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China' rising: The Parade

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Think of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Sept. 3 military parade, officially "Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War," as a tabula rasa, a blank screen upon which observers can project their PRC-related hopes, fears, anxieties, and fantasies. And, for Xi Jinping, to illustrate his "China Dream."

In my opinion, a central purpose of the parade was to elevate and celebrate Xi Jinping as a key figure in 21st century China. The parade recapitulated Deng Xiaoping's parade on the 35th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 1984. Xi, like Deng, rode down Chang An Avenue by himself with the gaze of the world upon him, so on and so forth. The CCP, by the way, had the same fear of snipers back then. I was there in '84, ventured out on a balcony for a better look, and was promptly and firmly instructed to get back inside.

As to what doctrine Xi was promoting, the parade was not an "anti-Japan" parade. Actually, it was an "anti-United States" parade.

The ostensible reason for the display of the PRC's military might was that the United States has turned its back on the Potsdam dispensation, abandoned the "honest broker" "Pacific peacekeeper" role it claimed after World War II, and has instead become an overtly destabilizing force in the region, encouraging Japan to expand its military role, egging on the Philippines &

Vietnam, etc. The PRC, therefore, not only has to look out for itself; it's got to look out for the whole East Asian region to keep US adventurism in check.

PRC perceptions of the US posture were confirmed by Washington's disparagement of the commemoration. The US recapitulated its boycott of Putin's V70 parade and sent no national leader to Beijing, and merely dispatched Ambassador Baucus. Japan and the Philippines sent nobody. Most other countries hedged their bets. India, for instance, only sent VK Sing, Minister of State for External Affairs. The US media framing that the parade was only attended by lickspittles, jerks, losers, Putin, and Vanuatu was perhaps not appreciated by the President of Vietnam, Truong Tan Sang, or the President of the Republic of Korea, Park Geun-hye, or for that matter UN General Secretary Ban Ki-moon.

The United States flirted with the same overreach that tainted its opposition to the AIIB by leaning on South Korea's President Park not to attend. Park attended, and so did Ban Ki-moon, despite criticism from Japan. Ban's presence was a reminder that the stated purpose of the parade was to uphold the post-World War II order that created the UN and turned over the job of ordering the world UNSC superpower club, and also a hint that US geostrategic boffins infatuated with Abe and roping Japan into the US security regime in Asia are ignoring ROK resentment at Japan for its brutal decades-long colonial occupation (and current zero-sum economic competition) at their peril.

All in all, the US response probably strengthened the hardliners around Xi by reconfirming US hostility to "rising China."

Undoubtedly, Xi is chagrined at his relative lack of success in moving the historiographical needle in favor of Chinese contributions during the Second World War, at least in the West.

Much unfavorable attention was paid to the tsunami, excuse me, *haixiao* of hyperbolic Japan-devil-bashing, Japan-murdering Chinese superhero-fluffing, ahistorical movie, TV, and print campaign to exalt the Chinese role and CCP leadership in the anti-Japanese struggle, perhaps reaching its nadir with a movie poster apparently placing Mao Zedong (instead of Chiang Kai-shek) at the 1944 Cairo Conference. Of course, whose nadir is perhaps open to question. The Guardian mocked the PRC for putting Mao in the poster for the movie; but from what I can see of the trailer, Chiang is accurately shown at the conference, while Mao is depicted uttering some noble anti-fascist verbiage from inside China.

The West is obviously extremely protective of its role in winning "World War II," and laying claim to leadership/lawgiver status in the postwar order. Now that the PRC asserts that the West is abdicating that role in order to cozy up to Japan and contain the PRC as a peer competitor, the West is getting testy about PRC pretensions to stepping up to sustain and guarantee the post-war order in Asia in its stead.

History would not seem to be on Xi's side. China, let alone the CCP, cannot claim a great deal of martial glory in the defeat of Imperial Japan, as this detailed rundown by Han Linchao of who did what in WWII illustrates. It was pretty much an American show, and a bloody one at that.

However, the CCP has adroitly "sliced the World War II salami," to coin a phrase, by splitting the Asian conflict into two separate chunks. There's the "Pacific" chunk, in which the United

States overwhelmed Japanese military forces in the Pacific from 1942 to 1945; and there's the "China" chunk, in which Japan started to fight its way into China in 1931 via Manchuria and got caught in a quagmire that it departed only with the utter collapse of its military capabilities in 1945, and after inflicting gigantic human suffering on China.

So the CCP calls Sept. 3 "Commemoration of The 70th Anniversary of The Victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (a.k.a. China chunk) and The World Anti-Fascist War (Pacific chunk)."

And it may gravel Western sensibilities, especially with its implication that the US was the decisive force in only one of the four global theaters, but this conceptual split captures what happened in Asia better than "World War II," which is largely a US/UK construct.

Indeed, Japan uses a similar formulation to the PRC: the "China War" and the "Pacific War." Probably the reason why Abe feels its proper to apologize to the US and backhand South Korea and the PRC is that Japan was unambiguously defeated by the US in the Pacific War, while the collapse on the Asian mainland had little to do with superior Korean and Chinese arms and valor, and a lot do to with catastrophic, serial defeats in the Pacific, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the opportunistic Soviet invasion of Manchuria and the Kuriles in the last moments of the war.

In his brief remarks kicking off the parade, Xi Jinping presented the situation reasonably accurately, especially if one defines "winning" as the first time since the Opium War a Chinese representative got to sit down on the victor's side of the table and stick it to an imperial freebooter:

In defiance of aggression, the unyielding Chinese people fought gallantly and finally won total victory against the Japanese militarist aggressors, thus preserving China's 5,000-year-old civilization and upholding the cause of peace of mankind. This remarkable feat made by the Chinese nation was rare in the history of war.

The victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression is the first complete victory won by China in its resistance against foreign aggression in modern times. This great triumph crushed the plot of the Japanese militarists to colonize and enslave China and put an end to China's national humiliation of suffering successive defeats at the hands of foreign aggressors in modern times. This great triumph re-established China as a major country in the world and won the Chinese people respect of all peace-loving people around the world. This great triumph opened up bright prospects for the great renewal of the Chinese nation and set our ancient country on a new journey after gaining rebirth.

During the war, with huge national sacrifice, the Chinese people held ground in the main theater in the East of the World Anti-Fascist War, thus making major contribution to its victory. In their war against Japanese aggression, the Chinese people received extensive support from the international community. The Chinese people will always remember what the people of other countries did for the victory of their War of Resistance.

The PRC posture is also something of a gift to the Kuomintang (albeit something of a poisoned chalice that the politically-vulnerable KMT on Taiwan cannot quite bring itself to accept at this

time). The standard narrative of Chinese involvement in the continental war effort was that Chiang Kai-shek, by and large, was a maladroit and unenthusiastic ally, holding back from the anti-Japanese struggle and instead hoarding his forces and US weaponry in anticipation of a restart of the civil war, which he lost in a rather humiliating fashion.

Instead, the current CCP revisionism accommodates the KMT as flawed, indeed, doomed Chinese partners in the anti-Japanese effort. And, with the veterans, memories, and animosities of the Chinese civil war dying out, the CCP is determinedly and not entirely inaccurately packaging the anti-Japanese struggle as a shared heritage of all the Chinese people.

So I think the “Xi Jinping is trying to pretend Commies won WWII” mockery is somewhat misplaced.

Instead, Xi was advancing a new formula for the PRC’s relationship with its people, its neighbors, and the Chinese diaspora: it was moving beyond the CCP as embodiment of the Chinese peasants and proletariat (Mao) and the Chinese nation (Deng) to claim a role for the party as the representative and shield of the Chinese people in the region and around the world, and a guarantor of East Asian stability.

The parade was meant to demonstrate that the PRC has a military heft commensurate with its ambitions ... and that Xi Jinping is an effective steward of this mission.

And it did a pretty good job.