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FEATURE-U.S. lawmaker eyes China's military buildup

Richard Cowan

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WASHINGTON, Feb 5 - Ask Rep. John Murtha about the U.S. war in Iraq and the conversation eventually veers to China.

Five years into a war the 75-year-old ex-Marine actively opposes, Murtha worries Iraq is sapping the U.S. military at the exact time the United States should be adding muscle to answer Beijing's growing military and economic clout.

"We've got to be able to have a military that can deploy to stop China or Russia or any other country that challenges us," Murtha told Reuters in an interview. "We want to look ahead of just Iraq ... to be prepared to prevent a war."

Beijing's rapidly growing military spending, estimated at \$85 billion to \$125 billion last year, is still dwarfed by the United States, where a half trillion-dollars is shelled out for defense spending each year, not counting money for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But with U.S. military hardware frayed by the Iraq war, troops strained by long combat deployments and more and more high school dropouts and ex-convicts being recruited to fight, Murtha says "We are right now inadequately prepared to deploy and sustain another front -- period."

The Pennsylvania Democrat, who has overseen military spending for the past year since becoming chairman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee, is poised to try to shift Pentagon resources away from Iraq and rebuild a force that in the long-term could have to confront China.

So far, Murtha has failed on Iraq, unable to tie any of the \$460 billion spent on that war so far to troop withdrawals.

But he has managed to add nearly \$1 billion this year for the Pentagon to build more Navy vessels than requested by the Bush administration, claiming it will better position the U.S. military to take on future challenges.

In coming months, Murtha will have two chances to channel more money to rebuild long-term U.S. naval and air power: a military spending bill for the fiscal year that begins on Oct. 1 and an "emergency" measure to keep the Iraq and

Afghanistan wars running through this year.

"I'm going to recommend to the subcommittee 14 C-17s and a number of C-130s," Murtha said referring to military aircraft used to transport cargo and troops.

Some analysts say a U.S. buildup of heavy equipment is less a response to an emerging Chinese military threat and more to the need to replace aging post-Cold War equipment for hotspots, be they in the Persian Gulf, North Korea, China or elsewhere.

OIL AND CHINA'S THREAT

Murtha's views toward China were shaped early in his 34-year House career. In the early 1980s, he traveled with then-House Speaker Tip O'Neill to China to meet its leader. "Here's Tip O'Neill, 250 pounds; here's Deng Xiaoping, a little fellow," says a bemused Murtha, a hulking figure himself.

Murtha said he asked Deng what his priorities were. "He said military hegemony, economic reform and Taiwan," Murtha recalled, adding, "As we were leaving, I said, 'In that order?' He said, 'In that order.'"

While he acknowledges military challenges could come from many sources, Murtha worries most about China because of the Communist country's burgeoning need for oil coupled with Beijing's success in cultivating ties in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East to help quench its energy thirst.

"I want to be prepared in case there's a confrontation about energy," such as in the Malacca Straits, Murtha said. "We're not talking about tomorrow . . . We're not even talking about four or five years from now. I'm talking long term."

For many military planners, a Chinese attack on Taiwan or Japan is more likely than a war over oil.

"Taiwan . . . is pretty much the only one that is a plausible path to war," says Brookings Institution defense analyst Michael O'Hanlon.

"As their military gets better they might someday convince themselves they could really pull it off. They might be tempted to test the situation" and try to retake the breakaway island.

According to U.S. government statistics, China's military expenditures have been growing briskly, as it stockpiles submarines, aircraft and missiles.

Meanwhile, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office last year said the U.S. Navy needs to spend about \$21 billion annually on new ship construction over 30 years to meet its goal of a 313-ship fleet. That is far above the Pentagon's average spending between 2000 and 2005, and about \$6 billion more than Bush requested for this year.

Compounding the Pentagon's readiness problem, Murtha says the next U.S. president, who will take office in January 2009, will have to slow the rapid growth in military spending, in part due to a voter backlash against the Iraq war and in part because domestic needs have been ignored.

Murtha, who laments that his initial support for the U.S.-led attack on Iraq in 2003 was a "bad mistake on my part; my judgment was wrong," looks at China's military buildup and says he's worried it's not getting the attention it deserves.

"I've felt we had to be concerned about the direction China was going."