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## Parading for peace? China's military parade targets both domestic and foreign audiences

China held a military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II. By showcasing the country's military strength, the ruling Communist Party wants to emphasise its leadership, increase national unity and send a message to Japan and the US that China is able to safeguard its national interests by military means.

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has adopted a more assertive foreign policy position, initiated new major economic institutions, as well as continued to modernise its military. China claims to be rising peacefully but its military build-up, changing maritime policies and disputes in the East and South China Seas detract from the credibility of this peaceful development. For example, a week before the parade, China's navy mounted a military exercise in the East China Sea involving over 100 warships.

The foreign policy terminology of Xi Jinping's regime manifests changes in China's national self-understanding and indicates that the country is starting to see itself as a great power. Military modernisation is part of China's new more prominent international posture and serves multiple functions from the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A strong army is a tangible expression of international status.

In recent years, China has held military parades every ten years only in the context of celebrating the founding of the People's Republic. The military parade held on September 3rd to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II was an exception, which offered the Chinese leadership

the possibility to showcase China's military strength to both foreign and domestic audiences. For President Xi, the timing of the anniversary was a convenient opportunity to increase domestic support for the Party by emphasising China's strength despite recent economic problems, as well as signalling to Japan and the US that China has the capacity to safeguard its national interests by military means if necessary.

The equipment showcased during the parade manifests China's rapid military modernisation. While China's share of defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP remained around 2 per cent in 2014, according to the latest figures issued by the Stockholm Peace Research Institute, military spending is growing at double-digit percentages.

Moreover, China's domestic military technologies continue to develop and improve the capacity of the Chinese military to meet its strategic needs, especially in neighbouring areas. Among others, these technologies include different types of anti-ship missiles. According to multiple researchers, China's anti-access area denial capabilities may soon credibly challenge US operations near Chinese shores.

The key message to the domestic audience was a strengthening of the

Party's image as China's saviour in the fight against foreign enemies. The narrative of the CCP's leadership in the war against Japan plays an important role in the CCP's legitimacy, clearly highlighted in naming the event a commemoration of the "Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression and World Anti-Fascist War". Hence, September 3 was designated a national holiday this year.

According to official Chinese sources, however, Japanese and Western media politicised the commemorative event. China claims that the parade was held to commemorate the end of World War II in China and its purpose was not to intimidate any country by showcasing China's military might, nor to address problems in Sino-Japanese relations. When holding the parade was announced in January 2015, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying emphasised that it would be held "to safeguard world peace". The same message was repeated in Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming's special press conference on August 25.

This message was not well received internationally, but nevertheless the parade and related commemoration ceremonies offered a way to emphasise political

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connections. In total, China invited participants from 50 countries, and the politics of attending the event shows which countries have closest relations with China.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and leaders from other member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation announced their participation weeks beforehand. The participation of South Korea's President Park Geun-hye to 70th anniversary ceremonies was perhaps the biggest surprise on the list of otherwise predictable names. Western countries kept the rank of official participants lower and the US, for example, sent its ambassador to China to attend the event.

The style and content of China's messages explains why so few Western leaders decided to attend. Although Chinese losses in World War II were massive, with over 14 million deaths, the issue of China's sacrifice in the war was overshadowed by the style of the commemoration with its openly anti-Japanese military parade. Indeed, holding the parade seemed more like an exercise in reinforcing existing rivalries than a demonstration of willingness for reconciliation.

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