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Russia hands over powerful warship to China

ST PETERSBURG, Russia (Reuters) - Russia handed over to China a destroyer equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry on Thursday, finalising a \$1.5 billion deal analysts say boosts Beijing's clout in its stand-off with Taiwan.

"The handover act was signed today, and a Chinese flag was hoisted on the ship," a Russian defence industry source told Reuters, requesting anonymity.

The warship was the fourth Project 956E 'Sovremenny' (Modern) class destroyer built at the Northern Shipyard in Russia's second city St Petersburg and sold to China under a 2002 deal through Russia's state arms trader Rosoboronexport.

In the late 1990s China bought two such ships under a separate contract.

"Rosoboronexport is interested in further sales to China, and we are not talking only about ships," the defence industry source said. "The company is actively promoting its output in China. But there have been no new orders for ships."

Defence analysts say the destroyers boost China's military might in the Pacific region and against Taiwan, the island to which Nationalist forces fled when Communists took over the mainland in 1949 at the end of the Chinese civil war.

Beijing considers Taiwan a breakaway province and has vowed to attack it if it declares formal independence.

Washington is bound by law to defend Taiwan and analysts say a conflict in the Taiwan Strait could quickly become a battle between Chinese and U.S. forces.

"Concern about these ships in both Taipei and Washington is justified by the fact that Taiwan and perhaps even the U.S. Navy lacks an effective defence against the ship's SS-N-22

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Sunburn (3M-80E Moskit) supersonic anti-ship missile,"
Washington-based think-tank the International Assessment
and Strategy Center said on its Internet site
www.strategycenter.net.

"This missile travels at about three times the speed of sound
and can perform violent manoeuvres that can defeat most
defences designed to ward off subsonic anti-ship missiles."

Apart from anti-aircraft missiles, the destroyer also carries a
Ka-28 helicopter armed with rocket-propelled antisubmarine
torpedoes.

In 2004-06 Russia built and sold to China six Kilo class
diesel-electric submarines.

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