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Asia's Military Spending Will Match U.S. Spending by 2020

China, and countries fearing China, are raising defense spending.

By Kyle Mizokami
Jun 1, 2016



The People's Republic of China has been increasing defense spending about 10 percent annually for more than two decades. Although dramatic, for most of the 90s and aughts, it still left the impression that China was militarily weak: In 1989, it spent only ten times more on its military than New Zealand and hadn't been involved in a shooting war for decades

All of that changed after 2010, when China took an assertive, even aggressive stance against Japanese territorial claims in the East China Sea, including the establishment of an Air Defense Intercept Zone over the sea. Since then, China has gone on to claim approximately 90 percent of the South China Sea, alarming its neighbors.



New FA-50 fighters of the Philippine Air Force, purchased in response to Chinese activity in the South China Sea.

This newly assertive behavior has spooked the rest of Asia, and as a result defense spending started to creep upward. According to Bloomberg, military spending globally is up one percent, but spending in Asia and Oceania is up five percent. Almost every country in Asia—Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and others—are all raising spending. If current trends hold, all of Asia will be spending \$533 billion by the year 2020.

What impact will this have for the United States? The Asia-Pacific region is actually a very friendly towards the U.S., with most countries having cordial relationships—and some, like South Korea and Japan have outright military alliances. The only real possible threat to U.S. superiority in the region is China, which will account for just over half of the \$533 billion total in 2020. The rest of that spending will be by pro-U.S. countries—or countries like Vietnam with goals that align with those of Washington.



French President Francois Hollande with the winning entry in Australia's submarine buy. The country will double the size of its submarine fleet by 2030.

Projects show that by 2020, \$320 billion will be spent on defense in the China camp (which consists of China, and maybe Pakistan) and more than \$800 billion will be spent in the "everyone but China" camp. In other words, while China's continuous military spending may look ominous, the country still continues to be outspent by everyone else with a stake in the region by a considerable margin.

The good news? A slowdown in this new arms race is in sight. For the first time in recent memory, China's defense spending is dropping under 10 percent—to 6.9 percent—as the country's economy cools. Meanwhile, a graying Chinese population means Beijing will soon have to spend more to take care of its people. While other countries will continue to spend to catch up, they'll now do so more quickly—and with less money.