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### **CHINA'S NUCLEAR ARSENAL IN THE SPOTLIGHT: DECODING THE 2025 VICTORY DAY PARADE**



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#### **Introduction**

On September 3, 2025, China held the Victory Day Parade, one of the grandest in its history, commemorating the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its victory over Japan. This parade caught the attention of the world, specifically as it showcased for the very first time China's full nuclear triad- land, sea and air delivery systems. This bold public showcase was a strategic message, both to rival powers and the world at large, about China's accelerating modernisation and expansion of its nuclear arsenal.

The conventional nuclear weapons were distinguished clearly, illustrating a significant buildup of nuclear weapons undertaken by China in the past years. This first-time showcase of the nuclear triad poses questions about China's nuclear obligations under the NPT and risks nuclear buildup in countries like the US and India as a response, which can further escalate nuclear insecurity.

The parade, attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Malaysian Prime

Minister Anwar Ibrahim, framed it as an emerging counterweight to Western influence.<sup>1</sup> China has traditionally maintained opacity about its nuclear forces. This parade broke the precedent through detailed displays and strategic signalling, evidence of China's power projection. It conveyed a dual message: domestically, it reinforced President Xi Jinping's vision of "national rejuvenation" through military modernisation<sup>2</sup>; internationally, it signalled China's emergence as a strategic peer to the United States and Russia.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Nuclear Triad on Display**

At the heart of the nuclear triad was its land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and air-launched nuclear weapons.

#### **Land-based ICBMs**

The land-based leg of China's arsenal has long formed the core of its deterrent. At the parade, three systems were highlighted.

The DF-5C, a silo-based missile with a range exceeding 12,000 miles, was presented as capable of carrying up to ten multiple warheads. Such capacity ensures that China could overwhelm missile defence systems if it chose to employ the weapon in conflict.<sup>4</sup> Alongside it appeared the DF-61, a road-mobile missile thought to have a range of around 7,500 miles. Mobility makes these systems harder to target in a pre-emptive strike, improving their survivability.<sup>5</sup> A variant of the DF-31, identified as the DF-31BJ, was also displayed in road-mobile form. Its inclusion suggested that even older platforms are being modernised for flexibility and rapid deployment.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Sea-Based SLBMs**

The second element of the triad came in the form of the JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile. The development of the JL-3 submarine-launched ballistic missile represents a pivotal advancement for China's naval strategic forces.<sup>7</sup> With an estimated range of 5,400 nautical miles, a significant increase over the older JL-2, this new missile fundamentally alters China's strategic posture.<sup>8</sup> By enabling Jin-class (Type 094A) submarines to hold the continental United States at risk while operating from protected littoral waters close to home, the JL-3 provides a far more secure and

credible second-strike capability.<sup>9</sup> This technical leap forward, which will be further enhanced when deployed on the future Type 096 submarines, brings Chinese naval deterrence into parity with other major nuclear powers and signals Beijing's intent to project a formidable strategic reach deep into the Pacific, a reality that is reshaping the calculations of regional rivals.<sup>10</sup>

### **Air-based ALBMs**

The public debut of the JL-1 air-launched ballistic missile, carried by H-6N bombers, finally provided concrete evidence of an operational airborne nuclear system for China.<sup>11</sup> This development directly addresses what was long considered the weakest and most vulnerable leg of its nuclear triad. While the H-6N platform itself may not possess the stealth of its American or Russian counterparts, the JL-1 itself introduces a critical new layer of flexibility.<sup>12</sup> This airborne ALBM capability allows for extended patrols and launch-on-warning scenarios, complicating an adversary's defensive calculations and providing Beijing with more dynamic options for crisis signalling and assured retaliation.<sup>13</sup>

### **Strategic Signalling and Global Reaction**

The full reveal of China's nuclear triad during the 2025 parade was a carefully crafted move, a single gesture intended to communicate distinct and pointed messages to the international observers.

- **Deterrence against the US.** Putting its entire nuclear triad on display was China's stark answer to a long-running debate in the U.S: China can now confidently absorb a first strike and retaliate. The underlying message, aimed directly at US strategists, could be that any intervention in a Taiwan crisis would now carry an unacceptable and unavoidable risk of nuclear escalation.<sup>14</sup>
- **Assertion of great-power parity.** The parade served as its public declaration that the era of a "minimal" arsenal is over. This was a calculated move to assert its rightful place at the table with the world's other nuclear heavyweights, including the US and Russia.<sup>15</sup>

- **Domestic reassurance.** Xi Jinping used the parade to project stability and strength. Nuclear weapons, in particular, were framed as symbols of rejuvenation and proof that China is unshaken in its trajectory.<sup>16</sup>
- **Alliance signalling.** The image of Xi Jinping positioned between Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un at the parade sent a distinct signal about the evolving nature of China's strategic network.<sup>17</sup> Though these alliances are driven largely by practical considerations and lack deeply formalised agreements, their joint appearance was orchestrated to demonstrate that China is far from isolated on the world stage. In effect, the gathering highlighted a convergence of interests among leading authoritarian governments, intended not just for domestic audiences but also as a message to Western observers watching China's diplomatic posture.<sup>18</sup>

### **Broader Implications for Regional Security**

The 2025 parade sent powerful shockwaves through Asia, reshaping regional security calculations far beyond its global message. The parade intensifies regional security dilemmas by spurring concerns over an arms race, as countries like India, Japan, and Taiwan feel pressure to enhance their own missile defence, surveillance, and retaliatory capacities. The key consequences are likely to include:

- **In the US: A Complicated Calculus.** The display immediately complicated US deterrence planning. Analysts noted that a more survivable Chinese nuclear force directly challenges long-held assumptions of American nuclear superiority.<sup>19</sup> A more cautious, though minority, view suggested this newfound transparency might eventually create an opening for future arms control talks.
- South Korea, Japan, along the United States have announced joint defence exercises just days after North Korea's leader joined his Russian and Chinese counterparts at a major military parade in China.<sup>20</sup>
- **For India.** China's military displays are a stark lesson in both capability and vulnerability. They reveal the advanced nature of China's deterrent while

simultaneously exposing gaps in India's own defences, particularly in submarine surveillance and ballistic missile defence. An arms race to match China weapon-for-weapon would be a costly and impractical strategy. A more effective approach would involve targeted investments to counter China in key areas-for instance, by developing defences against hypersonic weapons, fast-tracking domestic drone technology, and deepening surveillance across the Indian Ocean<sup>21</sup>. Strategic cooperation, especially through groups like the Quad, offers a way to bolster India's technological capacity without attempting to duplicate China's massive investments. The ultimate goal should be seamless coordination across military domains, moving beyond mere hardware to integrated, adaptive strategies. India's security will depend less on matching China parade for parade, and more on mastering how its forces can operate together to deter aggression.

- **Influence on Regional Calculus.** China's calculated display was intended to reshape the strategic landscape across the region. In reality, however, it is less likely to change minds than to harden existing positions. The parade offers a compelling rationale both to nations seeking accommodation and to those building a coalition to counter Chinese influence, effectively giving each side more purpose.<sup>22</sup>

## **A Complex Opening for Arms Control**

Paradoxically, by going public, China may have created an opportunity for dialogue on managing nuclear risks. China's transition toward a more visible and diversified nuclear arsenal reflects a strategic emphasis on assured retaliation rather than mere numerical expansion.

The survivability of China's nuclear forces and its second-strike credibility is significantly enhanced by its deployment of road-mobile and silo-based ICBMs along with hypersonic glide vehicles. These dual-capable systems are difficult to distinguish between conventional and nuclear payloads, introducing an element of strategic ambiguity. Such developments may trigger regional actors like India to build up their own strategic modernisation programmes, potentially resulting in regional arms race dynamics.

At the same time, these developments complicate the prospects for arms control. China, by shifting from its traditional opaque stand on minimal deterrence, has invalidated assumptions regarding the scale and sophistication of its nuclear forces. Although the current transparency may present the potential to facilitate dialogue on confidence-building measures, like increased communication mechanisms or incident prevention protocols, etc, the immediate consequence is expected to be strategic adjustment among major powers and heightened deterrence posturing. In short, the advancement of China's nuclear capabilities presents a complex challenge to existing frameworks of strategic stability and arms control.

## **Conclusion**

The Victory Day parade of 2025, held only days before the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Beijing, was more than a national celebration. It was a calculated demonstration that blended military spectacle with diplomatic positioning. By presenting its nuclear triad openly on Tiananmen Square and then welcoming regional leaders to the SCO, China sought to affirm both its strategic deterrence capabilities and its claim to a central role in Eurasian security. The timing created a deliberate contrast: nuclear weapons on parade to signal strength, followed by multilateral dialogue to project leadership. Taken together, these two events reflected Beijing's growing confidence in using both hard power and institutional influence to shape the regional order on its own terms.

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