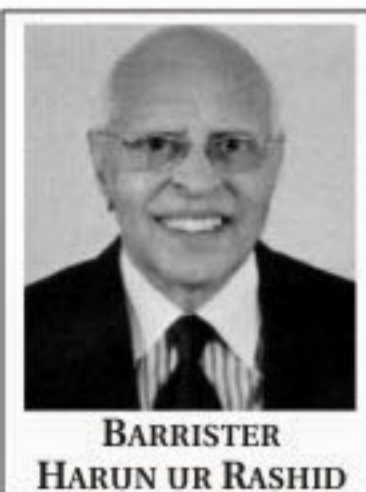


BOTTOM LINE

Chinese military budget and South Asia



CHINA'S military budget will rise 12.7% in 2011 to about \$91.5 billion, a parliamentary spokesman said on March 4,

resuming a long string of double-digit annual increases after an unexpected slowdown in 2010. Li Zhaoxing, the spokesman, justified the increase, saying that the military was a defensive force in China and "will not pose a threat to any country."

Mr. Li announced the increase as China's 3000-delegate National People's Congress opened its annual session on March 5. He said that the extra money would be spent on new weaponry and on pay increases. The world's largest army, with 2.3 million soldiers (US army has 1.6 million), and China's navy and air force have been rapidly modernising their arsenals. The Pentagon says that the Chinese navy could deploy its first aircraft carrier this year.

Since 1989, the budget has risen by an average of 12.9% per year, according to Global Security Organisation, a private institution that maintains an online database of military-related information. However, many Western analysts and the Pentagon say that China's actual military spending is probably considerably higher than the reported amount.

China's publicly reported military spending rose 7.5% in 2010, a modest increase that some analysts said might reflect a diversion of money to deal with the global economic crisis.

The air force conducted its first flight test of a stealth fighter jet, the J-20, in January this year when the

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was in Beijing, resuming top-level relations with Chinese military after a year-long estrangement because of the sale of weapons to Taiwan by the US.

China plans to resume double-digit growth of its official defence spending this year, a move likely to unsettle neighbours concerned by its rapid military modernisation and ever-more assertive attitude. Japan expressed concern at China's "very high" military spending. He said Beijing should be pushed to be more transparent on why such expenditure was needed and how the money would be spent. It highlighted worries about development of an aircraft carrier and stealth fighters.

"China's modernisation of its military and increased activity is, along with insufficient transparency, a matter of concern," Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary, Yukio Edano, said.

Other countries have also grown more nervous of China's rapid modernisation of its People's Liberation Army, the world's largest standing army, with 2.3million active soldiers. "They say their strategy is peaceful development, but their military modernisation, especially in the naval area, speaks another language," said one South-East Asian country.

Last year, Beijing started publicising a large number of military exercises, making much more visible the progress the military -- especially the navy -- has made in mastering more complex tasks and moving farther away from its coast.

South-East Asian countries sided with the US last year in calling on Beijing to try to defuse ten-

sion in the South China Sea, an area with vital sealanes in which China has territorial disputes with some of its neighbours.

Vietnam said on March 4 that it had protested to China this week over naval exercises in disputed

territory in the Spratly islands last week. The Philippines said it had protested to China over an incident in which two Chinese patrol boats threatened to ram a survey ship.

Some analysts say the Chinese military budget is very meagre compared with that of the United States. The US's military budget is

There will also be an impact on the rise of military budget of China on South Asia because India defines its security position against China's military strength while Pakistan assesses its security concern against India's military power.



AFP

strong as the US, the question is whether the US can meet its commitments to maintain a strong presence in the Asia-Pacific region.

There will also be an impact on the rise of military budget of China on South Asia because India defines its security position against China's military strength while

more than 110, according to the recent estimates of US intelligence.

Observers say that Pakistan has been infuriated by the nuclear deal between Washington and New Delhi in recent times, arguing that it has freed up India's homemade fuel to produce new weapons. As a result, Pakistan argues that it has

no choice but to bolster its own production.

Pakistan says what it has is a credible, minimum nuclear deterrent and people should not get unduly concerned about the stockpile of nuclear weapons.

Whatever the concerns, China does not spread its political ideology in Asia. Its policy of non-interference in domestic affairs has put China on a good standing with Asian countries.

China is not expansionist like other global powers who seek increased territorial control or influence. Beyond Taiwan and its current national boundaries, the history of modern China does not suggest a desire for territorial expansion.

China has cut out a bigger and benign influence over the Asia-Pacific region. The balance of power in the area is changing in the sense that within decades the US may likely lose its lone supremacy in the region.

Asian countries need to build deeper and more effective relationships with China. In the first instance, this needs to occur between governments by engaging China in multilateral and regional institutions, and at a bilateral level.

At the same time, there is an important role for business leaders, academics and other private sector organisations and individuals to contribute to constructive relationship through engagement with their counterparts in China.

Observers believe the leaders of US and China can forge a constructive and peaceful future, and will be able to overcome the challenges that could arise when two world powers seek to maximise their influence in a region.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Nuclear disaster in Japan refueling controversy

PETER CUSTERS

THE nuclear disaster which is unwinding in Japan has refueled debate in Europe over the risks associated with production of nuclear energy. Immediately after the disaster in the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear complex began, Western nuclear experts tried to pacify public worries. It was argued that the failure of the cooling systems in several of Fukushima's nuclear reactors could in no way be compared with the disaster that took place in Chernobyl.

The explosion and meltdown of one of Chernobyl's nuclear reactors

the wisdom of reliance on the nuclear sector has resumed all over (Western) Europe. Even before high levels of radioactivity were registered outside the Fukushima nuclear complex -- above the permitted maximum -- politicians both at national level and at the European level had already started drawing concrete consequences.

Dramatic reactions were registered in Germany, where an estimated 28% of electricity supply is dependent on nuclear energy, which has witnessed intense resis-

tion to prolong Germany's reliance on nuclear energy. Subsequently, the German government took a further step. It announced the immediate closure of all older nuclear plants, i.e. plants that had been constructed before 1980. By this time, opponents of nuclear energy had already held processions in scores of German cities. Given the speed with which Merkel staged her turnaround, it can be concluded that the disaster in Japan has foreclosed all possibilities of a nuclear renaissance in Germany.

However, Germany is not the only country where longstanding controversies over nuclear production have been revived. The same counts for instance for Switzerland, Germany's smaller neighbour. Reportedly, 39% of Switzerland's electricity supply is dependent on nuclear energy. On March 14, the Swiss minister for the environment, Doris Leuthard, announced that all procedures for permission to build three new nuclear plants stood suspended.

A fierce controversy has also erupted in France, a country which is most nuclear-dependent of all: nuclear energy provides as much as 79% of France's total electricity supply. After President Sarkozy came to power, the government initiated a roundtable with the country's leading environmental organisations, focusing on ways to better contribute to fighting climate change. The roundtable contributed towards the drafting of new legislative measures, such as introduction of a carbon tax. But it reportedly failed to address the nuclear issue.

Yet, according to France's leading daily Le Monde, the country's politicians have started crossing swords over France's overwhelming nuclear dependence. Thus, the French industry minister, Eric Besson, is being criticised for having stated on March 11 that the Japanese nuclear accident had "nothing in common with Chernobyl." The renowned

decided to abandon plans for construction of new nuclear plants. This happened in a period when the German Green Party participated in the country's government, alongside the more powerful Social Democratic Party (SPD). A section of Germany's business community, with remarkable frankness, had admitted that the question of final disposal of dangerous nuclear waste simply could not be resolved, and that continuance of

Merkel gave in last year to mounting pressure exerted by the nuclear lobby. But within days after the disaster in Japan she has been forced to completely change gear! First, on March 13 -- the day after the news broke regarding the problems with cooling systems in one of Fukushima's reactors -- thousands of demonstrators marched to demand the closure of one of Germany's older nuclear plants, Neckarwestheim 1.

Even before high levels of radioactivity were registered outside the Fukushima nuclear complex -- above the permitted maximum -- politicians both at national level and at the European level had already started drawing concrete consequences.



AFP

in 1986 admittedly engendered worldwide opposition against civilian nuclear production. But there was no question of a repeat. Instead, the experts argued, the Fukushima-Daiichi accidents could at most be compared with the 1979 accident on Three Miles Island in the US. The latter was a case of a partial meltdown, with largely localised consequences.

Yet, as events have rapidly unfolded in Japan, the debate over

tance against nuclear production for long. Thus, even as public protests in other parts of Western Europe largely died down in the 1990s, German activists continued staging blockades and other forms of civil disobedience. Repeatedly, large groups of activists chained themselves to railway lines, so as to obstruct the transportation of vessels containing nuclear waste.

Germany also was the first large European country which officially

any nuclear experiment was therefore irresponsible. During the rule of former chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (SPD), discussions among German politicians increasingly revolved around who should bear the expenditures for dismantlement of existing nuclear facilities. A major section of politicians argued that they should be borne by the owners of the nuclear plants themselves.

German Chancellor Angela

The demonstration was pre-planned, but in the wake of the disaster in Japan a hundred thousand people reportedly turned up instead of the expected 60 thousand. And Chancellor Merkel was quick to take due note. First, she rethought the decision which she had taken in September last, namely that the lifetime of all existing nuclear plants should be extended. She declared a moratorium and suspended her own deci-

European Green leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit immediately took him to task for repeating past errors, stating that similar attempts had been made after Chernobyl to play down the consequences of the disaster. Cohn-Bendit has demanded that France should hold a public referendum on staging a "nuclear exit."

Surely, it is too early to draw a balance sheet regarding the Japanese nuclear disaster, or about its consequences on the fate of nuclear production worldwide. Nevertheless, one thing can already be stated with confidence. In Europe, the attempts to stage a nuclear renaissance are facing a major setback. Whereas earlier the debate on nuclear energy had reached a stalemate in several European countries -- putting a brake on construction (or export) of new nuclear reactors -- serious pressure towards resumption of construction had been building up over the past years.

With hindsight, it may be argued that proponents of nuclear energy basically engaged in horse-trading. Arguing that the risks of a climate catastrophe needed to be pre-empted, they advised European governments that there was no other choice but to agree on expanding the generation of nuclear energy. Presumably, issues regarding nuclear safety had meanwhile been resolved and nuclear waste was a lesser evil than accumulation of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere.

Now, at a time when Japan is facing its worst ever nuclear accident in history -- an accident that makes all previous nuclear accidents in Japan look pale in comparison -- the circle has come full round. No longer can it be argued that the critics who insisted that the possibility of major nuclear accidents can never be excluded were wrong. The government of Angela Merkel, in any case, has made up its mind.

The writer is International Correspondent for The Daily Star.