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China's Military Power Nears "Parity" With the West, Report Says

Decades of double-digit defense increases pay off.

By Kyle Mizokami
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Chinese military power is reaching a state of "near-parity" with the West. That's the verdict of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank that tracks military spending and trends worldwide.

The 2017 IISS report on worldwide defense trends claims Chinese air power "'appears to be reaching near-parity with the West," adding that Chinese-made drones had been seen in Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. *According to Deutsches Welle*, IISS Director John Chapman says Western military dominance "can no longer be taken for granted".

During the 20th century, China was known as a middle-rank military power. Despite a population that would eventually exceed a billion people, China lacked the economy and technology to create a modern military. The country relied upon a combination of low-tech military forces and nuclear weapons for defense.

Over the last three decades, the meteoric rise of China's economy has lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty. It has also provided for massive defense budget increases since 1990, resulting in a more than tenfold increase in defense spending. A Western arms embargo imposed after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre of Chinese pro-democracy students forced China to undertake its own weapons development, often with the help of technology stolen from the West and countries such as Israel and Russia.

According to the IISS, China spends approximately \$145 billion on defense, although the true number is a closely held secret and almost certainly exceeds 200 billion. China's defense spending as a percentage of GDP is probably around 2 percent—the amount NATO recommends its members spends on their armed forces.

By comparison, the U.S. now spends \$604.5 billion on defense, and Russia spends just \$58.9 billion.

Despite all these advances, it's important to keep in mind there are many things China can't do well, or places where it suffers shortages. China has tried to develop a high-performance engine for its fifth-generation fighter jets, but so far has failed. It has just one aircraft carrier to the 11 carriers of the U.S. Navy, and it is seriously deficient in airborne early warning aircraft and tankers. The People's Liberation Army Air Force was for a time actually growing smaller, as the number of fighter and attack planes being retired was greater than the number of planes being purchased.