BUSINESS

Self-driving firms steer toward globe

Bigger efforts seen from domestic tech companies in expanding fleet, enhancing R&D

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A WeRide driverless minibus is seen in Barcelona, Spain in March.
DAVID ZORRAKINO / EUROPA PRESS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Chinese autonomous driving companies are accelerating steps to expand their presence overseas and increase robotaxi fleets — a move which industry experts said will bolster the large-scale commercial application of self-driving vehicles globally.

The enterprises boast relatively abundant experience in diversified road testing and operational scenarios from high-density urban centers to suburban areas. Meanwhile, ensuring the safety of robotaxis remains a top priority given the complex traffic conditions and urban environments in different countries, they said.

Chinese bike-sharing platform Hellobike has entered the robotaxi market by establishing a joint venture with fintech giant Ant Group and battery behemoth Contemporary Amperex Technology Co Ltd.

The three companies have invested more than 3 billion yuan ($418.3 million) in the new firm as an initial investment, Hellobike said in a statement on Monday.

With a registered capital of 1.29 billion yuan, the new Shanghai-based company will focus on the research and development of Level 4 autonomous driving technology, and its safe application and commercialization. Level 4 vehicles can intervene if there is a system failure, and do not require human assistance in most circumstances. Manual override options are also available.

Hellobike's entry into the robotaxi market offers a glimpse into the fiercer competition in China's autonomous driving sector. Chinese self-driving technology companies are ramping up efforts to make inroads into overseas markets.

Apollo Go, Baidu Inc's autonomous ride-hailing platform, has signed a strategic cooperation agreement with the Roads and Transport Authority of Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, to launch autonomous driving testing and services in the city.

It will deploy 100 fully autonomous vehicles in Dubai by the end of this year, with plans to expand the fleet to no fewer than 1,000 by 2028. The move marks Apollo Go's first international fleet deployment outside the Chinese mainland and Hong Kong and its first entry into the Middle East.

Moreover, it has inked a strategic partnership with AutoGo, a UAE-based autonomous mobility solutions company, with the goal of deploying the largest fully driverless fleet in Abu Dhabi, capital of the UAE.

Chinese self-driving company Pony.ai has accelerated its global expansion pace. The company announced in May that it has inked a strategic partnership with US-based ride-hailing service provider Uber to deploy its robotaxis onto the latter's platform.

The partnership will be first rolled out in a key market in the Middle East later this year, with a goal of scaling deployments to additional international markets in the future, said Pony.ai.

Autonomous driving startup WeRide recently announced the launch of fully driverless robotaxi trial operations in Abu Dhabi, the first deployment of its kind in the Middle East. Starting this quarter, a fleet of its robotaxis will be piloted on public roads without a safety driver, marking a major milestone in the advancement of smart mobility in the city.

"China is at the global forefront of R&D and the application of self-driving technology, and the accelerated expansion of Chinese self-driving companies abroad will be conducive to propelling the commercialization of the cutting-edge technology globally," said Zhang Xiang, a visiting professor from the engineering department at Huanghe Science and Technology University.

Zhang said authorities in the Middle East and some European countries have a relatively open attitude toward autonomous driving and are promoting the testing and use of robotaxis thanks to technological advancements and cost reductions.

"Chinese self-driving enterprises have strong technical prowess and accumulated rich testing and operational experience in the domestic market. They aspire to play a bigger role in the international autonomous vehicle field by leveraging their strengths," said Zhu Keli, founding director of the China Institute of New Economy.

EssilorLuxottica sees 'unparalleled potential' in optical lenses sector

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EssilorLuxottica, a global provider of eye care and eyewear, is doubling down on its long-term commitment to China, where it sees vast potential for growth across age groups — from managing childhood myopia to meeting increasingly sophisticated consumer demands in premium eyewear.

"We have always had confidence in the China market and will continue to deepen our roots here," said Kok Leong Lim, president of professional solutions at EssilorLuxottica Greater China.

"We have high expectations for the future performance of the China market," Lim said during a recent exclusive interview with China Daily, adding that the China market's contribution is steadily rising.

EssilorLuxottica reported 26.5 billion euros ($30.74 billion) in revenue for 2024, up 6 percent year-on-year, with adjusted operating profit margins rising to 17 percent — a 50-basis-point improvement. Optical products accounted for three-quarters of its global revenue.

In China, its childhood myopia management brand Stellest grew roughly 50 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024.

Lim said he sees a massive and largely untapped market in China's eye health sector. He noted that an estimated 600 million people are living with myopia, including over 100 million children and teenagers, a demographic experiencing earlier onset and faster progression of vision problems.

"The high incidence and early onset of childhood myopia is extremely serious but also presents enormous development opportunities," Lim said. "Children are now developing myopia between the ages of 6 and 10, earlier than the previous 8 to 12."

Earlier this month, the company unveiled its latest Essilor Stellest 2.0 lenses, designed to provide twice the power and higher efficacy for slowing childhood myopia progression.

Lim said the launch of the latest lenses is another example of the company's constant innovation in providing advanced solutions for children to fight against myopia.

The first Essilor Stellest glasses were also released earlier this year, specially designed to help the effect of Essilor Stellest lenses in slowing myopia progression.

"Our research shows that 90 percent of children focus on wearing comfort when choosing eyeglasses, and 87 percent focus on aesthetics such as style and color," said Michele Ginocchietti, general manager of high-end professional solutions at EssilorLuxottica Chinese Mainland.

"Based on our in-depth insights into the needs of Chinese consumers, Essilor Stellest glasses were developed based on anthropometric data of Chinese children aged 3-12 and tailored to three age stages, offering safety, stability, and comfort whether kids are playing sports or studying."

> "Eyewear in China is no longer merely functional, but is also considered an accessory to express their personality."
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> **Michele Ginocchietti**, general manager of high-end professional solutions at EssilorLuxottica Chinese Mainland.

"Eyewear in China is no longer merely functional, but is also considered an accessory to express their personality," Ginocchietti highlighted. The company is working with hospitals, clinics and retailers to enhance access and improve vision care delivery across diverse lifestyle scenarios, including work, travel and sports.

Consumers expect technology, style and scenario-based performance. For example, consumers need lenses that enhance color constraint to reveal details that are hidden by naked eyes, while office workers seek to protect their eyes from computer screens, he added.

"We strongly believe in China market growth and we are strongly committed to introducing the best innovation to support consumers and those facing everyday vision challenges," Ginocchietti said. "China has unparalleled potential as a growing domestic market."

To unlock China's full potential, EssilorLuxottica is also expanding optometry training programs in partnership with academic and industry bodies to build up the professional talent pool.

In its 2025 Government Work Report, China announced that it would vigorously boost consumption and investment, and stimulate domestic demand across the board.

With a series of existing policies taking effect gradually and more supportive measures in the pipeline, Sun Xuegong, director-general of the department of policy study and consultation at the Chinese Academy of Macroeconomic Research, said, "I believe we have great growth potential."

Looking ahead, Lim remains optimistic about China's prospects despite global headwinds.

"Today's economic challenges are global, not just limited to China," Lim said. "In fact, China may be handling them better than most. I am very optimistic about China's future."

As the country accelerates its domestic consumption strategy and health-tech transformation, EssilorLuxottica is positioning itself as both a commercial player and a strategic partner — embedding innovation, expertise and public health alignment into every lens.

"We're not just a company selling products," Lim said. "We are building long-term solutions to help people manage their vision health proactively. That's what sustainable growth in China will be built on."

Longi kicks off building of solar plant in Indonesia

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Chinese solar power giant Longi Green Energy Technology Co Ltd announced on Wednesday that it has kicked off a strategic project to establish a photovoltaic panel manufacturing facility in Indonesia.

The facility, in collaboration with Pertamina New and Renewable Energy (Pertamina NRE) — a subsidiary of Indonesian state-owned energy company Pertamina — underscores a shared commitment to advancing renewable energy adoption in Southeast Asia and supporting Indonesia's ambitious energy transition goals, it said.

The new facility in Deltamas, West Java, will feature an annual production capacity of 1.6 gigawatts and is set to commence construction this month, significantly boosting Indonesia's domestic solar PV production capabilities.

"Indonesia holds immense potential in renewable energy, and Longi is proud to contribute our world-leading solar technology to this transformative journey," said Dennis She, vice-president of Longi.

"This facility represents not just an investment in manufacturing, but a long-term partnership to accelerate Indonesia's clean energy future. By localizing production, we aim to drive down costs, foster innovation and create high-value green jobs, reinforcing our commitment to a net-zero world," said She.

Longi said the collaboration is a strategic step toward strengthening Indonesia's renewable energy supply chain.

The project will enhance the domestic component level, aligning with the Indonesian government's push for greater local content in renewable energy projects and meeting rapidly growing demand for high-quality solar PV modules in both the domestic market and across Southeast Asia, it said.

The Indonesian government has set a target of 17.1 GW of new PV installations over the next 10 years, which indicates that demand for PV power in Indonesia will continue to be unleashed with the advancement of the plan.

Industry experts said Chinese firms play a key role in helping Indonesia make steady progress in the development of the PV sector.

Longi announced earlier this month that it set two new world records for solar cell efficiency, including a 33 percent conversion efficiency for a commercial-sized (260.9 square centimeter) perovskite-silicon tandem solar cell and 26 percent efficiency for a crystalline silicon module, further cementing China's leading position in the global PV industry.

Technological advancements and innovation by Chinese solar companies are key to driving down costs of electricity derived from the sun, accelerating the global energy transition away from fossil fuels, said Lin Boqiang, head of the China Institute for Studies in Energy Policy at Xiamen University.

Chen Fei, an analyst of renewables supply chain research with global consultancy Rystad Energy, said with the United States imposing steep tariffs on solar panel imports from four Southeast Asian countries — Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia — Chinese manufacturers are accelerating production relocation.

"We've seen some leading Chinese firms seek to outsource cell manufacturing and announced new capacities in collaboration with local enterprises in Indonesia and Laos, while more commonly the manufacturers have turned to markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and announced plans to establish manufacturing capacities there," said Chen.

However, most of the announced capacity relocation plans have seen little progress so far, except for a few fast-movers who have already commissioned production or plan to commission production in early 2026.

The US Department of Commerce determined earlier that solar cells from Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam were being "dumped" into the US market and imposed tariffs, some exceeding 3,500 percent, in response. This action is impacting the solar sector in Southeast Asia, with some manufacturers considering shutting down or relocating.

Rystad Energy said US module manufacturing capacity is projected to surge, assuming no significant delays or cancellations.

However, a gap between crystalline silicon cells and module production capacity will persist, and the US will maintain reliance on imports of earlier-stage components over the short term, said Chen.

LDC banks on new unit in Qingdao for growth in China

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Louis Dreyfus Company, a multinational trader and processor of agricultural commodities, begins construction of a new food technology park in Qingdao, Shandong province on Thursday, and plans to further deepen its downstream presence in China, its senior executives said.

As China's middle-income group continues to expand and the country rolls out policies to boost domestic demand and drive consumption upgrades, they said that LDC has clearly seen the nation evolving into a dynamic consumer market characterized by diverse needs and significant growth potential.

"The new facility is another significant development in LDC's growth journey in the country and underlines the group's long-term commitment to the Chinese market," said Jerrity Chen, head of North Asia at LDC, which is headquartered in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Operations at this park will include oilseeds crushing, processing of specialty feed proteins and products, as well as production of food-grade lecithin. The site is scheduled to be operational in 2027 and will have the capacity to produce 1.5 million metric tons of feed protein, 370,000 tons of refined oil and 15,000 tons of lecithin annually.

Moreover, LDC has invested in a specialty feed production line in Tianjin to produce fermented soybean meal, aimed at improving animal health and growth performance. This initiative is intended to support higher-quality and more efficient livestock and poultry farming. The facility is expected to begin operations in the second half of this year.

"China's steady growth, predictable policy environment, pro-business initiatives and vast consumer market potential have all strengthened our determination and confidence to continue increasing our investment in the country and grow alongside it," Chen said.

Michael Gelchie, CEO of LDC, said the group will continue to extend further downstream to achieve diversified growth by offering high-quality, value-added products that meet the evolving needs of Chinese consumers, such as premium sources of protein and nutritious dietary options.

This goal will be realized primarily by enhancing the company's research and development capabilities and strengthening its capacity for processing and producing high value-added products, Gelchie said.

"We are seeing strong and growing demand for high-quality proteins, as China's per capita meat consumption continues to rise in tandem with the country's economic development, rising incomes and rapid urbanization," he said, adding this growth has fueled an expanding animal feed market in China and the company is committed to meeting that demand.

Under its plan, LDC, backed by more than 19,000 employees globally, will also reinforce its core business — the trading and marketing of key commodities such as corn, soybeans and coffee — through strategic investments and partnerships in China.

Highlighting that local innovation is another key element of the group's downstream strategy, Gelchie said that LDC's global research and development center in Shanghai, which was established in 2023, has made solid progress, with research outcomes now being applied to industrial-scale production.

"Given the scale of China's agricultural demand, international collaboration is essential to ensure stable supply, promote sustainable farming practices and support the country's evolving consumption patterns," said Bai Ming, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation in Beijing.

Visitors gather at LDC's booth during the seventh China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

China will continue to see rising consumer demand for premium, healthy and diversified agricultural products and its agricultural trade patterns will be further optimized through deeper global supply chain integration in the years ahead, according to the China Agricultural Outlook Report (2025-34) released by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs in April.