

Drones, Space and Defense: From the Rome-Kyiv-Tel Aviv Triangle to Germany's Ban on Beijing, and the Argotec-Rheinmetall Space Partnership

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The unmanned aircraft, satellite communications and aerospace surveillance sectors continue to reshape geopolitical and industrial balances. The current landscape is developing along three main lines: Ukraine’s search for alternatives to Starlink (with manufacturing implications in Italy), Western restrictions on Chinese technologies deemed vulnerable to espionage, and stronger European industrial alliances spanning space and defense, as demonstrated by the agreement between Italy’s Argotec and German giant Rheinmetall.

An alternative to Starlink and the Rome-Kyiv-Tel Aviv axis

According to reports circulated by pro-Russian sources and channels, the Ukrainian military has identified an alternative to SpaceX’s Starlink satellite network. At the end of October, a terminal removed from a Kyiv drone was shown: the **SmartLITE Sirius**, a six-kilogram device produced by Israeli company **HiSky**.

The need for an alternative system arose from restrictions imposed in mid-October by Starshield (the military version of Starlink), which, at Washington’s urging, cut the signal to drones exceeding 160 kilometers per hour, effectively grounding Ukrainian interceptors and disrupting strikes on Russian refineries. Although the service was restored a few days later, Ukrainian attacks resumed with greater precision, prompting pro-Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev to credit the Israeli terminals.

Unlike Elon Musk’s network, the HiSky system does not have its own constellation but leases capacity on third-party satellites. While offering lower performance that does not allow real-time piloting, it makes it possible to change course or target after a mission has begun and ensures coverage over Russian territory as well, where Starlink is blocked.

This case also reveals a **direct link with Italy**:

- In July 2023, HiSky signed an agreement with multinational company Jabil to produce an earlier family of terminals (Smartellite 8x8) at its plant in **Marcianise** (Caserta), in Campania.
- In August 2025, the Caserta plant was taken over by Campania-based TME (TMA) group, owned by Aniello Stellato, with **Invitalia** acquiring a 45% stake.
- This alleged manufacturing involvement in the Ukrainian drone supply chain prompted oligarch Malofeev to declare both Israel and Italy "legitimate targets".At the official level, however, there are no publicly disclosed authorizations for Israeli military exports to Kyiv, while Ukrainian presidential adviser Serhii Beskrestnov merely commented that such technologies are not entirely unprecedented.

Western crackdown on "made in China" technology: the Bundeswehr case

Alongside the race for military innovation, concern is growing in Europe and allied countries over the cybersecurity risks posed by commercial drones. As reported by the weekly *Der Spiegel* , the German Armed Forces (**Bundeswehr**) have decided on a blanket ban on all Chinese-made drones (such as those produced by giant DJI) inside barracks and training grounds.

The measure, which will lead to the replacement of the thousands of aircraft currently in service with domestic or European products, is intended to prevent espionage activities and the unauthorized transmission of data on exercises, infrastructure, and weapons systems. Although Germany had previously placed some Chinese models on a *white list* to speed up pilot training despite bans on tactical use, the policy has now changed radically; according to internal sources, German military counterintelligence (Mad) may even have detected signs of data leakage from the devices examined.
Berlin's decision is part of a broader framework of international restrictions against Chinese technology in the defense sector:

- **Drones and components:** The United States banned DJI drones from the military as early as 2017 (extending the ban by law to the Pentagon in 2019), followed in subsequent years by the Netherlands, Japan, Lithuania (which has applied the ban to all public institutions since 2025), Australia, and India. Last August, moreover, the British Royal Navy discovered that the cameras of some surface drones send automatic signals to an IP address in China.
- **Connected cars:** Security concerns have also extended to Chinese electric vehicles (such as BYD, Geely, or NIO), now regarded as mobile sensors equipped with cameras and radar.After Poland and reports that emerged during an exercise in Norway, the Bundeswehr has also banned "made in China" cars from entering military perimeters, mirroring a measure adopted as early as 2021 by the Chinese military against Tesla vehicles.

The European industrial response: the space alliance between Argotec and Rheinmetall

As European armed forces phase out non-European systems and seek technological autonomy, industrial integration between Italy and Germany is taking shape in the space domain applied to defense. **Argotec**, the Turin-based aerospace company led by David Avino, has launched a close strategic collaboration with **Rheinmetall Italia S.p.A.** (a subsidiary of Germany's Rheinmetall AG) to develop a new satellite infrastructure dedicated to military surveillance and air defense.
The key aspects of the agreement and the joint program include:

- **The first operational launch:** On 1° October 2026, the first satellite resulting from the partnership was placed into orbit (aboard a SpaceX launch vehicle). The satellite is

equipped with multispectral optical sensors and onboard processing capabilities supported by artificial intelligence.

- **Preventing aerial threats:** Unlike traditional satellites dedicated to ground mapping, the system is designed to detect ground-based indicators of emerging aerial threats (such as missile launches or unmanned aircraft), providing near-real-time early warning (*early warning*).
- **Division of roles and future constellation:** Under the agreement, Argotec is responsible for designing and manufacturing the satellites and space technologies, while Rheinmetall Italia handles the integration of orbital data into ground-based Command and Control systems and tactical air-defense networks. The launch represents the first building block of a modular program that will lead to the creation of a true European constellation, with a second launch already scheduled on the roadmap for **2028**.