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David Lai

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Strategic Insights: If You Want Peace, Prepare for War: Reflections on China's V —Day Parade

October 5, 2015 | Dr. David Lai

The Chinese government conducted a military parade to commemorate the “70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War” on September 3, 2015. Although Chinese President Xi Jinping uttered “peace” 18 times in his brief opening remarks and Chinese government propaganda flooded China’s media with massive unqualified praise afterward, this show of force was by no means a blessing for peace. On the contrary, it arguably will cast a shadow over China’s outreach in the Asia-Pacific region for years to come.

A Parade for the Wrong People.

If the stated title for the parade meant anything, the leaders of the United States and Japan should have been at the ceremony, for it was the United States, not China, that brought Japan to its knees 70 years ago. The ceremony should have been the perfect occasion for Japan and China to move forward in a new era of cooperation and prosperity. Unfortunately, U.S. and Japanese heads of state were notably absent. In their place, ironically, were foreign dignitaries representing nations that have little, or nothing, to do with China’s war of resistance against Japan.

A Parade to Open Old Wounds and Create New Ones.

Japan and the United States did not attend the ceremony for good reason. After all, China’s military parade was not intended to show support for Japan and the United States, but to act as a warning to them.

China's contemporary problems with Japan go back to its humiliating loss in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894. China ceded Taiwan and other national treasures to Japan at that war's conclusion. Imperial Japan initiated the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and committed wartime atrocities in China (in Korea and other Asian nations as well) until it was defeated in 1945. The Chinese were severely traumatized by Japan's actions during the Second World War and that Japan has never "sincerely and formally" apologized for its brutality in China. The military parade thus started with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) National Flag Guard marching 121 heavy steps to the flag pole at the center of Tiananmen Square, reminding Japan the number of years the Chinese have been in waiting since 1894 for "appropriate" reparations and for an expression of regret.

While the old wounds are still raw, China and Japan are creating more animosity. The two nations have been engaged in bitter disagreements over the disputed territories in the East China Sea since 2010. China-Japan tension has become more explosive since Japan took steps to get involved in China's territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Consequently, China intended to put Japan on notice, through this military parade, that it was ready to fight, but this time, history would not repeat itself, China would be the victor.

At a higher level, China's military parade was a show of force against the United States. China insists that the United States condones Japan's reluctance to address its wartime atrocities. In addition, China blames the United States for provoking the China-Japan territorial disputes in the East China Sea and for siding with Japan. Moreover, China insists that the United States is encouraging Japan to abandon its post-World War II commitment to maintaining only defense forces and to become more aggressive on security issues in the Asia-Pacific region thereby acting as a counterbalance to China's growing regional power. Finally, China believes that the U.S. strategic rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific is intended to contain China.

China apparently does not want to simultaneously confront Japan and the United States. Therefore, it solicited support from Russia, which in turn used China as a much-needed ally in its conflict with the United States on the European front. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a joint statement in April 2014 (against the backdrop of Russia's brutal annexation of Crimea) that Russia and China would conduct the 70th V-Day military parades in 2015 together. Putin delivered his attacks on the United States at the Russian parade, condemning the United States for its efforts to create a unipolar world. Xi followed in his address at the Chinese parade by stating that "war is the sword of Damocles that still hangs over mankind," a code phrase in China's routine criticism of the United States for what it perceives to be "excessive use of force" in international affairs by the United States. Xi also called for the international community to "uphold the international order and system underpinned by the purposes

and principles of the [United Nations] Charter.” This line was to tell the United States to stop changing the rules at will and supporting Japan to alter the post-World War II order in the Asia-Pacific region.

Talk the Talk, but Walk the Walk.

Xi took the occasion to announce that China will cut 300,000 soldiers from its 2.3 million-man military. He also reiterated China’s promise of not seeking hegemony. The *People’s Daily* followed this announcement with an editorial rejecting the notion that a more powerful China would inevitably become a hegemon. Well, one’s intention is proportional to one’s capability. When China was backward and underdeveloped, it talked and acted like a weak power. However, now that China is strong, it cannot help but act more assertively. The following examples show how similar China's rise in power is to that of the United States when the United States became a formidable nation and started to project its power overseas.

In March 2014, the tension on the Korean Peninsula flared up again. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi issued a forceful statement to put North Korea and the United States on notice indicating that the “Korean Peninsula is right on China’s doorstep. We have a red line, that is, we will not allow war or instability on the Korean Peninsula.” Sound familiar? How different is the Chinese statement from that of the U.S. Monroe Doctrine?

In recent moves and countermoves by the United States and China in the South China Sea, the United States openly challenged China on its position and conduct in the South China Sea. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel asked China to define the 9-dash line over the South China Sea; Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel told China that the United States would not look the other way if China were to upset the international order in the southern Pacific; and Secretary of State John Kerry questioned China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. China adamantly rejected the U.S. “attacks” and asked the United States to stop meddling in South China Sea affairs and stay away from the region altogether. Once again, the Chinese policy statements sounded like those of U.S. President James Monroe nearly 200 years ago.

The third example of Chinese assertiveness as compared to the U.S. Monroe Doctrine in the Western Hemisphere came in May 2014 when Chinese President Xi took the podium to welcome the heads of states at the 4th Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. Xi declared that, “In the final analysis, it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation.”¹ This statement can be likened to that of the United States telling the old European powers to stay away from the Western Hemisphere.

The Chinese take it as an article of faith that China is different from the United States and will conduct international affairs differently. Indeed, China may be unique and ultimately conduct its world affairs differently than that of the United States. However, while the jury is still out on China's future behavior, the observations listed previously in this article are intended to remind Chinese leaders that China's growing power can drive them to do things beyond their control. They will do themselves a great deal of service by vigilantly guarding against their "hegemonic impulses" in the years ahead.

The old-fashioned goose-stepping parade, unnecessary for the occasion (it was the first time China staged a military parade to commemorate its Anti-Japanese War in 70 years; one wonders why the Chinese forgot to observe this occasion in this fashion for so long), should find its resting place in a museum. China should move on, as it has promised repeatedly, to become an innovative and welcome leader of the world.

ENDNOTES

1. Xi Jinping, "New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation," Opening Remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Shanghai, May 21, 2014.

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