

**Chinese military**

## China reverses roles in arms trade with Russia

Beijing becomes partner and potential supplier to former source of military equipment



A helicopter aboard a Chinese guided-missile destroyer during a Sino-Russian joint military drill in the Sea of Japan in October 2021  
© Sun Zifa/China News Service/Getty

**Kathrin Hille** in Taipei YESTERDAY

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For nearly 30 years, Russia has been enabling China's rise as a military power. Russian weapons producers have [supplied](#) the People's Liberation Army with missiles, helicopters and advanced fighter jets to the tune of an average of \$1.5bn a year.

Now, the tide is turning. As [reported by the Financial Times](#) this month, Russia has requested military assistance from China to maintain its invasion of Ukraine. According to intelligence the US shared with allies, Russia requested supplies including surface-to-air missiles, drones, intelligence-related equipment and armoured and logistics vehicles.

Arms trade experts said that if these requests were made after the start of the war, the shopping list pointed to a military in dire need of basic support. "Trucks are something that Russia produces a lot of. If they have to ask for that, that would tell you what bad condition their armed forces are in," said Siemon Wezeman, an arms trade specialist at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Both governments have denied that Moscow made a request for Chinese assistance

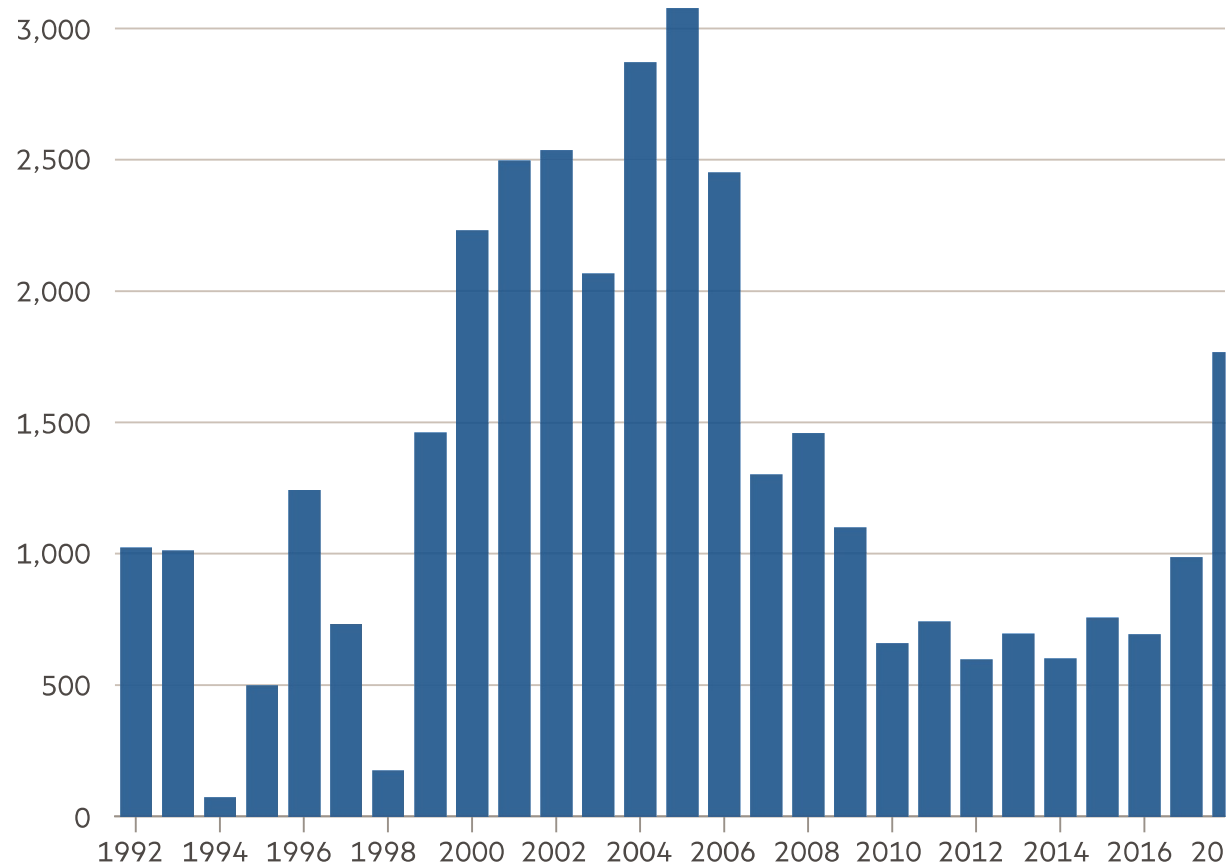
with military equipment for its Ukraine war.

Such support would mark a role reversal in China's long-running defence trade [relationship with Russia](#), and one that analysts said would highlight a broader change already under way in the bilateral power dynamics.

Sipri's arms transfers [database](#), which tracks deals from 1950 to 2021, records scores of Russian weapons exports to China, with none going the other way. But China is clearly outgrowing its traditional reliance on Russian for supplies of advanced arms.

## Russia's arms exports to China have declined from peaks of early 2000s

Russia's arms exports trend-indicator value (TIV) to China (mn)



China over the past two decades has increasingly manufactured under licence defence products it historically bought from Russia. Such licensing deals helped China develop the ability to build its own frigates, [aircraft carriers](#) and advanced fighters —

and even their hugely complex engines — instead of relying on Russia suppliers.

More recently, China has shipped some arms components to Russia.

If China meets Russia's recent equipment requests, it would be the first time it has supplied arms to Russia as military assistance, but not the first it has done so as "part of normal military-technical co-operation", said Alexander Korolev, an expert on the China-Russia security relationship at the University of New South Wales in Sydney.

Vassily Kashin, a leading expert on the Chinese military-industrial complex at the Russian Academy of Sciences, [told](#) Russian media that China had exported a batch of Haval off-road vehicles for driving command personnel as well as drone components and naval engines.

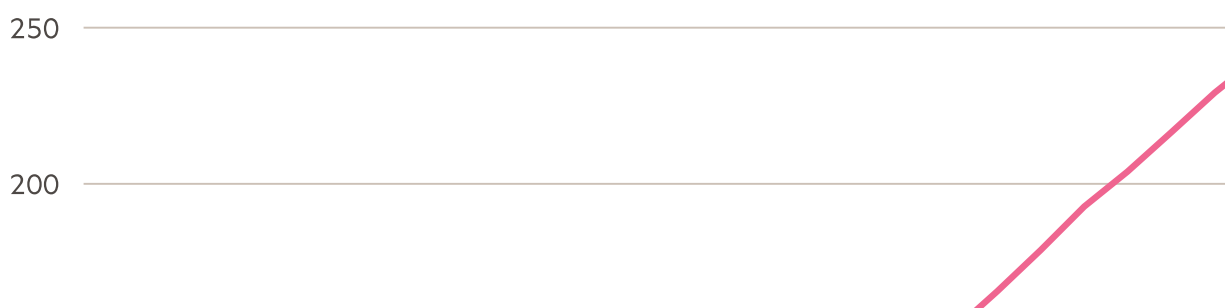
Korolev said Moscow was buying the naval engines for Russian coastguard ships and for its Buyan class missile corvettes from Henan Diesel Engine Industry Co to replace MTU brand engines made by Power Systems, a German business division of Rolls-Royce. According to [Waimaobang](#), a Chinese external trade database, marine power plant producer Henan Diesel Engine Industry Co has completed more than 300 transactions with Russian customers.

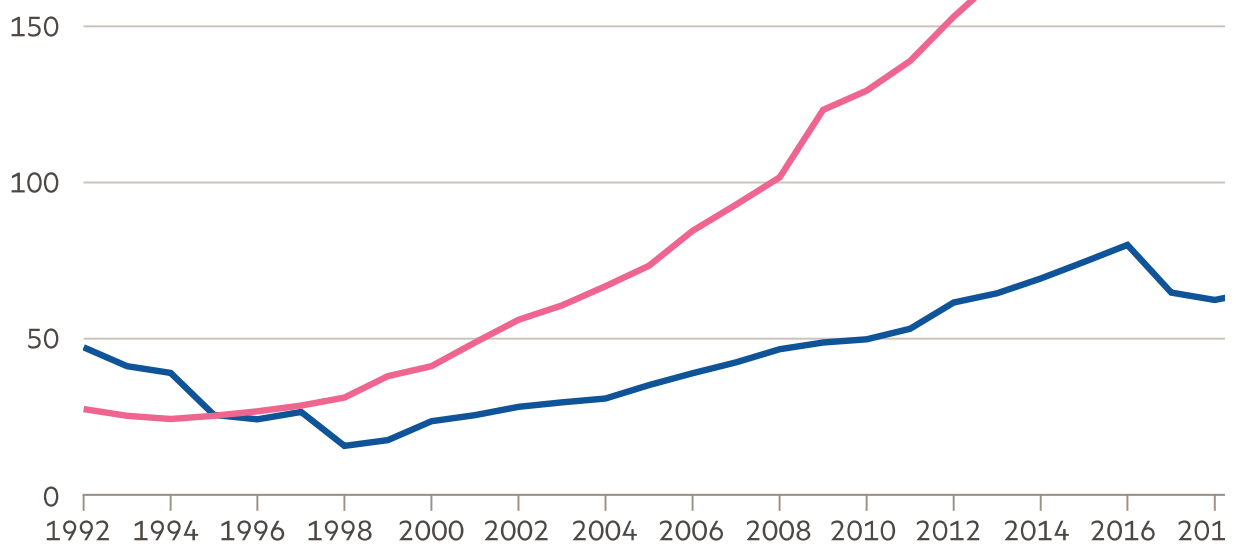
An online [announcement](#) by a Chinese company trading in diesel engines suggests such shipments started as early as 2017.

"Russia [has also been] interested in procuring production technology of space-grade, radiation-resistant electronic components from the state-owned China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation for Russian weapons," Korolev said.

## China spent more than three times as much on defence as Russia in 2020

Annual military expenditure (\$bn in constant 2019 dollars)





Other Russian analysts have pointed out that China is better placed than Russia to produce some weapons because its armed forces buy larger quantities of sophisticated items such as naval ships, and it has a stronger manufacturing sector.

Still, defence experts believed it was unlikely that the Russian government would allow the country to grow dependent on Chinese arms supplies.

“Russia has been very focused on being self-reliant for weapons and there is an almost cultural resistance about treating China as an equal,” Wezeman said. “They would have to overcome their pride.”

In the past, Russia sourced some components for its weapons systems in Europe. But Moscow tried to eliminate any reliance on foreign suppliers from its military-industrial complex after it was targeted by western sanctions in 2014 over its annexation of Crimea and fomenting a proxy separatist war in eastern Ukraine.

During the same period, [co-operation with China](#) on military and dual-use systems increased. “There are joint projects in satellite navigation going back to 2015,” said Korolev.

China’s Beidou and Russia’s Glonass satellite systems are expected to use the same signal and the countries plan to co-operate in developing applications. The joint satellite communication system is believed to be [able to compete](#) with the US-backed Iridium network, Korolev said.

Russian president Vladimir Putin in 2019 also revealed that the countries were co-operating on the development of [advanced weapons systems](#), including missile defence. Moreover, Moscow has expressed [interest](#) in the Vilyuysk, a Chinese military-

uence. Moreover, Moscow has expressed [interest](#) in the Yilong, a Chinese military-use reconnaissance drone also known as the Pterodactyl.



A Chinese Yilong II unmanned reconnaissance-strike drone on display at an air show in Guangdong Province in September 2021 © Chen Xiao/VCG/Getty Images

But, pointing to the [Russian military's shortcomings](#) in reconnaissance during their Ukraine campaign, analysts said commercial drones were the most likely item China could usefully supply quickly.

“Small, super-short range drones of the kind you can buy in toy shops could already help them because they can just look around the corner and those are used by the Americans and Europeans by the hundreds,” Wezeman said.

He said that it was probable that “sooner or later” a drone produced in China but operated by the Russian military would be discovered in Ukraine.

“You cannot hide that because eventually, one will come down. What you can hide in this case is Chinese government involvement because these are commercial products that don’t need an export licence,” he said.

*Additional reporting by Andy Lin in Hong Kong*

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