China’s Increased Defence Budget and its Implications for India

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Fri, 02/07/2014 - 14:53

Paper No. 5644 Dated 07-Feb-2014

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In marked contrast to India’s regrettable declining defence budget expenditures in face of rising threats from China and Pakistan, one is witnessing a surging increase in China’s defence budget notably when China faces no credible military threats from any quarter.

China's defence budget is assessed to touch US $ 148 billion in 2014, second only to the United States defence budget and outstripping the combined defence budgets of Germany, France and the United Kingdom.

China’s defence budget also far outstrips the combined defence spending of its peer Asian rivals, namely, Japan and India. Japan’s spending on defence in 2013 amounted to $56.842 billion and that of India was $46.183 billion. In case of India, every year as the Annual Budget nears presentation, thousands of crores are hived from the Defence Budget to balance the books by the Finance Ministry.

Strategic analysts all over the world are questioning as to why China requires such outsized budgets when it faces no credible threats from major powers like the United States and Russia?

The answers forthcoming on analysis are that China is engaged in reducing the differentials in its military power relative to the United States with multiple aims of emerging as the predominant Asian military power, attempting to emerge as the “strategic co-equal” of the United States in Asia and all of these combined to ultimately prompt a US military exit of its forward military deployments in the Western Pacific.

Towards such multiple strategic aims, China’s increase in its defence budgets are focused on expansion of the Chinese Navy and the combat power of the Chinese Air Force along with China’s force projection capabilities. Also in focus is China’s emphasis on the expansion
and modernisation of its nuclear arsenal. The display of Chinese maritime and air power in China’s conflict escalation in the South China Sea against Vietnam and the Philippines and in the East China Sea against Japan are clearly visible.

Further increases in China’s defence budgets can be expected to be earmarked for significant increases in China’s maritime power in terms of upgradation of its submarine fleet, surface combatants and additional aircraft carriers. China’s missiles arsenal can also be expected to be increased and so also its nuclear arsenal.

China’s ground forces may not see increases in manpower but what can be expected certainly will be in terms of increased firepower systems, helicopter and airborne forces capabilities and special forces operations. With the emphasis on integrated warfare marked increases in China’s C4I capabilities will receive focus.

China’s cyber-warfare capabilities need to be a special concern to all nations in China’s military crosshairs and this is equally applicable both in peacetime and in conflictual situations.

China’s increasing military profile does not lend itself to China’s self-proclaimed ‘China’s peaceful rise’. China’s switch from use of ‘soft-power strategies’ to use of ‘hard power strategies’ since 2009, more noticeably against Vietnam, Philippines, Japan and even against India on the Himalayan borders with Tibet stand well-documented.

China’s emerging military profile is also a concern to the leading military powers like the United States and Russia and both in their own ways are engaged in coping with the implications of a militarily rising China with no benign aims or stake in global and regional stability.

What are the military implications for India of China’s sustained increases in military expenditures visible with the increasing defence budget increases?

China’s defence spending increases may not be India-specific as some would like to argue and that they are geared to its strategic aims outlined above, however, what cannot be wished away is the strategic reality that China’s increasing military profile has in terms of spill-over effects creates serious strategic and military implications for India’s security.

In strategic terms, China’s significant military rise without any corresponding, if not matching, increases in India’s military profile against the backdrop of the reality that China is “India’s Military Threat Number One”, strategically diminishes India’s Asian and global image of being a serious contender for emerging as an ‘Asian Power’ of some reckoning. Even Japan as an aspiring ‘Asian Power’ has responded to its ‘China Threat’ with significant fast-track military increases.
Strategically therefore, India rather than attempting to reduce the differentials in its military power relative to China is down-sliding and permitting the China-India military power differential to widen and this should be a matter of concern to all Indians.

Reverting to the military implications of China’s increasing military spending on Indian security, we have serious challenges to face in all three domains of land warfare, air warfare and sea power.

India’s Himalayan land borders with Tibet are a matter of special military concern. Both on the borders and in the Tibetan hinterland, China has amassed overwhelming military power, air power and strategic nuclear missiles. China has developed extensive defence infrastructure by way of roads, railways and airfields to support this massed Chinese military power threatening India.

China’s focus in terms of military spending in Tibet is therefore now likely to focus on air-mobility and helicopter-borne military operations for swifter operations against Indian Army limited by under-developed defence infra-structure and limited mobility in any counter-offensive operations.

China is also likely to increase the integral firepower of its forces deployed in Tibet. India’s lack of matching firepower with the Indian Artillery being deprived of modernised inductions for the last thirty years due to political leadership and its inefficient Ministry of Defence civilian bureaucracy will seriously handicap Indian Army military operations on the Tibetan borders.

Indian Air Force combat operations in the Tibet Theatre are seriously blunted with the deficiency of more than 126 Fighter Aircraft in its inventory hanging fire for the last ten years or more again due to political indecision and processing paralysis by the Ministry of Defence bureaucracy. This glaring void would seriously impair India’s air defence on its Tibetan borders and deprive the Indian Army of critically needed air support and more so when the Indian Artillery is burdened with outdated weapon systems.

In terms of China’s significant focus on expansion of its maritime sea power, India should awaken to the implications that would ensue as China’s maritime power receives sustained inputs for its expansion with budgetary increases. The Indian Ocean is in danger of no longer continuing as the Indian Ocean. The Chinese Navy has already established an Indian Ocean presence as far as the Gulf of Aden on the pretext of joining the international effort to combat piracy.

India’s business as usual in terms of coping with China’s growing intrusive strategies in the Indian Ocean is also likely to effect India’s Look East Policy implementation. India’s Look East Policy effective implementation would require a strong naval posture besides a strong political will.
One wonders also whether substantial financial resources have been allocated by the Government for the effective land, sea and air defences of its garrison deployments on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Concluding, one would like to make the following assertions in relation to China’s sustained increases in its defence spending and its implications for India:

- China continues and will continue as India’s “Military Threat Number One”.
- China’s sustained increases in its defence spending reinforce India’s “Military Threat Number One”.
- Indian political leadership’s lack of political will to measure up to China’s threatening military profile is contributing to the widening of China-India military power differentials.
- Measuring up to facing The China Threat squarely dictates imperatives for India for complete re-structuring of India’s national security apparatus, its Ministry of Defence and a re-casting of India’s civil-military relations template.

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