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#### MILITARY BUILD-UP IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION: TRENDS, RISKS AND RESPONSES

by

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## **The Military Buildup in the Asian-Pacific Region**

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I'd like to deliver my viewpoints from four respects on military buildup in the Asian-Pacific region.

### **First, general information of military buildup in the Asian-Pacific region**

In recent years, military buildup in the Asian-Pacific region has been intensified along with sustained development of the region's economy. Major countries in the region are scrambling to increase military input and seek advanced weapons and equipments, which has resulted in some kind of arms competition.

In Northeast Asia, North Korea continues to maintain a strong position on the nuclear issue and places the task of strengthening military force on the top of the agenda. South Korea is making great efforts to promote "blue water navy" plan and continuing to improve striking power of the land and air forces, in purpose to retain military superiority over North Korea and safeguard its maritime rights and interests. In the year 2009, South Korea's military expenditure is estimated at 29 billion dollars, growing 8.8% compared to last year. Japan as a country with the most modern military force in East Asia, is still pushing forward hard its military modernization with the emphasis being put on anti-ballistic missile system and equipment of its naval and air forces. Japan's military expenditure is always on a high level over 40 billion dollars and reaches 44.4 billion dollars in the year 2009, growing 5% compared to last year. Russia has also paid more attention to the Far East region when reviving its status as a traditional global military power.

In Southeast Asia, many countries are actively acquiring advanced weapons and equipments to enhance their military deterrence. In the year 2008, most countries in Southeast Asia increased military expenditure greatly: growth rate of Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia are all above 10%, some countries even above 20%. Quite recently, it was widely reported that Vietnam was planning to purchase from Russia six Kilo-class submarines and 12 more Su-30MK2 fighters at a total cost of 2.3 billion dollars. This would greatly enhance its combat capability at sea and in air, and strengthen further its position as the No.1 military power in the Southeast Asia region. Singapore's military expenditure is over 30% of the total sum of Southeast Asia's military expenditure, making its military modernization outstanding in the region.

In South Asia, there has been fierce military confrontation and arms race between India and Pakistan for long. In recent years, India has accelerated the pace to build itself into a military power in South ~~Asia~~ Asia and Indian Ocean region in an all-round way as its economic power increased rapidly. In the year 2008 to 2009 India's military expenditure is estimated at 26.4 billion dollars, growing 10% compared to the previous year. Advanced weapons and equipments which India has been developing and acquiring vary from main battle tanks, aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines to multi-role fighter jets, cruise missiles and so on. India pays special attention to forging a blue water navy and "tri-unity" nuclear striking force consisting of land-based missile, nuclear submarine and combat aircraft and has made remarkable progress.

Of course, China cannot be ignored when we discuss military buildup in Asian-Pacific region. As a major power in the region, China's achievement in its military modernization is undoubtedly a highlight of the arms-building in the region. About China, I will talk more in the

following paragraphs.

**Second, the role the US plays in the arms-building of the Asian-Pacific region**

The US, the only superpower in the world, holds an important position and plays a significant role in the military strength frame of the Asian-Pacific region. As the status of the Asian-Pacific region keeps rising in Washington's global strategy, the US attaches more importance to its military presence in this area. On one hand, the US strengthens its military alliance with Japan, South Korea, and Australia and sells a large number of advanced weapons to its Asian allies, which upgrades the arms-building in the region both in size and quality. On the other hand, the US is making efforts to adjust the military deployment in the Asian-Pacific region, highlighting Guam Island as the core base, and deploying a great variety of state-of-the-art weaponry in the area, so as to further perfect and reinforce its frontline military deployment in the West Pacific region. Just as US official documents have signaled, what the US is doing not only aims at improving its ability to respond quickly to regional hotspots, international terrorism and other security threats in the West Pacific region, but also is in consideration of guarding against the potential challenges from China or Russia, and ensuring its strategic supremacy in the region. By all these acts, the US makes itself one of the major factors that lead and push the arms-building of the Asian-Pacific region.

**Third, the modernization of Chinese military forces**

China, with its rapid economic development and national strength enhancement, has also increased the expense of national defense and made great progress in the army's modernization. Since 1998, defense

spending grew by about 15% per year (\$70.2 billion in 2009, grew by 14.9% compared with the year 2008). Weapons and equipments of the PLA have been markedly improved, while logistical support ability has been enhanced largely, and military training becomes more scientific. The PLA Navy started deploying warships to the waters off Somalia coast to take part in international anti-piracy operations at the end of last year, and celebrated the 60th anniversary of its founding through holding a major military parade in the Yellow Sea this April, both of which noticeably display the achievements scored by the Chinese military forces, especially the navy, in their modernization drive. The PLA is vigorously promoting the military reform with Chinese characteristics and striving to enhance the capability of winning local wars under conditions of information technology and implementing non-war military operations as well. The Chinese government and people are determined to build a modern army that can effectively defend our national sovereignty, security, territorial integrity and protect the interests of the national development and the people, and to build a modern army which matches the China's economic strength, international status and responsibilities, as well as closely follows the trend of the world's new military changes. I believe that building such an army is not only a necessity for the development of China, but also a century-long expectation for the Chinese people who had been repeatedly bullied by foreign powers in history.

China is a big country in the Asia-Pacific region, so it is no wonder that the build-up of its military force will be of concern to the US and countries in the region, or even raise apprehensions from some people. However, it is groundless to describe the build-up as a threat to the region or an action against a particular country. This is because:

1. China firmly takes the road of peaceful development, emphasizing

the pursuit of a defensive national defense policy, advocating the settlement of international disputes through peaceful means, opposing the use of military force to threaten or infringe on other people. The Chinese government has repeatedly made it clear that China's development of military force, no matter what level it achieves in the future, is totally for self-defense, i.e. to deter and prevent the infringement of China's territory, sovereignty and legitimate rights and interests by other countries, so as to create a stable, peaceful international environment for the economic development of China. In essence, China's military force has always been a military strength for self-defense, a safeguard for regional peace and stability. The purpose of China's development of military force has always been firm and transparent.

2. China's military spending is moderate, limited, and goes with economic development. China does not possess the willingness and resources to engage in arms race with other countries. With its vast territory and a large population, China needs to maintain a military force of 2.3 million troops. Therefore, the military personnel's living costs and the fees for maintaining such an army is very high, while the expenditure on the construction of weapons and equipments is less than one-third of the military spending. Furthermore, China's per-service-person-share of military spending is far less than those of developed countries like the US and Japan.

3. China's military modernization starts from a very low base, which decides that it is a long process. After over ten years' effort, Chinese military forces have not yet achieved the full mechanization. There is still a long way to go for the Chinese military forces to become truly modernized. On the whole, the modernization level of Chinese military forces is still significantly lagging behind that of some neighboring countries like Russia, Japan and South Korea, let alone challenges US

military superiority in the western Pacific—of course, China has no intention to do so.

In short, the defensive nature of China's defense policy and the status-quo of China's army building tell people that the development of China's military strength is by no means against a particular country, does not and will never pose any threat to others. However, I would like to point out that people should no longer be used to seeing a Chinese army whose weaponry and equipment always stay backward, or taking it as a precondition for maintaining the military balance in the Asia-Pacific region, nor should they view Chinese army's efforts to change this backwardness as a threat. It is quite normal that China, as a big country with rapid economic development and a permanent member of the Security Council, will by no means tolerate its military backwardness for long. The process of China's full modernization logically includes military modernization, which does not go against China's peaceful development goal.

#### **IV. Trend of Arms Building in the Asia-Pacific Region**

It is a historical necessity that countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including China, enhance their arms building. There is a variety of factors behind it. The rise of each country's economic strength has enabled them to increase military input while the stretch of their economic interests has raised new requests for military strength to safeguard these interests. Faced with unstable regional hotspots, increasing nontraditional security threats posed by national separatists, religious extremists and terrorists, and potential external interference, all countries concerned have to enhance their military capability to cope with emergent events and multiple threats in order to maintain their own security and stability. As the territorial and maritime disputes among regional countries remain

serious, many countries intend to support their claims and safeguard their interests with necessary military strength. Some countries in the region have ambitions to promote their international status and dominate the regional affairs by boosting their military strength. Additionally, the rapid development of global military technology objectively stimulates the desire of major countries in the region to have their military further modernized. Although the influence of the global financial crisis may slow down the steps of regional arms building, the trend of Asia-Pacific countries competing in arms building would continue as long as the above factors exist.

But it should be noted that the intensity of arms building in the Asia-Pacific region so far still has its limitations, the arms competition remains controllable. In the foreseeable future, this competition is unlikely to produce serious impact on the stability of the region. None of the regional powers' military buildup would break the established regional military balance in a short period. Almost all countries in the region have set the task to develop economy as their first priority. And regional and sub-regional economic and security co-operations keep stepping forward. It has become the common policy orientation of the regional countries to settle disputes and hotspot issues peacefully through dialogue. Generally speaking, the regional security situation remains stable.

But there is no doubt that arms competition in the region would cause suspicion and precaution mentality among countries, which would bring about some complexity in the regional situation. So it is necessary for countries in the region to strengthen all kinds of military exchange and cooperation, promote mutual understanding and trust and take steps towards creating a persistent and effective multilateral cooperation mechanism on regional security so as to minimize the negative influence



caused by arms competition in the region. Each country should pay considerable attention to boosting the security and stability of the entire region while developing their own military strength and safeguarding their rights and interests. In my opinion, it is the responsibility and in common interests of all countries in the region. China will make its own efforts for it.