



## Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

# CHINA'S MILITARY PARADE: SYMBOLISM AT ITS BEST

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The Asian Century as it is popularly called is truly the era of Chinese preponderance in the international arena. The country has traversed a long path from its victimhood mentality during the Century of Humiliation (1839-42) to becoming an assertive power and a potential challenger to the global hegemon at present. Owing to its increasing political, economic and military might, there has been a growing tendency amongst countries both in its neighbourhood as well as across the world to reorient their foreign policy strategy to accommodate an alliance with China in it. Subsequently, most activities of China have a bearing on other states of the world and are subject to much speculation and analysis.

China's military parade is one such illustration of great relevance. Held on September 3, 2015 to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War Two, the parade held immense symbolic relevance to the present international relations.

The venue selected for the lavish parade in itself had an implicit significance. The Forbidden City holds a place of distinguished importance in Chinese history. Dating back twenty six years, during the spring of 1989 the crackdown of the Chinese government on the student demonstrators at the Tiananmen Square had led to the country being vehemently criticised and isolated by the West. Deserted and partially vulnerable, the Chinese government sought to foster friendship with non-Western developing and peripheral countries as those of Africa. 26 years hence, today China stands in the same place demonstrating its unparalleled military might to the world, flexing its colossal muscles. China has truly risen.

The first Chinese military parade had taken place way back in 2009. However the spectacle of 2015 was extraordinarily distinctive. The presence of 30 heads of states and 19 dignitaries from foreign countries was a manifestation of the importance that China has attributed to its

strategy of neighbourhood diplomacy. It maybe anticipated that a further demonstration of the success of China's neighbourhood diplomacy will be witnessed in the forthcoming years, with the institution of projects like the Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt.

Interestingly though the guest list of the lavish parade was not surprising yet it was an effective display of China's "friends" and the "foes" in the international arena. Amongst the pre-eminent leaders present at the event were Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain, Russian President Vladimir Putin, South Korean President Park Geun-hye, Myanmar's President Thein Sein. Other high profile guests included the heads of states of the member nations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), South African President Jacob Zuma, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and most importantly United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon. The United States and the other Western allies namely Australia, France and United Kingdom were represented by unspecified government ministers.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly Japan was represented not by its present Prime Minister Shinzo Abe but by its former Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama.

The event was high on symbolism. Alongside China's own military personnel, 12000 troops from Russia, Pakistan and fifteen other nations joined the extravaganza. Such instances clearly depicted China's rising pre-eminence and

its expanding number of allies across the world. It maybe contemplated that in due course of time; the Western nations may suffer from a feeling of antagonism owing to their rising isolationism and declining sphere of influence.

At the parade, the Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese armed forces President Xi Jinping, mentioned that China was committed to "the path of peaceful development". Further, he pledged a 13% troop cut in the 2.3 million strong Chinese military.<sup>2</sup> However a great dichotomy was at play between China's words and deeds. Although on one hand a troop cut was pledged yet the act of parading People's Liberation Army's (PLA) latest ammunitions sent out strong messages to the world.

Hundreds of drones, missiles, tanks, amphibious assault vehicles, anti-ship "carrier killer" missile Dongfeng- 21D amongst others were displayed before the esteemed guests.<sup>3</sup> A strong point was directed towards both Japan and the US. This was expressed through statements like Chinese victory during World War II had "crushed the plot of the Japanese militarists to colonize and enslave China"<sup>4</sup> and "you take us on at your own risk".<sup>5</sup> President Xi Jinping's remark that China prefers to "remain committed to peaceful development" seemed ironic. With the presence of five naval ships in the Bering Sea off Alaskan waters the claim that China did not harbour any hegemonic ambitions or desired to adhere to a peaceful path to development fell flat.

For some time now, several countries ranging from the Himalayan frontiers to the South and the East China have been alarmed by the sustained rise in China's military expenditure and modernization. To name a few India, Japan, Vietnam and Philippines have been enmeshed in the sometimes hot-sometimes cold relationship with China.<sup>6</sup> Through this parade, President Xi has expressed the military and political resilience of China to these countries, indicating its endeavour to recreate a Sino-centric world order in the forthcoming years.

Apart from its symbolism in the international sphere, the parade may also be viewed as an instrument to infuse the much needed element of nationalism in the domestic realm of China. For many centuries, the rulers of China have used nationalism as a tactic to inculcate the elements of unity and brotherhood in the country. A case in point is the Middle Kingdom theory that was propagated in China several centuries ago. Initially the concept of Middle Kingdom described the location of China at the centre of the world with countries surrounding it, being referred to as tributaries. These tributary states owed their allegiance to China in lieu of robust trade relations and protection from external aggression. Over time, in the nineteenth and the twentieth century the Middle Kingdom theory was used as an instrument to infuse the element of solidarity amongst the Chinese people.

In this line, the Chinese military parade of September 2015 represents a continuing tactic of China's administrators to hold the country together. More than ever before the element of nationalism has assumed key importance for China. Of late the country has been confronted by a number of challenges in the domestic sphere – namely slowing down of the economy, an aging population, environmental degradation, income inequality, gender imbalance, ethnic tension and corruption. Therefore the parade maybe viewed as a tactic adopted by the Chinese government to deflect the attention of the general public from unresolved failures towards a belief that China is rising on all measures.

Be it an approach to conceal its domestic failures or an endeavour to display its might to the world, China has undoubtedly flexed its muscles. It has cautioned its adversaries and demonstrated to the world that it is the power of the moment and of the coming decades. Through a splendid show of strength, President Xi Jinping has demonstrated that China has finally shed its victimhood mentality but has not forgotten the Century of humiliation. Rather, the Chinese people have finally stood up (Mao Zedong).

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "30 Heads of States Will Watch China's Military Parade Next Week", *The Diplomat*, August 26,

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2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/30-heads-of-state-will-watch-chinas-military-parade-next-week/>

<sup>2</sup> Katie Hunt, Steven Jiang and Will Ripley, "China Flexes Muscles With World War II Military Extravaganza", *CNN*, September 3, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/02/asia/china-world-war-ii-military-parade/>

<sup>3</sup> John Sudworth, "China Military Parade Commemorates WW2 Victory Over Japan", *BBC*, September 3, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-34125418>

<sup>4</sup> Katie Hunt, Steven Jiang and Will Ripley, "China Flexes Muscles With World War II Military Extravaganza", *CNN*, September 3, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/02/asia/china-world-war-ii-military-parade/>

<sup>5</sup> Dean Cheng, "Chinese Military Parade Sends Multiple Signals", *The Daily Signal*, September 8, 2015, <http://dailysignal.com/2015/09/08/chinese-military-parade-sends-multiple-signals/>

<sup>6</sup> C. Raja Mohan, "WWII Military Parade: Ambitious China, Divided Asia, Uncertain India", *The Indian Express*, September 4, 2015.