

DATENNA INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Civilian Skies, Military Ties



Mapping Military-Civil Fusion at Shenzhen's Drone World Congress

How China's flagship civilian UAV expo reveals
priorities in the military-civil ecosystem

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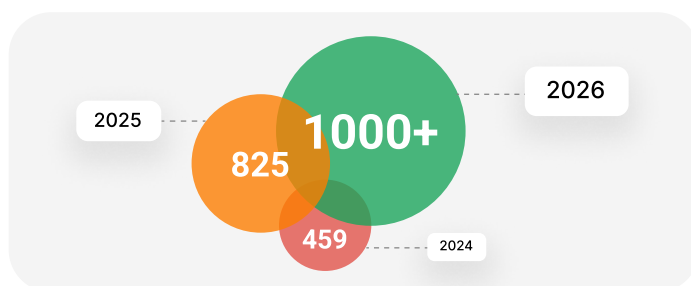
KEY FINDINGS

- The DWC is a large and growing arena to demonstrate China's low-altitude civil drones.
- New exhibitors display a marked bump in government connections after their first attendance. This is especially true for defense ties.
- Measuring newcomers vs. returnee exhibitors shows that the "UAV platforms" field is quite saturated, while "components" and "counter-UAV" systems are dynamic.

A Civilian Showcase with a Military Undercurrent

WHAT HAPPENED

The Shenzhen Drone World Congress (DWC) [深圳国际无人机展览会] is a massive UAV-theme expo held in the heart of China's high-tech push, Shenzhen. This showcase highlights China's booming low-altitude drone economy and the latest developments from China's UAV titans like DJI. However, the expo isn't just a forum for the largest players like AVIC and CASC to demonstrate their worth. Instead, the DWC has been growing steadily in recent years, and features many newcomers to the expo. The DWC



has more than doubled in the past two years, with 459 [exhibitors](#) in 2024, to 825 [exhibitors](#) in 2025, and now sits at over 1,000 in 2026. Datenna's analysis reveals that this year 632 exhibitors (58%) at the DWC will be participating in the event for the first time ever. This large influx of new participants is a strong indicator that China's low-altitude UAV sector is growing steadily, as new start-ups are looking to break into the field.

China's Domination of the Low-Altitude Economy is a Security Risk

WHY IT MATTERS

The Chinese government has been laser-focused on promoting UAV research, development, production, and adoption for years. This effort is paying off, with rapid expansion of capabilities and market saturation for China's UAV firms.

China's civil UAV sector is expected to triple between now and 2029, with [figures](#) at end of 2025 estimating total production at nearly \$26 billion. As it stands now, China has a total UAV fleet of at least 3.29 million [units](#). In recent years, much of China's focus has been on the so-called "low-altitude economy," an umbrella term referring to all economic activities (manufacturing supply chain, businesses, services) in the airspace below 3,000 meters, where smaller, dual-use personal drones dominate. China has massive production capability in this realm. Chinese company [DJI](#), for example, accounts for over 70% of global personal drone sales, and is [reportedly](#) being utilized by both sides of the Ukraine War.

China's **15th Five-Year Plan** designates this airspace as a "strategic emerging pillar industry" for economic growth while reinforcing the importance of **Military-Civil Fusion**. The Chinese military in particular has utilized the civil sector's low-altitude specialization to build out its capabilities in coordinating swarms of small drones to carry out attacks on targets.

Key Drone Swarm Platforms Under Development

Platform	Developer	Domain	Capability
Jiutian SS-UAV	AVIC	Air	Deploys 100 small drones and loitering munitions
"Atlas" drone swarm system	CETC	Land	Launches 48 fixed-wing drones, controls nearly 100
Orca JARI-USV-A	CSSC	Sea	Coordinates both aerial and underwater drone deployments

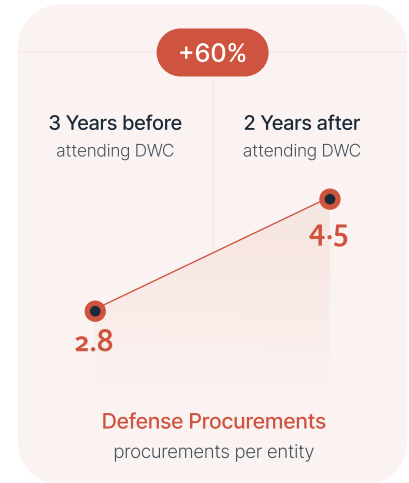
The Drone World Congress is a Likely Key Avenue for Companies to Enter the MCF Ecosystem

WHAT WE FOUND

To better understand the significance of the Drone World Congress, Datenna analysed procurement activities between 2021 and 2026 among firms that first attended the DWC in 2024 and were present again in 2026. This cohort was chosen due to the balance of procurement records available both before and after first attendance.



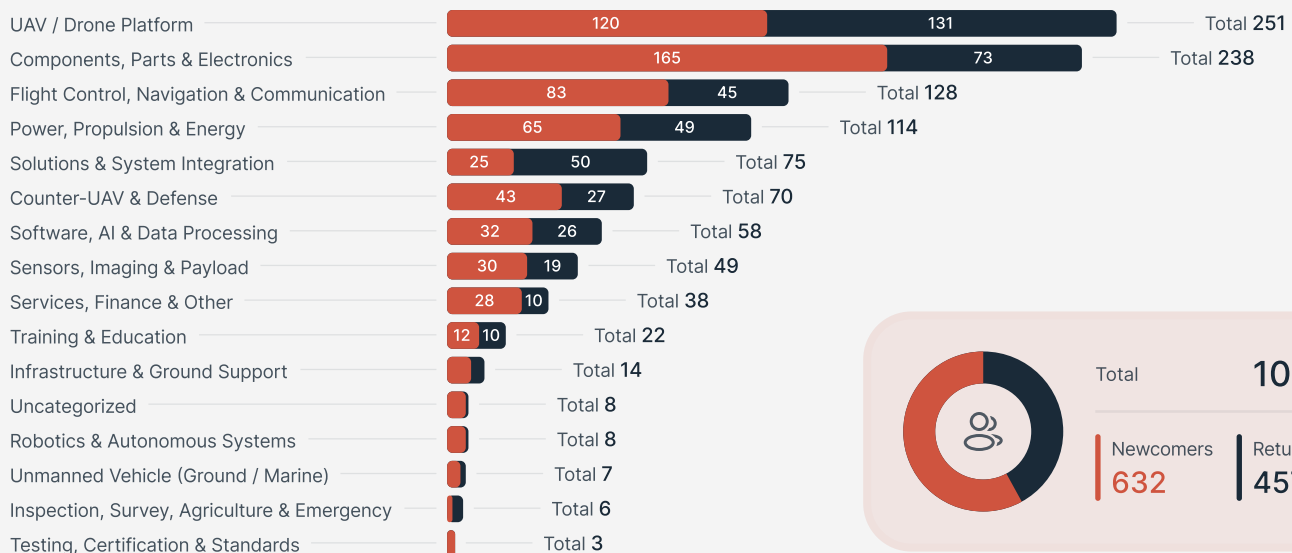
For the 2024 newcomer cohort, they averaged about 8.4 procurements per entity for the three years before attending the DWC. For the two years after their attendance, this number jumped to 11.4. Among defense procurements this figure was 2.8 per entity before and 4.5 after. This represents an average **35% increase in government procurements**, and a **60% increase in defense procurements** in specific. These numbers may well suggest that the connections made at the DWC not only help to the exhibitors work with the Chinese government, but also support the People's Liberation Army despite the claims that the DWC is only for civil drones.



NEWCOMERS VS. RETURNEES

Further, we looked at the product categories present at the 2026 DWC and compared newcomer vs returnees. If the DWC represents China's low-altitude drone field as a whole, then the product categories that are most heavily represented by newcomers may suggest the sectors that are most dynamic with firms competing to enter the market. Likewise, the fields with returnees may show us which product categories are already fully saturated with firms.

Newcomers vs Returnees within each product category - Raw counts



Analysis shows that "UAV/Drone Platforms" and "Solutions and System Integration" represent the fields most heavily saturated by returnees, while "Components" and "Flight Control" feature a high number of newcomers. Likewise, the "Counter-UAV & Defense" contains a surprisingly high percentage of newcomers. Taken as a whole, this suggests that the market for smaller, personal drone manufacturers is already quite full with established firms fighting for their slice of the pie. Likewise, these numbers suggest that the ecosystem is still building out support capabilities to sustain and enable this sector through electronics and navigation systems. This has likely spurred the creation of the counter-UAV technology field, which appears highly dynamic and set to grow in the coming years.

The Trail Leads Back to China's Defense Conglomerates

WHAT THIS MEANS GOING FORWARD

1,000+

Exhibitors
DWC 2026

58%

First-time
participants

24%

Provable defense
connections

+60%

Defense procurement
jump post-DWC

Among the entities in Datenna's datasets that attended the DWC, at least 24% were found to have provable connections to China's defense industry already. Many of these are through either ownership structures or procurement activities with China's sprawling state-owned defense conglomerates like CETC, CASC, or AVIC. For example, CETC, which designed the Atlas drone swarm system discussed earlier, has connections with at least 23 exhibitors at the 2026 DWC through 16 subsidiary organizations.

CSSC

China State Shipbuilding

34

DWC participants . 24 intermediaries

CETC

China Electronics Technology

23

DWC participants . 16 intermediaries

CASC

China Aerospace Science & Tech

22

DWC participants . 14 intermediaries

AECC

Aero Engine Corp of China

12

DWC participants . 6 intermediaries

AVIC

Aviation Industry Corp of China

7

DWC participants . 4 intermediaries

DWC 2026 participants with traceable connections to China's five major state defense conglomerates, mapped through Datenna's ownership and procurement datasets.

These ties to defense conglomerates as well as the bump in procurements for newcomers highlight both the importance of the Expo and what newcomers can achieve by participating. The Shenzhen Drone World Congress is an opportunity for both aspirants to participate in MCF initiatives pushed by the Chinese government, and as useful tool for the PLA's defense enterprises to bring on entrepreneurial talent and build out their capabilities.

As China continues to push forward with its UAV capabilities, the DWC hints at what is to come. For Western governments and defense planners, the implication is direct: China's civilian drone sector cannot be assessed independently of its military applications. The DWC is one of many likely pipelines into China's defense industrial base.

About Datenna

DATENNA.COM

Datenna maps over 50 million Chinese organizations, tracking procurement contracts, patent filings, funding streams, and ownership structures. Our platform provides allied governments, defense institutions, and industry with provable, auditable intelligence on China's technology and defense ecosystem.

To book a platform demonstration or speak with our analyst team: datenna.com