

Chinas Military Parade: A Message to the West but Implications for India

Introduction

On 03 Sep, China held the biggest military parade in its modern history, showcasing powerful high-tech weaponry to mark 80 years since Japan's defeat at the end of the World War II (WW II).

Chinese President Xi Jinping was flanked by Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korea's Kim Jong-un, the first North Korean leader to attend a Chinese military event in 66 years. 26 other leaders who attended the parade and were witness to a procession of advanced Chinese weaponry and troops marching in step included Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko, Iranian President Pezeshkian, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, Myanmar Junta Chief Min Aung Hlaing, and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif along with Pakistan Army Chief General Asim Munir.¹

The parade celebrated the role of Communist fighters against the Japanese soldiers, with Xi dressed in a Mao-era coat as a key contributor in the post-war international order. The optics, while reflecting its deepening regional influence, were designed to project a vision of Chinese power to the world.²

Display of Military Might

The 70-minute parade at Tiananmen Square displayed an expanding array of military hardware. From tanks and drones to long-range and nuclear-capable missiles, fighter jets and stealth aircraft, the parade also revealed advances in People's Liberation Army's (PLA) weapons and assets.

The procession opened with more than 10,000 troops. Formations on parade included ground, naval and aerial drones, strategic missiles, and a cyber space combat force. China, a leader in hypersonic missiles, showed its latest Yingji series described as 'A Strategic Hammer'. The new variant of the two-stage Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) DF-5C was also on display.

There were reported sightings of the J15-DT—China's new, carrier-based electronic warfare jet. Raymond Kuo, director at Rand corporation,

described it as a flying support system and decoy for fighter jets, keeping track of moving targets for the fighters, and drawing counterattacks away from them. Also known as 'Wingman' drone, it flies alongside manned warplanes and offers autonomous combat support.

Kuo also noted a new Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM), demonstrating progress in China's efforts to build a 'Triad' of nuclear missile systems that complement each other and offset each other's weaknesses by launching from the land, air, and sea.³

One key takeaway from the Russia-Ukraine war, where drones are being widely used, was the growing emphasis on counter-drone systems and airborne early warning aircraft. The FH-97 stealth combat drone, paired with directed-energy weapons and microwave defences, indicates that China foresees swarming, autonomous warfare, where machine speed could outpace human reaction.⁴ Unmanned combat platforms such as robot wolves, 'Sharp Sword' reconnaissance, and strike drones showcased China's transition into 'New-age Warfare'.⁵

The parade witnessed significant participation of contingents of the PLA's Space Force, Cyber Force, Information Support Force, and Logistics Support Force. Electronic warfare vehicles and artificial intelligence-enabled command platforms were showcased to demonstrate how China aims to paralyse enemy networks and sustain its own decision-making in conflict.⁶

Ground-based air-defence and antiballistic missile systems such as the HQ-20, HQ-19, and HQ-29, which form part of multi-layer air and missile defence network and China's nuclear 'Nuclear Triad'—including the JL-3 SLBM, the DF-16 ICBM, and the new DF-5C with more than 20,000 kms range—were also showcased.

Jennifer Parker, at University of New South Wales, said it was important to 'Break Apart' real capability from what she called China's information warfare campaign. "Associated with parades or exercises or demonstrations is always a huge degree of deception", she said.⁷ "But I don't think we should underestimate China's capabilities—they are a very capable military, and I think we should be quite concerned".⁸

Drew Thompson, at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said the display was intended to "Give the United States (US), Europe, and

China's neighbours a pause should they consider challenging China's core national interests".⁹

The Speech

The highly choreographed display and guest list were designed to send a message about the strength of China. Speaking at the parade, President Xi said that "Today humanity is again faced with the choice of peace or war, dialogue or confrontation, win-win or zero sum", warning that China was a great nation that "Is never intimidated by any bullies". He said the past showed that Chinese people always rallied together "to defy the enemy" when faced with adversity.¹⁰

As per Wen-ti Sung, at the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub, the images of Xi, Putin, and Kim showed that "China is unafraid to stand by its friends even, and perhaps especially, when they are pariahs in the court of international public opinion".¹¹ With both leaders by his side, President Xi underscored his belief that the existing international system led by the US is to blame for current conflicts and confrontation.

"Only when all countries and nations treat each other as equals, coexist in peace, and support each other", they can "uphold common security" and "eradicate the root cause of war", Xi said during the speech to over 50,000 attendees.¹²

The symbolism was hard to miss. In 1959, Chairman Mao Zedong hosted Kim's grandfather and the then-Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to watch a military parade. That was the last time when the leaders of the three countries met together. It was the height of the Cold War, and China was isolated from much of the world as was North Korea, and the Soviet Union was the most powerful and richest among them. Now, it's China that holds the reins.

President Xi's speech reiterated Mao Zedong's slogan about the Party "commanding the gun". Xi's speech and every major slogan resolutely reinforced that the military should be loyal to the party and follow its instructions with absolute discipline.

China's defence indigenisation on display also helps its defence export industry, which is growing in South Asian, African, Latin American, and West Asian countries.

The parade drew an almost immediate reaction from US President Donald Trump. "May President Xi and the wonderful people of China have a great and lasting day of celebration. Please give my warmest regards to Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un, as you conspire against the US", Trump posted on his Truth Social account.¹³

Implications for India

Chinese technological progress in drones, hypersonic technology, electronic and cyber warfare, and space technology outpace India's incremental modernisation.¹⁴ For India, it is not about the technological superiority of a missile or a drone but the ecosystem behind them.

India no longer faces a two-front war but one consolidated front across its borders, with China arming and orchestrating Pakistan. While future wars will be multi-domain, hybrid, and prosecuted across the spectrum of conflict with compressed operation cycles over the escalation ladder, India must prepare not only through developing platforms, acquisitions, structures, doctrines, and training of its armed forces but also through integration and innovation.

What was invisible but is more significant is the Chinese military-industrial complex and its emerging capabilities. The evolution of its doctrines, which have resulted in joint structures and information dominance and the strategic signalling regarding deterrence, partnerships, and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party project China's strength and its inevitable and unstoppable rise through demonstration of large-scale and high-technology military power.¹⁵

Major General Wu Zeke said the "goal is to demonstrate our military's formidable strategic deterrent capability and win future wars". But notwithstanding the impressive orchestration of the parade and highly synchronised music and marching the impact on the measurement of military effectiveness has many more metrics.

The effective integration and operation of these weapon systems and performance in combat remains unknown. Without any real combat experience since 1979, adapting to the complexities and chaos of modern warfare will be challenging.

Conclusion

Military parades are not mere rituals of military pomp and precision; they are occasions for strategic communication. President Xi's 2025 vision focuses on rejuvenation as part of China's aspiration to achieve superpower status by 2049. The guest list was carefully chosen, which included strategic partners and important neighbours with the absence of India even though Prime Minister Modi was in Tianjin two days earlier to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit.

As per Vina Nadjibulla, of the Vancouver-based Asia Pacific Foundation, China is positioning itself at the centre of an 'Alternative World Order' while the US is dismantling the order that was put in place after the WW II. "I think China is now again taking advantage of the fact that the US is destroying its relationships with its allies", she said.¹⁶

The spectacular military display coincides with the 2027 deadline for the PLA to be prepared for potential Taiwan contingencies. Domestically, it instils national pride while signalling that notwithstanding the purging of senior military officers, President Xi is still in command. Further, the capability of the military is constantly being sharpened and there has been no dilution in its readiness. For international audiences, the message was deterrence and power projection: China is positioning itself as an alternative to the US hegemony and is assuring its friends that it will not be caught unprepared for the wars of tomorrow.

The message is clear: President Xi was orchestrating his most forceful showing of China as an alternative global leader with military might and geopolitical heft. While commemorating the end of WW II, it conveyed the rapid advancement of the world's largest military and signalled Xi's growing ability to project hard power on the world stage.

For India, the message is clear. Notwithstanding a warmth in India-China relations, the fact remains that unless the border issue is resolved, tensions along the Line of Actual Control will persist and China will keep aiding Pakistan's military against India. The only way to meet the widening asymmetry is a whole-of-nation approach to security by building self capacities and capabilities.

Endnotes

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Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

Uploaded on 15-09-2025

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