

# China announces surge in military spending

China's defence budget for 2012 will top \$100 billion, officials have revealed – an 11% rise on the year before. But should the country's growing strength really be a cause for alarm?



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Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the USA has been by far the world's strongest military power.

The \$740 billion spent on America's armed forces every year is more than most countries' entire GDP.

But the era of unchallenged US dominance is coming to an end. After years of peaceful but lightning-paced growth, China has the world's second biggest economy and a population of more than 1.3 billion people. Now, a growing portion of the country's huge wealth is being diverted towards building up its military might.

According to the latest defence budget announcement, China will spend more than \$100 billion on its armed forces in 2012. That is still only a fraction of what the USA spends, but it represents a big increase from the year before.

Meanwhile, US defence spending is to be cut this year and, as the country struggles to bring its debt down to reasonable

levels, may well continue to decline.

And US forces are spread all over the world. China's forces are concentrated in one place, and now include advanced weapons like stealth fighters and anti-ship ballistic missiles, capable of hitting an enemy vessel even thousands of miles away. In a military confrontation near Chinese territory, US forces look less and less certain to get the upper hand.

Chinese officials insist that all this military spending is strictly for defence. Painful history, they say, has taught them what happens to countries that look weak.

But despite these assurances, the shift in the balance of power has China's neighbours increasingly worried. Countries like Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines rely on US naval backing to resist Chinese claims to disputed waters in the South China Sea. South Korea fears aggression from the Chinese-backed communist government of North Korea. Taiwan suspects dwindling US

power may tempt China to reassert its longstanding claim of sovereignty. Not surprisingly, these countries are now building up their own armies and navies as fast as they can.

## SABRE RATTLING

To some foreign policy experts, the accelerating East Asian arms race looks worryingly like a throwback to the old-fashioned geopolitics of the 19th and 20th Centuries, when hostile competition for limited territory and resources led to rising tension and, sometimes, open war.

But others think China's military build up is really no cause for alarm. Times have changed, they argue. National wealth is no longer primarily built on territory and resources – things which can usefully be fought over. Rather, wealth depends on trade, which only flourishes in times of peace. A strong army might make a country look tough, but it would be economic suicide ever to use it.

## Q & A

**Q No one really has full-on wars any more do they?**

**A** There hasn't been a war between two developed countries for decades. It is easy to forget that Europe was torn apart by fighting as little as 70 years ago. France and Germany fought three major wars against

each other in the space of a century. It's hard to imagine that happening today.

**Q But war could be making a come-back?**

**A** Perhaps. The current period of peace has been driven by a central principle: that when one country does well, all countries prosper. One of the consequences of the 2007/8 financial crisis, however, is that more and more people have stopped believing in this optimistic notion. In many countries,

nationalist movements are on the rise. These promise to advance their own national interest at the rest of the world's expense.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

**'The days of full-scale war between major powers are over.'**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**GDP** – GDP stands for Gross Domestic Product, a common way of measuring the total value of a country's economy. If the US defence department were a country, it would have a population bigger than Wales and a GDP bigger than Turkey, making it the 17th richest country in the world.

**Stealth fighters** – Stealth fighters are military jets designed to be

undetectable on radar. China is thought to have acquired the technology by stealing parts from the crash site of a downed US plane.

**Anti-ship ballistic missiles** – Ballistic missiles are missiles that cover huge distances by being launched all the way into space. They come down vertically at astonishing speeds and are exceptionally difficult to defend against.

**South China Sea** – Around half of the world's shipping passes through the South China Sea, making it one of the most important strategic waterways in the world. Anyone controlling the South China Sea could strangle world trade.

**Taiwan** – Taiwan split from China following a civil war between communists and republicans in the 1940s. The defeated republican KMT party took control of Taiwan while the communists held power in the mainland.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Is China's growing strength a threat to world peace?
2. US President Theodore Roosevelt famously said the best thing in foreign policy was to 'speak softly and carry a big stick.' What do you think he meant? Do you agree?

### ACTIVITIES

1. As a class, make a list of things a country could expect to gain or lose through war or the threat of war.

2. Do some research into China's history since the 19th Century, and create a simple timeline of events. Why do you think China might feel a historical need to maintain a strong army?

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