



Hiding and Biding No More: Military Parade Intended to Send Message that China is World Leader Capable of Deterring and Defeating the United States

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The September 3rd Victory Day parade in Beijing showcased an array of military capabilities intended to demonstrate the fruits of its decades-long modernization effort. The parade, in conjunction with the Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Tianjin prior to the parade, sought to demonstrate the People's Republic of China's (PRC) growing diplomatic and military power. China sought to promote itself as a world leader offering an alternative vision to the U.S.-led international system while the aerospace capabilities paraded down Chang'an Avenue and flying over Beijing were intended to deliver the message that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is a first rate aerospace power capable of defeating the U.S. military. The parade signaled the PLA's intent to develop into a joint force capable of operating in all domains with both manned and unmanned systems. The parade's emphasis on multi-domain precision strike capabilities, joint coordination, and unmanned capabilities across all domains also aligned with the PLA conception that precision, coordination, and speed are critical to dismantling an enemy system of systems.

China portrays itself as the alternative superpower

The overriding message of the parade was that China has arrived as a superpower and is now a credible alternative to the United States. The images of Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un flanking PRC leader Xi Jinping on the viewing stand reinforces China's narrative that it is the leader of a new world order that offers an alternative to the U.S.-led system established after the end of World War II. In his parade commencement remarks, Xi compared the international situation in 1945 and the need for a new international order to address the causes of World War II to the present day need for a new international system. Xi called on nations to "eliminate the root cause of war and prevent historical tragedies from recurring" and warned that "humanity is again faced with a choice of peace or war,

dialogue or confrontation, and win-win outcomes or zero-sum games.”¹ Xi asserted that the Chinese people “will stand firmly on the right side of history and on the side of human progress, adhere to the path of peaceful development, and join hands with the rest of world to build a community with a shared future for humanity.”² Xi added that “the Chinese nation is a great nation that is never intimidated by any bullies.”³

The political narrative of the parade was also intended to advance China’s argument that the “west is on the decline and the east is on the rise,” with China as the driving force. The absence of leading Western countries and representatives of the Republic of China were part of the Chinese Communist Party’s promulgation of a counter-factual historical narrative that it was the PRC that defeated Japan even though the PRC was not yet in existence in 1945. This narrative downplayed the leading role played by the Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek in fighting Imperial Japanese Forces and ignored the significant materiel and financial assistance provided by the United States.⁴

When coupled with the 2025 Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization that was held just days before in the Chinese city of Tianjin, China sought to portray itself as the leader of the developing world, now commonly referred to as the “Global South,” that would work for reform of the international system. The meeting was attended by 26 world leaders, during which Xi Jinping introduced the Global Governance Initiative for the first time. This initiative joins the previously established Belt and Road Initiative, Global Development Initiative, Global Civilization Initiative, and Global Security Initiative as a comprehensive alternative to the post-World War Two international system. Although Xi’s announcement lacked specifics, his call to “deliver more benefits to the entire humanity through the reform of the global governance system” amid a world in which “Cold War mentality, hegemonism, and protectionism continue to haunt the world” and “new threats and challenges have been only increasing” indicates that China intends to use the Global Governance Initiative to lead efforts to reduce U.S. influence around the world.⁵

China intended to send a strong deterrence message

The highly polished parade with stern looking PLA personnel marching in lockstep was intended to demonstrate a highly proficient military that is both willing and able to defend China and its interests. The parade of high-tech weaponry was intended to demonstrate that China has the capability to respond to any contingency from UN peacekeeping operations to nuclear warfighting. This is a PLA that is developing into a joint force capable of operating in all domains with both crewed and uncrewed systems.

Of particular importance was the display of China’s modernized nuclear forces. For the first time, China displayed all three components of its nuclear triad with the likely message that China’s nuclear modernization and expansion continue apace and could be developed into a coercive and warfighting capability. The parade included previously known missile systems such as the silo-based DF-5C intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that was described as being able to strike targets anywhere in the world, road-mobile/silo based DF-31, and the submarine

launched ballistic missiles JL-2 and JL-3. Of note, the DF-31BJ appeared to be a silo loading variant, an important component of the PLA's nuclear breakout.⁶ Other systems were new. The DF-61, a supposed next generation ICBM similar in appearance to the DF-41 from the 2019 Victory Day parade and the JL-1 air launched ballistic missile, clearly demonstrated the emphasis the PLA places on further developing each leg of its nuclear triad as it continues the expansion of its nuclear arsenal.



DF-31BJ roll past the Tiananmen Rostrum.⁷

While the land- and sea-based legs of the triad are strategic in nature, the limited range of the JL-1 and its launch platform, the H-6N bomber, without tanker support, limits the air leg to theater ranges. Of note, the H-6N parade overflight formation was accompanied by Y-20U aerial refueling tankers, indicating the intention to extend the effective range of the airborne component of the triad. The H-6N, the only inflight refueling capable variant, notably flew with a pair of land attack cruise missiles under its wings while the H-6K and J flew with anti-ship cruise missiles. The H-6N configuration clearly demonstrated this platform is envisioned as performing both nuclear and conventional missions, just like B-52s and B-2s in U.S. Air Force inventory today. Currently, given the small number of H-6N airframes and sole unit that operates it, it is likely that it the H-6N will primarily perform its nuclear mission. As the air leg of the PLA's nuclear triad develops, how the PLA presents H-6Ns and talks about employing them will offer insights into future PLA nuclear signaling as well as conventional long range fires employment.



The JL-1 air launched ballistic missile.⁸

The PLA intends to develop its triad into a complex deterrent or coercive tool by pursuing the capabilities necessary to do so. Part of this modernization push is the PLA's shift towards a launch on warning posture, explicitly referenced when the DF-5C was described as maintaining constant readiness.⁹ This was made clear in a post parade interview during which a member of the DF-5C formation described his unit as maintaining a constant state of alert.¹⁰

The PLA's future is unmanned



The last two echelons of the UAV operations formation roll down Chang'an Avenue.¹¹

The PLA displayed a variety of new unmanned systems and collaborative combat aircraft (CCA). These systems were described as capable of autonomously conducting integrated strike and reconnaissance and acting as “loyal wingmen.” A reference to an air superiority role was also made. The broadcast noted that these platforms are capable of coordinating with one another, stealthy, and capable of operating across great distances.

The PLA has long extolled its belief that the future of warfare will be unmanned because of its low cost, ability to avoid detection, and capability for precision strike. While the advantages of unmanned systems can be applied across all domains, the PLA message appears to be that these advantages are particularly critical to the future of air power. Unmanned aerial systems could be employed as active sensing platforms inside enemy detection ranges at lower cost allowing more valuable sixth generation platforms to employ weapons with minimized risk.

Alternatively, higher cost, stealthier platforms could coordinate the operation of these systems from further range and use them to employ sensors and missiles against enemy aircraft. Or, possibly, these platforms could act in closer coordination with manned platforms to flexibly provide sensing for weapons employment. The only known system that appeared in previous parades was the conformal wing shaped unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) GJ-11. Not all aircraft spotted in pre-parade assembly areas around Beijing were displayed, and it is likely that some of the systems publicly revealed in the parade are not as far along in the testing and evaluation phases, nor yet operationally deployed like the GJ-11.

While only one unmanned helicopter system was called out as being capable of launching from aircraft carriers, the GJ-21 (a naval variant of the GJ-11), and one of the air superiority UCAV airframes appeared to have folding wing tips for better storage on aircraft carriers. The lack of emphasis on naval aviation CCA's or UCAVs in the parade commentary should not be taken as an indication that this is not a priority for PLA Navy (PLAN) Aviation.

Airpower demonstrates importance of lift and command and control aircraft



PLA Naval Aviation and PLA Air Force formations fly over Beijing.¹²

The parade featured a variety of systems that have previously been seen. On display were variants of the J-15, J-16, J-20, and J-35 fighter aircraft, the KJ-500A and KJ-600 airborne early warning and control aircraft (AEW&C), standoff jamming aircraft, anti-submarine warfare aircraft, H-6 bomber variants, and the transport and refueling variants of the Y-20 cargo aircraft, highlighting domestically made engines. While nothing new flew during this demonstration, there are still several key points worth highlighting.

The prominence of AEW&C aircraft in the parade flyover indicates PLA appreciation of their roles in making People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) and Naval Aviation fighters more capable of employing their modern missile systems to best effect. Additionally, these platforms could potentially be used as critical joint enablers. Continued iteration of the KJ-500, including the addition of inflight refueling capability allows these platforms to maintain longer time on station, increasing their utility. These platforms could also potentially play critical roles in coordinating the employment of unmanned assets in the future.

The KJ-3000, first seen flying earlier this year, was not present at the parade but is another important AEW&C platform in the development and testing cycle.¹³ Additionally, the operationally fielded KJ-700 was not present as well. The KJ-700 represents a (great) capability leap forward in terms of providing a combination of radar, infrared, and electro-optical ISR and target track capabilities to the joint force.¹⁴ The KJ-600 represents a critical step forward in fleet

aviation capabilities, enabling PLAN carrier based aircraft to more effectively employ their weapons and unmanned assets further from their carriers and provide additional sensing and coordination capabilities to surface combatants working with fleet aviation. Effective employment of this platform would enable the PLAN to better contest the U.S. Navy's ability to operate freely in the Indo-Pacific region.

The J-20S also represents a critical milestone achieved by the PLAAF. This dual seat fifth generation platform is thought to have a weapons systems operator in the back to coordinate employment of CCA's or other unmanned assets.¹⁵ This represents the first operationally fielded fifth generation aircraft in the world intended to do so. Given the ability of the PRC's aerospace defense industry to churn out J-20s and the PLA's emphasis on manned-unmanned teaming during the parade, this platform not only represents a critical step for developing tactics, techniques and procedures for future employment of manned-unmanned teaming with sixth generation assets, but it could also be used prior to those future assets reaching operational units.

Missiles, Missiles, Missiles

The parade displayed several different types of short- and long-range cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic missiles intended to attack surface vessels and ground targets. The PLA has analyzed the U.S. military's various geographic problems and determined that the best way to fight U.S. forces over long distances is with missiles that can attrit U.S. military systems and inflict casualties while keeping manned PLA forces closer to China. Overall, many of the systems on display were already known to be operational or under development, although there were a few surprises.

The PLA Army's display of the PHL-191 self-propelled multiple rocket launcher in two configurations was a clear display of the changing nature of short-range fires intended to be employed against Taiwan. The two different munitions displayed, a short-range ballistic missile and longer-range rockets, were described as being capable of "subjugation" and precision strikes. These systems were highlighted as being capable of integrating campaign level strikes with tactical support, demonstrating the evolving nature of conventional missile operations in a Taiwan scenario. While the PLARF still maintains cruise missile and short-range ballistic missiles for targets on Taiwan, the PH-191 provides further capabilities to the PLA Army to support its own operations on-island and sustain tactical and campaign level fires targeting Taiwan for long durations without needing to waste more expensive systems or place them at undue risk.

The parade had an entire component dedicated to anti-ship missiles that can be launched from submarines, surface vessels, and aircraft. Most of these systems were either supersonic or hypersonic intending to break through missile defense networks at sea. These missiles collectively represent the PLA's push for multi-domain coordinated fires against targets at sea to overwhelm enemy air defense systems. This is a critical capability for attacking U.S. surface

combatants as a component of counter intervention and could also allow the PLA Navy to employ advanced anti-ship cruise missiles from submarines against ships flowing into theater.



YJ-15, YJ-19, YJ-17, and YJ-20 antiship missiles¹⁶

In addition to these systems, several other conventional strike systems were highlighted, including subsonic cruise missiles, hypersonic cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles. The air launched cruise missile was described by the *PLA Daily* as precision strike weapons for hitting key points within an enemy's system.¹⁷ PLA cruise missiles will be an important component for overwhelming enemy air defenses and striking key points, continued development of new, more capable systems to do so is obviously a PLA priority across the joint force.

Air and missile defense

The parade was also a chance to showcase the evolving air and missile defense capabilities the PLA will bring to bear in seeking operational success. The shipborne air defense weapons formation showcased the PLAN's movement towards a sophisticated layered missile defense system that seeks to balance efficacy and cost efficiency through employment of future capabilities such as the LY-1 laser system. This formation was emblematic of the counter-intervention obstacles the PLAN presents to adversaries by allowing forward deployed surface formations to effectively expand the integrated air defense system (IADS) in further complicating any U.S. air domain intervention. The PLAAF and People's Liberation Army Army (PLAA) also displayed systems ranging from layered high-end ballistic missile defense capabilities like the HQ-29, H-19, and HQ-9C, to modern, long range SAM systems like the HQ-20, and shorter range systems like the HQ-11 which are a component of layered cruise missile defense. In conjunction with the high-powered microwave, short-range gun and missile systems, and short-range laser systems, these capabilities are intended to address a potential high-low mix of small numbers of sophisticated munitions and large numbers of low cost drones and cruise missiles that the U.S. may choose to employ against PLA targets. Air defense is traditionally an area where the PLA is more effectively a joint force, and continued refinement of its tactics, techniques, and procedures and technology are of concern.

Conclusion

China's Victory Day parade was an opportunity for China's to present itself as an alternative to U.S. leadership of the international order and display its ruthless pursuit of its military modernization goals. China's efforts to engage the Global South and win over U.S. allies and partners will continue. Countering these efforts where possible is essential. While a military parade is neither a demonstration of operational effectiveness or the performance of military capabilities, if it is placed in the context of increased training tempo, better training, and improvement of military talent acquisition, it is clear that the PLA is well on its way to becoming a military that can fight informationized and eventually intelligentized wars.

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Endnotes

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