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China's Drone Exports to Russia Use a New Route Through Thailand

- Rise in shipments shows how hard it is to enforce sanctions
- Russian-Thai political, economic and cultural ties are growing

By Antony Sguazzin, Andy Lin and Pathom Sangwongwanich

(Bloomberg) -- On the 30th floor of the Chartered Square building in downtown Bangkok, the low-key office of Skyhub Technologies Ltd. serves as a nexus for a burgeoning and contentious trade.

The space, rented out by a serviced office provider, is visited only rarely by the company's sole director and occasionally by Chinese nationals, according to building staff who asked not to be identified speaking about clients. No contact number is listed on its online registration documents. No one was available during a visit by Bloomberg News in late January.

Despite the appearance of inactivity, this is a busy conduit for advanced drones. Trade documents show that Skyhub Technologies is Thailand's second-biggest importer of unmanned aerial vehicles from China. Where they go from there isn't recorded, even though the bulk of drones imported into the country are re-exported to Russia — a perfectly legal trade.

Thailand has so far largely escaped notice as a route to Russia. Yet an analysis of official Thai trade data shows that Thailand's exports of drones to Russia have surged since 2022, when President Vladimir Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, closely mirrored by a rise in imports of those goods by Thailand from China.

That trend has been noticed by Ukrainian officials, a person familiar with the situation said.

Beijing says that it does not aid Russia militarily. However, Chinese-made technology is routinely found on the battlefield in Ukraine, where first-person view drones that allow pilots to remotely monitor events in real time have reshaped the face of modern warfare.

The US's Department of State declined to comment on the shipments through Thailand. But a spokesperson said that China has been supporting Russia's war effort and accounts for about 80% of so-called dual use parts — a term for equipment with a potential military application — that Russia uses in the conflict.

"South East Asia is as a region definitely one to watch," said Maria Shagina, Berlin-based senior research fellow for economic sanctions, standards and strategy at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "The countries may change but the methods do not: Rerouting via third countries using shell companies."



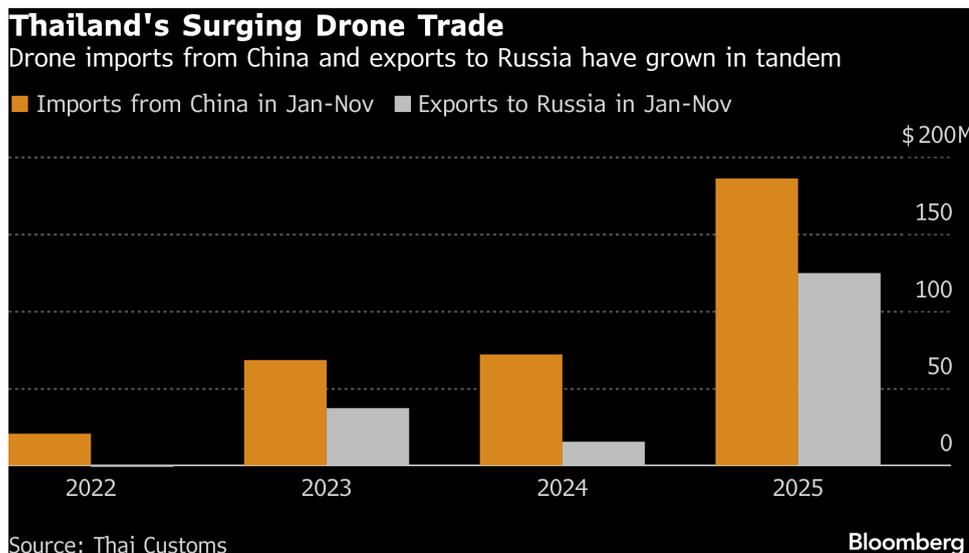
Autel Eco Max 4 T drone. Skyhub Technologies' imports came from Autel Robotics, one of China's major drone manufacturers, the documents compiled by Big Trade Data showed.

In the 11 months to the end of November 2025, Russia imported \$125 million of drones from Thailand, 88% of Thailand's total UAV exports and eight times what it bought the previous year. In the same period, China shipped \$186 million of drones to the southeast Asian nation, accounting for almost all drone exports to Thailand.

In 2022, Thailand exported less than \$1 million of drones, with none going to Russia, the government trade data shows.

Exports of Chinese drones from Thailand are within the legal framework, Phantong Loykulnanta, director general of Thailand's customs department, said in an interview. Declaration of usage when drones are imported from China isn't mandatory, he added.

"We are ready to act, but a law has to be in place first," Phantong said. The Commerce Ministry's Foreign Trade Department is looking into the issue, he said.



Russia is subject to multiple rounds of international sanctions due to its war on Ukraine, and while most sanctioned goods — usually dual-use — enter via China and Hong Kong, according to EU and US sanctions notices, Moscow has looked to use transshipment routes to get around European restrictions.

South East Asia emerged as an important conduit last year, after western governments exposed and took action on earlier routes via countries including the United Arab Emirates and Kazakhstan. In October, the European Union sanctioned two Thailand-based firms for their support of Russia's military. The Thai government hasn't commented on those bans.

The rise in shipments via Thailand shows just how hard it has been for western authorities to curb Russia's access to both arms and dual-use technology.

In 2024, Bloomberg reported that India was being used as a conduit to channel US-made servers containing Nvidia Corp. chips to Russia, and in October it emerged that South African-made drone parts were ending up in Russian unmanned aircraft used to attack Ukraine. Russia is meanwhile buying missiles from Tehran, as Iran-designed Shahed 136 drones are assembled in Russia.

"The war of attrition is a battle of resources," Shagina at the IISS said of the conflict in Ukraine. "Russia is scaling up."

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[An Indian Pharma Firm Is Sending Nvidia Chips to Russia at War](#)

[South Africa Investigates How It Made a Part for Russian Drones](#)

[Iran Is Said to Have Sent Russia \\$2.7 Billion Worth of Missiles](#)

Skyhub Technologies initially worked in the geology sector, according to its registration documents, and is now listed as a car rental firm. It imported \$25 million of drones in 2025, according to documents compiled by Big Trade Data, a trade intelligence platform specialized in shipment-level data. Skyhub Technologies' imports came from Autel Robotics, one of China's major drone manufacturers, the data showed.

Trade documents show the shipments included 976 drones bearing the same model code as Autel's EVO Max 4T, which costs about \$9,000 apiece, according to Autel's website. Last year Russian company Aero HIT wrote to the defense ministry in Moscow seeking financial assistance to localize production of the EVO Max 4T, originally designed for civilian use but which it said had proven highly effective in combat, according to a copy of the letter obtained by Bloomberg. Autel said in an emailed statement at the time it hadn't partnered with Aero HIT and was unaware of the proposal.

Autel, in a response to queries about its relationship with Skyhub Technologies, said that it is unable to discuss clients due to confidentiality but has an "economic sanctions compliance system that aligns with international standards." It said its drones are designed for civilian use and are equipped with a "no-fly geofencing system" that would prevent flight in the conflict area between Russia and Ukraine.

Skyhub Technologies has made no public statements about its drone imports.

Read more: [Russian Drone Documents Draw Line From China to Ukraine's Skies](#)

Another company based on Bangkok's outskirts, China Thai Corp., appears to be playing an even bigger role in the drone trade. It imported \$144 million of drones to Thailand from China in the first 11 months of 2025, according to trade data. During that time, in October, the company was sanctioned by the UK for supplying technology to Russia's military.

China Thai's involvement in the supply of equipment to Russia dates back to at least 2023, when trade data shows it worked as a freight forwarder for a shipment of Apple Inc. iPhones worth \$2 million bound for Russia's OOO Atlas, an electronics firm sanctioned by the EU the following year. Also in 2023, Nikkei reported that OOO Atlas bought \$2.5 million of semiconductors from a Hong Kong company called DEXP International Limited, another EU-sanctioned company, which was the seller of the iPhone shipment handled by China Thai.

DEXP and Atlas didn't respond to emailed queries.

China Thai's annual revenue surged from a token amount of around 14,000 baht (\$450) from 2020 through 2022, to 17.8 million baht in 2023, then 25.3 million baht in 2024, financial statements from Thailand's companies registry show.

The firm, located 10 minutes away from Bangkok's main international airport on the edge of a cargo storage area, is now being rebranded as Lanto Global Logistics, signage at the site showed when Bloomberg visited on Feb. 11. A staff member, speaking to Bloomberg, said executives were aware of queries sent earlier but didn't want to comment. She said the site provides logistics for customer orders, adding that staff are aware that the company has been sanctioned.

While Thailand's overall trade relations with Russia are limited, with just \$2.3 billion in two-way business recorded last year, economic, cultural and political links are growing. Those date back to 1897 when royal ties led to formal diplomatic relations being established, a first for a Southeast Asian nation with Russia.



A pharmacy sign in various languages including Russian in Phuket, Thailand, in 2023.

Last year, a record 1.9 million Russians visited Thailand. In the first quarter of 2025, Russians bought the equivalent of more than \$30 million-worth of Thai properties, ranking only behind buyers from China and Myanmar.

By late 2023, a third of expatriate residents on the Thai resort island of Phuket were Russian, according to Ian Storey, author of *Putin's Russia and Southeast Asia: The Kremlin's Pivot to Asia and The Impact of the Russia Ukraine War*.

Moscow is in the process of opening a so-called Russia House in Thailand — a cultural and language center — and is offering fully-paid scholarships to Thai students, according to the Russian embassy in Bangkok.

Even as Putin's all-out war on Ukraine approaches its fifth year, the Thai focus is on "encouraging Russian visitors to come and spend their holidays in Thailand and to invest in the country," said Storey. "Thailand has been much more concerned about strengthening economic ties with Russia."

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