



China's parade: mixed messages

by Alice Ekman and Eva Pejsova

Last month, on 3 September, China organised a large-scale military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the victory in the 'Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression'. While the timing, style, attendance and the type of weapons on display say much about China's ambitions, they also reveal some of the challenges it is facing both domestically and internationally. While the message of a powerful China, back on the world stage and geared up for a new era, is appealing to the domestic audience, its nationalistic discourse and unilateral actions in its neighbourhood undermine the peaceful image it aims to project abroad.

A strong leader for a strong nation

Given that China did little in previous years to mark the occasion, why were this year's celebrations so elaborate? The answer lies first and foremost at home. Domestic media coverage before, during and after the parade was extensive, depicting Xi as a president fully in command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Since March 2013, Xi has closely associated himself with the PLA, frequently visiting military units and emphasising the loyalty of the army to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Over the last three years, Xi has managed to consolidate his own power by restructuring top-level decision-making processes and launching a large-scale anti-corruption campaign within both the CCP and the PLA. Dozens of senior military officers, including generals, have publicly been

placed under investigation or convicted. The parade was thus an occasion to demonstrate Xi's strong hold over the party and the army.

The overarching domestic message of the parade was the "Great Renewal of the Chinese Nation" – mentioned twice in Xi Jinping's speech. China is once again "a major country in the world", resurgent after a long period of "national humiliation of suffering successive defeats at the hands of foreign aggressors in modern times". 'Promoting patriotism' and linking China's renaissance to the victory over Japan is part of a broader cultural campaign under Xi. Over the last three years, Beijing has organised a particularly high number of museum exhibitions, conferences, and events specifically dedicated to the Second World War. The September parade was the highlight of this historical commemoration, which aims at reaffirming the CCP's ideological and political legitimacy.

A modern army for a new era

Showcasing the military was the most important and eagerly anticipated aspect of the whole parade. Xi's announcement that China will cut its overall number of troops by 300,000 should be analysed in the context of the restructuring of the PLA. It is likely to concern mostly non-combat personnel, in an effort to increase the performance and 'agility' of its large military bureaucracy. Although it is the largest troop reduction in nearly two decades, China will, however, retain the largest army in the

world (still over 2 million-strong) and remain the second-largest military spender.

Cutting down on personnel does not mean reducing, but rather rationalising and modernising the country's military capability. New weapons reflect the changing priorities of the PLA: more emphasis is being placed on the development of naval and air forces. Among the most strategically important weapons on display were the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missiles (nicknamed the 'carrier killer') and the 4,000 km-range DF-5B intercontinental missile (or the 'Guam-killer'), capable of targeting the US base on the island of the same name. Early warning and control aircraft likely to be deployed over the East and South China Seas were also exhibited

What was not visible at the parade itself is the modernisation of the PLA Navy (PLAN). Since 2009, China has been building up its maritime power and expanding its blue water capabilities. On one hand, the PLAN has been increasingly active in international waters, participating in counter-piracy efforts and joint naval exercises. On the other hand, it has been involved in infrastructure development and intimidating foreign vessels around China's claimed territories in the South China Sea (SCS).

More connected but more isolated

Beijing's celebrations were closely watched by countries inside and outside the region. Despite Xi's reassuring statement that 'China will never seek hegemony or expansion', several East Asian countries remain on high alert, in particular claimant parties to its various territorial disputes at sea. Despite the peaceful rhetoric, China's unilateral actions in the SCS are an increasing source of concern for neighbouring countries, especially Vietnam and the Philippines. Although Vietnamese President Truong Tan Sang has been one of the few ASEAN leaders to have made a trip to Beijing, Vietnam has been stepping up security cooperation with the US and Japan, in an attempt to garner additional support for its territorial claims.

Perhaps surprisingly given the title of the celebrations, official statements during the parade did not specifically target Japan. Despite apprehensions on both sides of the East China Sea concerning the commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War, relations between Tokyo and Beijing did not deteriorate any further. After two years of heightened tensions, the bilateral relationship is geared towards stabilisation, partly driven by China's economic slowdown. As a result, Japan's reaction to the celebrations in Beijing was rather muted, and the two countries' leaders will

likely meet on the margins of G20 or APEC summits in November.

The parade also sought to showcase Xi surrounded by foreign dignitaries and a China well integrated in the international community. The Chinese media heavily emphasised the presence of foreign leaders and troops. Yet only a limited number of countries sent their highest representatives, among them Russia, South Africa, Pakistan and South Korea. High-level American and European leaders were notably absent, as was North Korea's Kim Jong Un.

Lost in contradiction

The style of the parade itself appeared somewhat old-fashioned. On the day of the event, Xi Jinping, wearing a traditional Mao-style suit, referred to "Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong thought, Deng Xiaoping theory" as the "[Chinese people's] guide to action", under the leadership of the CCP. For many Western observers, such a message contradicts Xi's previous economic and political reform announcements, and China's overall image as a modern country. The timing of the parade did not help, either: the recent industrial accident in Tianjin and current financial difficulties further undermined the image of a strong, successful China.

Severe contradictions remain in Xi Jinping's efforts to improve his country's image, both at home and abroad. What is perceived positively by parts of China's domestic audience is often viewed negatively by outsiders. Beijing is aware of some of these perception gaps, but not all. For instance, most Chinese senior officials do not realise the negative connotations generally attached to nationalist discourse, especially in Europe.

When analysing China's international actions and messages, outside observers need to take its domestic context into account. For example, the anti-corruption campaign strongly impacts on the management, working style and atmosphere within the majority of China's party and state-affiliated actors, which, in turn, impacts on the way they interact with foreign partners. Fully grasping China's inherent contradictions, as well as the intrinsic connection between its foreign and domestic policies, is essential if Europe is to successfully manage its relations with Beijing.

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