the volcanological history of the moon and other rocky bodies in space, said the White House was introducing substantial uncertainties for the US and its allies.

"The reversal of the joint Mars sample return mission between Nasa and the European Space Agency is a prime example. The team has already made significant progress collecting samples via the Perseverance rover since 2021," he said.

Nasa's international partners might be prompted by such a move to rethink their cooperation with the US, according to Qian.

"It would certainly weaken US leadership in space, especially as China is rolling out well-planned, ambitious programmes to return Martian samples and send humans to the moon."

Elon Musk, founder of SpaceX and a political ally of President Donald Trump, voiced concerns over the potential Nasa funding cuts, which include an overall reduction of 20 per cent – to US$20 billion – mostly concentrated in the agency's science mission directorate.

Musk described the news as "troubling", saying: "I am very much in favour of science, but unfortunately cannot participate in Nasa budget discussions, due to SpaceX being a major contractor to Nasa."

China and the US are taking different approaches in the race to retrieve rocks from Mars. Tianwen-3 will follow a relatively simple grab-and-go strategy, landing at a specific site to collect samples. In contrast, Nasa's Perseverance rover has been gathering specimens from multiple locations in and around the Jezero crater on Mars since 2021.

Namrata Goswami, a space policy expert at Arizona State University's Thunderbird School of Global Management, noted that China had also released a detailed road map of its Mars exploration plans after the Tianwen-3 mission, expected to launch in 2028.

> The US is giving their leadership role in space to China
>
> YUQI QIAN, UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

The Chinese plan includes a robotic survey for a base on the red planet by 2037, followed by construction of a research facility by 2041 focused on in situ resource utilisation, and a Mars-Earth cargo transport system by 2043.

"This is not dissimilar from the focus of China's lunar missions, which aim at resource extraction and the economic development of the moon," Goswami said, adding that China was also working on nuclear propulsion to support the development of Mars.

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