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CHINA DAILY

香港版
HONG KONG

TUESDAY, January 13, 2026

中國日報

www.chinadailyhk.com HK \$12

Satellite industry set for rapid expansion

By CHENG YU and MA SI

China has filed plans with the International Telecommunication Union to deploy over 200,000 low-Earth-orbit satellites across roughly 14 constellations, a record-breaking move as major powers race to secure scarce orbital slots and radio spectrums.

Data published on the ITU website showed that China submitted filings covering roughly 14 constellations, the largest number the country has ever submitted. Two of the applications alone each seek authorization for 96,714 satellites, underscoring the unprecedented scale of the proposals.

These filings, however, do not confer the final launch. Under ITU rules, satellite networks must pass technical review and meet deployment milestones through actual launches before spectrum rights and orbital positions are formally secured.

The two largest constellations were filed by the Institute of Radio Spectrum Utilization and Technological Innovation, a national research institute newly registered on radio spectrum innovation and commercialization.

Other submitters include China Satellite Network Group, Shanghai Yuanxin Satellite Technology, telecom giants China Mobile and China Telecom.

Ding Botao, deputy director of the information research institute at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, said, "The move reflects China's determination and capacity to carry out large-scale, coordinated deployment amid intensifying global competition in the low-Earth-orbit satellite sector.

"It also supports China's longer-term 6G ambitions, as low-Earth-orbit satellite internet is a core component of the integrated space-air-ground network."

Currently, US operators still hold a dominant position. As of May 2025, there were about 10,824 low-Earth-orbit satellites in operation worldwide, with orbital resource utilization reaching 18 percent.

The United States holds a commanding lead through SpaceX's Starlink program, which accounts for 75.94 percent of all active spacecraft globally, while China represents only 9.43 percent.

China has already rolled out several national-level constellation programs led by China Sat-Net and some other companies and institutes, which together aim to deploy tens of thousands of satellites over the next decade.

Liu Zhongyu, chief analyst for machinery and defense at China International Capital Corp, said that looking ahead, China's satellite industry is approaching a period of rapid expansion.

"We expect satellite launches in 2026 to more than double," Liu said, adding that manufacturers and launch providers are likely to see stronger commercial returns.

Zhang Zhilong, an associate professor at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, said China still faces a sizable gap with the United States in low-Earth-orbit satellite development.

"It may take Chinese companies five to 10 years to catch up with Starlink's launch amount. The whole ecosystem, including standards for direct-to-handset connectivity, terminal pricing and service packages, is still being explored, and the entire industry chain needs closer coordination," Zhang said.

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