

CONFRONTATION WITH AMERICA: China's military spending surpasses \$100 billion

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This year's Chinese military budget, approved by the National People's Congress, is 670 billion yuan (\$US106.4 billion), an 11.2 percent increase from 2011 and a doubling from 2006.

As a result, China is only the second country, after the US, to have a defence budget of over \$100 billion, well ahead of third-placed France, which spent \$61.2 billion in 2011. According to IHS Jane's, in four years China's military spending could exceed the rest of Asia combined, "leaving Japan and India far behind".

The Western media, especially in the US, seized on the figure as further evidence of the military threat posed by China. The *New York Times*, for instance, wrote: "The new [Chinese] hardware is being displayed at a time when there is a growing gap between China's rising military expenditures and slowing spending by other countries in the region, many of them American allies. That gap has reinforced the realisation that the United States may not remain the singularly dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region if Chinese military spending keeps escalating."

Beijing is expanding its military to defend the economic and strategic interests of Chinese capitalism. But the main driving force for this arms race is the aggressive stance taken by the US, particularly under the Obama administration, toward China. Washington's strengthening of alliances and partnerships throughout the Asia region, and its military build-up in South East Asia, threaten to encircle China.

US military spending is projected to be \$707.5 billion in 2012 (base budget plus war costs such as in Afghanistan)—nearly seven times that of China. The US defence budget is greater than for the next 10 largest military powers combined. Huge US military spending ensures its vast superiority to China in almost every military field, ranging from its possession of the world's largest strategic nuclear forces, to its 750 military bases around the world.

US militarism is the chief destabilising factor in world politics today. Facing economic decline, US imperialism has increasingly used its military might to undercut its rivals in Europe and Asia, waging predatory wars such as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The NATO war on Libya directly led to the loss of billions of dollars in Chinese investment. Military threats by the US and its allies against Syria and Iran further undermine Chinese interests.

Under Obama, the US is focussing on undercutting Chinese influence throughout the Asian

region. Speaking in Canberra in November, the US president pledged there would be no cut in defence spending in the Asia Pacific. The Pentagon's new strategic guidelines, "Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense," published in January emphasised "a rebalance" toward Asia and singled out China for special mention over its alleged lack of military transparency.

The Pentagon last year established an office for a new strategic doctrine of Air/Sea Battle which is directed against China. No official papers have been published, but it is openly discussed in American strategic think tanks. While nominally a defensive strategy to respond to a Chinese strike on US bases in the West Pacific, it has an overtly aggressive content. A so-called US counter attack would involve a full-scale war on China, firstly "blinding" Chinese surveillance, command and control systems, while destroying Chinese cruise and ballistic missiles forces, as well as its surface and submarine fleets.

The offensive character of Air/Sea Battle is demonstrated by its targeting of China's "access-denial" capabilities, such as its DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missiles. While much hyped in American strategic literature, these missiles were developed as a defensive measure to prevent American warships having unfettered access to sensitive strategic waters near the Chinese coast. The US is developing a new X-47B stealth drone bomber to pre-emptively attack these missiles.

Another purpose of Air/Sea Battle is to cut China's vital shipping routes to the Middle East and Asia, by blocking the "choke points" such as the Malacca Strait. As a result, the Chinese economy would be starved of imported energy and raw materials. Such a conflict would rapidly involve US allies such as Japan and Australia and potentially escalate into a nuclear war.

Washington's push to develop a joint anti-ballistic missile defence system with Japan in recent years has prompted China to deploy less detectable mobile land- and submarine-launched nuclear missiles. The concern in Beijing was that a missile defence shield would allow the US to launch a first strike against China's relatively small nuclear force then neutralise any remaining Chinese missiles. China has also responded by developing anti-satellite missiles to reduce US monitoring capabilities in the event of a war. The anti-satellite missiles in turn have become a main target of the American Air/Sea Battle doctrine.

So far, China has increased its military spending within the context of avoiding any confrontation with the US. Its official policy remains that of the "peaceful rise"—a course set in the 1980s, when China was incorporated into the world capitalist economy as a cheap labour platform.

Measured as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), Chinese military spending declined from 1.4 percent in 2006 to 1.3 percent last year. By comparison, the US figure increased from 3.1 percent in 2001 to 4.7 percent in 2011. Chinese spending per GDP is also low compared to other major military powers—4.3 percent in Russia, 2.5 percent in France and 2.7 percent in UK.

A large component of China's increased military spending is devoted to building hi-tech weapons to match those of the US. For its precision-guided munitions, China aims to establish its own equivalent of the American GPS system, covering the Asia Pacific region by the end of the year. As a result, it made more satellite launches than the US during the past two years. China's stealth fighter J-20 fleet is likely to cost \$110 million apiece, compared to

\$131 million for one US F-35. Beijing is also investing heavily in a costly blue-water navy, including aircraft carriers.

Far from ensuring peace in Asia, the Obama administration's belligerence toward China is strengthening the hand of more hardline sections of the Beijing regime that have long argued that the current military spending is "too low" and called for stronger action to defend China's interests. The result is rising tensions in a region of the world that is notorious for the numerous potential flashpoints that could trigger a war.

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