The US and China's Military Budget

On September 3, celebrations took place in Beijing to mark the 70th anniversary of Victory of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War. The significance of the event for the Chinese should not be underestimated, owing to which Beijing attached special importance to its preparation for the events and made sure that major global leaders would be present. Among the 23 heads of state who took part in the celebrations on September 3, which included a military parade, US president B. Obama was absent.

The US leader's reluctance to pay tribute to China and the Chinese people should not be seen as accidental or unexpected and is consistent with Washington's ambivalent and ambiguous policy towards Beijing. Despite the long-standing calls from the highest representatives of the USA for Beijing to develop trustworthy relations and a partnership, and continued US assurances of their desire to build "a new type of relationship between great powers" with China, Washington continues to demonstrate an unwillingness to respect "fundamental" Chinese interests, and build relations on an equal basis without constantly regulating various aspects of the Chinese leadership's international and domestic activities.

China often draws attention to the US policy of "double standards", which is manifested in fundamentally different requirements, criteria and standards of conduct imposed on China by Washington on the one hand, and those imposed on the US and its allies or close partners, on the other. China is often the object of harsh criticism from Washington for actions that in other circumstances, if committed by the United States or its allies instead of China, would not be viewed in a negative light and would be deemed fully justified in terms of fulfilling state national interests.

One of the areas where Washington's double standards towards China can be traced most clearly, is to China developing its military capabilities. Beijing is systematically subjected to severe criticism of the increase in their military spending, the lack of transparency in military modernization, the strengthening of their military capabilities, which according to Washington stimulates the arms race in East Asia and, as a consequence, the growth of regional instability.

Primarily, Washington focuses on to the long-term, steady growth of China's defense budget. From 2004 to 2013, the annual increase in China's official defense budget averaged 9.4%. China currently ranks second in the world in defense spending, coming second only to the United States, but significantly exceeding its neighbors. What's more, gross figures of China's military spending show that it increased faster than that of the other Asian countries: from 2010 to 2014 China's share in the overall volume of military spending in Asia grew from 28% to 38%.

Citing the high increase rate in the defense budget and an increase in the absolute figures of defense spending when evaluating Chinese defense spending, as a rule, Washington ignores other important indicators such as the share of defense spending as part of GDP and per capita defense spending. After all, these figures give a completely different picture of China's military spending. Thus, the share of defense spending as part China's GDP is very modest: in 2013 it was only 2%, which is lower than that of the majority of the top ten military spending countries: USA (3.8%), Russia (4.1%), Saudi Arabia (9.3%), France (2.2%), the UK (2.3%), India (2.5%) and South Korea (2.8%).
The share of defense spending as part of China's GDP has remained almost unchanged since the start of the 21st Century. From 2000 to 2013, it fluctuated between 1.9 and 2.2%. This indicates that the growth of China's defense spending is not due to increasing the share of defense expenditure as part of GDP, but down to the growth in GDP and China's maintaining a consistent percentage of allocations for military needs.

China's defense spending looks even more modest, if you evaluate the per capita spending. Thus, China's defense spending per capita is 1/22 of the equivalent US figures, 1/9 of that of the UK and 1/5 of Japan. In the world ranking of defense spending per capita, China only ranks 76th, while the United States is in fifth place.

While questioning China's right to increase its defense budget, Washington has a huge defense budget, which reaches an amount equivalent to the total figure of the defense budgets of the remaining nine countries of the top ten military spending countries combined (including China). China's defense budget in 2015 is less than one third of the USA's projected defense budget. Meanwhile, from 2003 to 2013 China's share of defense spending as part of GDP ranged from 2.0 to 2.2%, and the US share fluctuated in the range of 3.6 to 4.7%. US defense spending continues to remain at a high level, reaching, in real terms, its previous historical peak of the late 1980s.

Confident in their indisputable right to have the largest defense budget and most powerful army in the world, Washington consistently draws the world's attention to China's increasing defense budget, to China's strengthening of its various aspects of its military capabilities, and questions the need for such growth and its peaceful intentions. The natural need to strengthen the defense capabilities of a rapidly developing power (of which China is one) is often dressed up by Washington as evidence of a growing "Chinese threat". Meanwhile, the United States posits the strengthening of its military potential, which has long been far superior to the military capabilities of any other great power, as justifiable and reasonable measures taken by the world's leading power that bears the heavy burden of responsibility for ensuring global and regional security.

Moreover, while directing a barrage of criticism at Beijing in connection with it strengthening its armed forces, Washington ignores the fact that certain US allies and partners in Asia are increasing their defense spending and in some cases even assists them in strengthening their military capabilities. From 2009 to 2013, the most rapidly growing defense budget in East Asia was not only China's (though only China lends itself to Washington's condemnation), but also Indonesia's (which increased by 93% from 2009, while China's grew by only 33%), the Philippines' (which increased by 27%) and Vietnam's (24%).

Washington's clear double standards in this regard are manifested in relation to countries who participate in territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas: China is categorically condemned for increasing its defense budget, but the increased military spending by other participants in territorial disputes is deemed justifiable measures to improve their defense capabilities in the face of the "Chinese threat."

For example, since 2009 there has been a steady increase in military spending and a boost to the modernization of the military in the Philippines, which is one of five US allies in the region. Defense spending has increased from $2billion in 2009 to $3.5billion in 2013. According to the 5-year program of modernization of the armed forces, approved by President of the Philippines B. Aquino in 2013, Manila plans to spend $1.73billion from 2013 to 2017 on the purchase of warships, helicopters and other types of weapons to strengthen its defense capability. The trend of increasing defense spending can be traced to another US ally - Japan. In 2013, there was an increase in the Japanese defense budget for the first time in the previous 11 years: by $1.15billion or 0.8%. Japan's defense budget increased by 2.8% in 2014 on the 2013 level, and in 2015 it will be increased by a further 2%, to $42billion.

Impressive rates of increase in defense spending are typical for Vietnam, with whom Washington seeks to develop military and political cooperation. In the ten year span from 2003 to 2013, Vietnam's military spending increased 4 times from $842million to $3.4billion. In order to assist Vietnam in reinforcing its maritime security, Washington approved granting Hanoi aid worth $18million in 2013, which provides for, among other things, the delivery of five modern patrol boats on an annual basis over the next five years.

While it criticizes Beijing for accumulating their military power and for expanding the scope of projecting its military power in East Asia, of which China is an integral part, Washington has been building up its military and political presence in the region. However, from a geographical point of view, the United States does not belong in East Asia. In its day, Washington proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine, which gave the US exclusive rights within the Western Hemisphere and considered any attempts by foreign nations to exert their influence there as acts of aggression against the US, and now does not want to acknowledge China's exclusive rights within East Asia and rejects modern China's expanding influence in the region, which logic would dictate should be attributed to China's natural sphere of influence.
It is noteworthy that while Beijing holds back from developing military contacts and deepening strategic cooperation with the countries of Latin America even now, when the Monroe Doctrine is no longer a part of the US foreign policy strategy, in order to avoid dissatisfaction from Washington, the USA, on the other hand, clearly demonstrates to China its commitment to maintain its status as a regional leader in Eastern Asia, and plays an active role in the establishment of military-political cooperation and strengthening allied relations with the countries of the region.

The logic of Washington's conduct in relation to China is that the United States reserves the right to have full freedom of action in the implementation of its national interests, while limiting Beijing's freedom of action with a strict framework of regulation within which Washington allows China to operate. Going beyond these limits is treated as a manifestation of China's "assertiveness" or even its "aggressiveness", confirming the "China threat" theory, as well as China's reluctance to play a role of a responsible power in the international arena.

It is of fundamental importance that the fact that these double standards are not a reflection of specific, individual cases of inadequate assessment of the various aspects of the Chinese leadership's domestic and foreign policy, but a manifestation of the USA's generally cautious approach to China as an inexorably growing rival power, alien to Washington in its political and economic model, ideology and values.

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