

China raises defence budget by 7.2% amid regional tensions

Drops 'Peaceful Reunification' Reference To Taiwan In Report

Beijing: China on Tuesday announced a 7.2% increase in its defence budget, which is already the world's second-highest behind the US at 1.6 trillion yuan (\$222 billion), roughly mirroring last year's rise. The US leads in defence spending, with the department of defence's proposed budget for fiscal year 2024 totaling \$842 billion, roughly a 5% increase when adjusted for inflation.

China's tensions with the US, Taiwan, Japan and neighbours with competing claims to the crucial South China Sea are seen as furthering growth in high-tech military technologies from stealth fighters to aircraft carriers and a growing arsenal of nuclear weapons.

China also officially adopted tougher language against Taiwan as it released the budget figures, dropping the mention of "peaceful reunification" in a govt report delivered by Premier Li Qiang at the opening of the National People's Congress. Tensions have risen sharply in recent years over Taiwan, the democratically ruled island China claims as its own.

China has reiterated a call for "reunification" with Taiwan, but added emphasis it wants to "be firm" in doing so and dropped the descriptor "peaceful", which had been used in previous reports. Although it is not the first time China omitted the word "peaceful", the change in language is closely watched as a possible sign of more assertive stance towards Taiwan.

The official budget figure is considered only a fraction of spending by the People's Liberation Army, the military wing of the ruling Communist Party, once spending on research and development and foreign weapons purchases are considered. "We will provide stronger financial guarantees for efforts to modernise our national defence and the armed for-



A videograb shows a Chinese Coast Guard ship (R) deploying water cannon at the Philippine military-chartered civilian boat Unaiyah May 4 during its supply mission near Second Thomas Shoal in the disputed South China Sea

Manila: Vessels damaged by China Coast Guard, crew hurt

Manila: The Philippines said Tuesday that China Coast Guard vessels caused two collisions with Philippine boats and water cannoned one of them, leaving four crew injured during a resupply mission in South China Sea.

Manila summoned a Chinese representative over the incidents, which happened in waters around Second Thomas Shoal in Spratly Islands where the countries have contesting maritime claims.

The China Coast Guard said it "took control measures" against Philippine ships' "illegal intrusion" in waters around the shoal.

BRP Sindangan, along with a sister ship, had been deployed to support the military chartered Unaiyah May 4 and

ces on all fronts and consolidate and enhance integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities," Premier Li said.

China's defence budget has more than doubled since 2015, even as the country's economic growth rate has slowed considerably. However, the country's continuing ambition is to challenge the US and its allies

Unaiyah May 1 boats carrying replacement soldiers and supplies to Second Thomas Shoal, where Filipino troops are stationed on a grounded Philippine navy vessel, BRP Sierra Madre.

Four crew on board Unaiyah May 4 were injured when two China Coast Guard ships simultaneously fired water cannon at it, shattering the windshield, the National Task Force for the West Philippine Sea said. It said a China Coast Guard vessel also caused a "minor collision" with Unaiyah May 4, which turned back to shore without delivering its cargo. Unaiyah May 1 was able to unload its provisions, which the troops on the rusty BRP Sierra Madre depend on for their survival. AFP

in Asia including Japan, South Korea, the Philippines and Australia over territorial claims, regional leadership and a bigger say in world affairs.

Since Xi Jinping became president more than a decade ago, the defence budget has ballooned to 1.67 trillion yuan (\$230 billion) this year from 720 billion yuan in 2013. The per-

China sets growth target of 5%, but says will be tough

Beijing: China aims to achieve 5% economic growth this year, Premier Li Qiang said Tuesday, acknowledging that it will be a challenging goal in difficult times. In his address to the National People's Congress, Li outlined plans to boost spending on developing advanced technology, fortifying China's military and supporting the economy, among other goals. But there was no big package of stimulus to boost markets and reassure investors.

Li said govt would continue with a "pro-active fiscal policy and prudent monetary policy," suggesting no major change in the leadership's approach to the economy. He unveiled a plan to boost growth by issuing long-term bonds over several years, starting with 1 trillion yuan (about \$139 billion) this year. The money would be spent to implement "major national strategies" and fortify security "in key areas," he said.

"Achieving this year's targets will not be easy," Li said, referring to economic growth and other goals including raising incomes, creating 12 million jobs and making the economy more energy efficient in pursuit of climate goals. But he reiterated calls for greater confidence despite challenges, noting the country's vast market of 1.4 billion people, its advanced manufacturing capacity and massive workforce. AP

centage rise in military spending has consistently outpaced the annual domestic economic growth target during his time in office. The target for 2024 is 5%, similar to last year's goal.

Based on International Institute for Strategic Studies data, this year's budget marks 30th consecutive year of Chinese defence spending increases. AGENCIES

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China boosts def budget 7% to \$230bn, more than thrice India's outlay

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New Delhi: China Tuesday hiked its annual defence budget by 7.2% to cross \$230 billion despite a distinct slowdown in its economic growth, which is more than three times India's military expenditure and comes amid Beijing's fresh refusal to de-

► **China sets growth target of 5% but says will be tough, P28**

escalate heightened tensions along the 3,488-km Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The main driver behind China's rapid modernisation of its two-million-strong armed forces is to deter the US — which had a \$877 billion defence budget last year — from interfering in its neighbourhood, especially in Taiwan which it considers a breakaway pro-

Beijing report drops mention of 'peaceful Taiwan reunification'

China officially adopted tougher language against Taiwan as it released budget figures, dropping the mention of 'peaceful reunification' in a govt report delivered by Premier Li Qiang at the opening of the National People's Congress on Tuesday. Tensions have risen sharply in recent years over Taiwan as regional military deployments rise. **P 28**

vince. India, however, has huge reasons to be concerned. China's actual military expenditure is much more than its declared defence budget.

► **Related report, P 21**

'El Nino weakening, but India will be hit'

'Above Normal' Temp Likely: WMO

Vishwa Mohan | TNN

New Delhi: The 2023-24 El Nino has peaked as "one of the five strongest on record", and though it is now gradually weakening, this weather phenomenon will continue to impact global climate in the coming months, leading to predicted "above normal" temperatures areas between March and May over almost all land, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) said on Tuesday.

In India, the El Nino — climate pattern associated with warming of the ocean surface in central and eastern tropical Pacific Ocean — impacted the monsoon season that ended up having 'below normal' rainfall last year.

Though its gradual weakening and then turning to a predicted neutral phase later in 2024 may be good news for monsoon this year, it would be premature to say anything on the fate of the seasonal rainfall as it also depends on other climatic phenomena.

"Every month since June 2023

Reuters



SIMMERING BEFORE SUMMER

has set a new monthly temperature record, and 2023 was by far the warmest year on record. El Nino has contributed to these record temperatures, but heat-trapping greenhouse gases (GHG) are unequivocally the main culprit," said WMO secretary-general Celeste Saulo.

El Nino (means Little Boy in Spanish) occurs on average every two to seven years, and typically lasts nine to 12 months. It influences weather and storm patterns in different parts of the world. The current El Nino event, which developed in June 2023 and peaked in Dec, was at its strongest between Nov and Jan.

"El Nino typically has the greatest impact on the global climate in the second year of its development — in this instance 2024," said WMO.

India ensuring no one exercises hegemony in Indian Ocean: Rajnath's veiled dig at China

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Panaji: In a veiled reference to China's expansionist policy, defence minister Rajnath Singh on Tuesday said India would not tolerate hegemony or coercion in Indian Ocean Region (IOR), and would stand with allies when their sovereignty is threatened.

Singh, who was in Goa to inaugurate new administrative and training building of Naval War College at Verem, and aircraft carrier piers at Karwar naval base, emphasised that if India was stronger, it would not only allow neighbouring nations to economically grow, but would also strengthen democracy and rule of law in the region.

"India is ensuring that all neighbouring countries and maritime stakeholders of In-



Rajnath Singh at the inauguration of a new wing of Naval War College in Goa's Verem on Tuesday

dian Ocean are helped in protecting their autonomy and sovereignty," he said, adding that Navy was operationally ready to fulfil its responsibility in IOR by providing full assistance to littoral countries.

The defence minister also spoke about Navy playing a role in safeguarding the country's interests in the Indo-Pacific region. "Our Navy en-

sures that no country, with its overwhelming economic and military power, can suppress our friendly countries or crush their sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific region. The readiness with which Navy stands with our allies provides substantive strength to India's global values," he said.

Singh later also witnessed demonstration of "twin aircraft carrier operations" by new indigenous INS Vikrant and older, Russian-origin INS Vikramaditya, on western seaboard, while addressing naval commanders' conference.

Highlighting the importance of focusing on maritime threats, Singh said due to past conflicts with Pakistan and China in north, efforts were made to strengthen land borders, because of which mari-

time domain did not get priority. "In view of increased movement of our adversaries in IOR and commercial importance of the region, it is necessary to re-assess our threat perception and accordingly re-balance our military resources and strategic attention," Singh said.

Singh said most of the global trade passed through the sea route, with the Indo-Pacific region emerging as its hub. Due to increasing goods trade, threats such as piracy, trafficking and terrorism needed to be neutralised so that India's trade and interests were not compromised. He cited the damage to four undersea fibre optic cables, which carry approximately 97% of all internet traffic, as yet another reason for Navy to remain ever vigilant.