

# China: Modernizing the World's Biggest Army

Saturday 24 January 2009, by [BEZLOVA Antoaneta](#) (Date first published: 23 January 2009).

BEIJING — The army parade to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of modern China's founding this fall—a rare chance for China to flaunt its military muscle—will showcase not only the country's newest weaponry but the modernization of its military too.

China's army is no longer content with military recruits drawn from the urban unemployed and the low-skilled peasant boys. Since last autumn the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been offering competitive grants to attract graduates from colleges and vocational schools, aiming to raise the army's profile and enhance its skills.

China's 2.3 million-strong army is the biggest as far as numbers go. It is followed by the United States with 1.38 million troops, India with 1.3 million and Russia's 1.24 million. Technological capability is another matter.

The realization that China needs to modernize its army was brought home forcefully last May. When a devastating 7.9-magnitude earthquake hit the province of Sichuan, killing nearly 80,000 people, Chinese soldiers deployed to conduct rescue and relief operations found themselves challenged by tasks requiring the use of life-detection devices and satellite navigation.

*"New requirements of the times demand that soldiers are of high caliber, can react swiftly and possess strong capabilities to handle new equipment,"* an article written by the head of the department of the People's Armed Forces of the quake-stricken city Dujiangyan and published in the PLA Daily said in December.

*"Low targets previously set for military recruitment have restricted the combat-readiness of the PLA,"* it added.

The army's new recruitment policies offer college students grants of 10,000 yuan (1,470 US dollars) before enrolling and an equal amount after serving two years in the military with a chance to resume their university studies. Wealthy provinces like Guangdong in the south—China's manufacturing and export hub, are offering even more—between 70,000 and 80,000 yuan (11,000 dollars) in one-off payment to university students who join the army.

The policies have attracted a wave of new recruits. The PLA Daily says that more than 10,000 college students joined the army in 2008, *"much higher than the figure for the previous year,"* without providing a number.

China has been steadily increasing spending on its military, citing its overall backwardness in comparison to developed nations and a rise of internal and external security threats.

In 2008 China's official military budget was 61 billion dollars, up nearly 18 percent over the previous year. By comparison, the Pentagon's budget for fiscal 2009 is 515 billion dollars, with additional spending budgeted for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*“China is faced with the superiority of developed countries economically, scientifically and technologically, as well as militarily,”* a newly-issued national defense paper said this week. *“It also faces strategic maneuvers and containment from the outside while having to face disruption and sabotage by separatist and hostile forces from the inside.”*

Figures for China’s military spending in 2009 are still to be made public but PLA officers say more needs to be done to usher Chinese troops into the high-tech era.

*“Our military’s general levels of armaments have made big strides,”* Fan Jianjun of the PLA armaments department said at a press conference to launch the defense paper this week. *“But there is still quite a large gap with the levels of the world’s developed countries, and we still cannot fully adjust to the needs of protecting national security and unity and better fulfilling out international duty,”* he added.

The primary mission of the People’s Liberation Army remains stopping the self-ruled island of Taiwan from formally declaring independence, as well as preventing US forces from intervening in any ensuing war. Despite recent thaw in relations with its longtime rival Taiwan, Beijing says threats from separatist forces in Tibet and Muslim-populated Xinjiang that endanger China’s security and unity have risen.

*“On these matters, we will not compromise,”* defense ministry chief spokesman Hu Changming said at the press conference.

New international developments have also demanded the expansion of Beijing’s seafaring clout. Last month, two Chinese destroyers and a supply vessel joined the global armada patrolling the waters off Somalia’s coast where Chinese ships had suffered seven attacks by pirates.

In a rare display of openness the Chinese military has also said it is “seriously considering” adding an aircraft carrier to its fleet to ensure the country’s maritime security and its commercial interests.

*“The aircraft carrier is a symbol of a country’s overall national strength, as well as the competitiveness of the country’s naval force,”* defence military spokesman Col. Huang Xueping told the media in December.

The United States and Japan have taken aim at China’s increased military spending, accusing Beijing of being murky about the motives for its accelerated army modernization. Some experts estimate China’s true defense spending could be triple the officially announced figure.

But China contends its military budget is for defensive purposes, saying Washington and Tokyo have qualms about the rise of another global sea power.

For a country, which strives to reassure its neighbors about the peaceful intentions of its global ascendance, the celebrations for modern China’s founding provide the ideal legitimate platform to showcase its expanding military strength.

The parade October 1—the first such display in ten years—will include the navy which dispatched warships to join the global anti-piracy campaign in the Gulf of Aden, and the Second Artillery Force, which controls China’s nuclear missiles.

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