Why Xi, Putin and Kim on One Stage Matters

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Beijing's Victory Day parade in Tiananmen Square was designed to dazzle: ranks of uniformed troops, formations of aircraft, and an arsenal of new systems meant to underscore China's rapid military modernization. But the most consequential image was not a missile or a stealth jet. It was a tableau of three leaders—Xi Jinping at the center, flanked by Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un—watching the spectacle together. The scene, widely broadcast and photographed, turned a commemorative event into a geopolitical marker. It was less a snapshot than a signal: the public normalization of a deepening alignment among China, Russia, and North Korea, at a moment when Western democracies are struggling to sustain cohesion on core strategic questions.

The parade itself offered the familiar mixture of hardware and narrative. Coverage highlighted the unveiling or public confirmation of advanced systems across domains: upgraded intercontinental missiles, new submarine-launched ballistic missiles, hypersonic and anti-ship capabilities, long-range bombers, early warning aircraft, and a broad stable of unmanned platforms, including undersea vehicles and "loyal wingman" drones. Chinese media presented these developments as evidence of a "world-class" People's Liberation Army (PLA) moving beyond legacy constraints and into truly multi-domain operations, with information, space, and cyber now integrated alongside land, sea, and air. Independent reporting catalogued the breadth of systems and emphasized a narrative of credible deterrence and strategic depth rather than mere choreography.

Yet the more instructive message was political. The presence of Putin and Kim, alongside other leaders, was not a mere ceremonial occurrence. Each leader arrived with clear incentives to be seen at Xi's side, and each gained by lending visual weight to Beijing's story. For Moscow, the image reinforced the claim that Russia is not isolated, that it retains powerful partners and is embedded in a wider non-Western coalition. For Pyongyang, the moment was even more significant: an opportunity to step out of diplomatic isolation and be recognized publicly as a member of a consequential strategic grouping. For Beijing, hosting both leaders signaled that China can convene and coordinate—projecting status, reassuring sympathetic governments, and unsettling adversaries by hinting at a tighter web of cooperation among U.S. rivals.

The convergence behind the optics has been building for years, and could have happened only on Chinese soil. China and Russia have expanded their coordination across energy, defense, and diplomatic, even as they preserve maneuvering room on sensitive issues. North Korea's accelerating exchanges with Russia, alongside growing political warmth with Beijing, provide a third leg to this emerging tripod. None of this amounts to a formal alliance with mutual defense obligations. But it does resemble a strategic alignment held together by shared interests: resisting a U.S.-led order, blunting sanctions pressure, reducing vulnerability to Western technology restrictions, and demonstrating that alternatives exist to dollar-centric finance and Western supply chains. The choreography on the rostrum did not create this alignment; it made it more legible and clear.

Memory politics is a key component of that legibility. Beijing's decision to anchor the parade in the commemoration of victory over Japan allows contemporary power projection to be cloaked in a unifying moral narrative. China increasingly leverages World War II memory in diplomacy—shaping a "memory war" that reframes the post-1945 order and what is seen from China as its rightful place within it. Russia's long-standing use of the "Great Patriotic War" plays a parallel role, justifying current policies through selective historical continuity. North Korea's revolutionary mythology fits easily into this narrative architecture. By standing together at an anniversary of anti-

fascist victory, the three leaders signaled an ideational convergence that complements their material cooperation: a claim to moral legitimacy as guardians of an alternative international vision.

The military dimension of the parade, while not the core of this argument, still matters. Displays of a maturing triad—land-based ICBMs, submarine-launched systems, and an air-launched nuclear component—aim to convey survivable second-strike capacity. The public presentation of hypersonic and anti-ship systems is meant to complicate adversary planning in the Western Pacific. The range of unmanned platforms suggests an intent to saturate domains with relatively low-cost, attritable assets, improving persistence and compressing the sensor-to-shooter loop. It is prudent to treat parades cautiously: not all showcased systems are fully operational or fielded at scale, and performance claims are difficult to validate. But as an indicator, the breadth and integration of platforms reflect a planning culture committed to joint operations and "intelligentized" warfare, where AI-enabled targeting and decision support are not theoretical ambitions but programmatic priorities

What, then, does the image of Xi–Putin–Kim actually change? First, it clarifies expectations. Observers no longer need to infer the trajectory of this triangular relationship from scattered bilateral overtures. The three leaders have chosen to make their alignment visible. Visibility creates deterrent value, raising the perceived costs of coercing any one member, and it can also facilitate practical cooperation: intelligence sharing, diplomatic coordination at the UN and other fora, synchronized signaling during regional crises, and mutually reinforcing sanctions-evasion practices. Second, it complicates Western planning. Even if Beijing keeps caution around direct military assistance in Europe or the Korean Peninsula, diplomatic top-cover, economic buffering, and technology flows short of lethal aid can still alter the correlation of forces over time. Finally, it resonates across the Global South. Many governments seek strategic autonomy and resist being forced into binary choices. The parade's optics supplied a ready-made narrative for those who argue that the international system is already multipolar and that non-Western coalitions can deliver security and development without Western tutelage.

The contrast with Western coordination was strikingly evident. In the transatlantic community, support for Ukraine remains substantial; however, debates about resource levels, war aims, and timelines have intensified. In the Indo-Pacific, there is a growing alignment on deterring coercion in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea; however, national economic interests and differing risk tolerances result in uneven policies toward China. Across Europe and North America, electoral politics continue to inject volatility into foreign policy, complicating efforts to sustain long-term, bipartisan strategies. None of these frictions amounts to collapse, and there are genuine Western successes in coalition-building—from NATO enlargement to evolving minilateral formats in the Indo-Pacific. However, an analytically honest reading of the moment acknowledges that the authoritarian trio in Beijing has projected a unity of purpose that Western capitals currently struggle to match consistently.

Three implications follow. The first is narrative competition. If Beijing, Moscow, and Pyongyang can turn a commemorative event into a global story about legitimacy and resilience, they will continue to use history as a strategic resource. The appropriate Western response is not to cede the narrative field but to invest in historically grounded, forward-looking messaging that explains the link between rules-based order and practical benefits—trade reliability, crisis management, and sovereignty protection—for diverse audiences. The second is coalition maintenance. Western policymakers will need to prioritize "coalition hygiene": aligning export controls and investment screening where it matters most; building redundancy into critical supply chains; closing divergences in sanctions enforcement; and coordinating messaging so that tactical differences do not obscure strategic alignment. This requires political discipline more than new institutions. The third is theater integration. As the Beijing image suggested a cross-regional understanding among three adversarial capitals, allied planning must better account for cross-theater linkages—how actions in Europe affect deterrence in Asia, and vice versa—and ensure that resource allocations and industrial policies reflect genuinely global prioritization.

It is important not to overstate. The emerging alignment among China, Russia, and North Korea is asymmetric and interest-based, not a tightly binding alliance. Beijing's global economic integration imposes constraints that Moscow and Pyongyang do not share. Russia and North Korea each bring liabilities that China will manage carefully. Frictions—over technology, pricing, and regional equities—will persist. But the threshold crossed in Beijing is nonetheless meaningful. These governments judged that the benefits of public proximity now outweigh the costs.

That judgment, once made, is difficult to reverse quickly; it tends to generate its own momentum through bureaucratic follow-through and sunk reputational costs.

One image cannot rewrite the balance of power. It can, however, crystallize a trend and concentrate minds. The sight of Xi, Putin, and Kim standing together did exactly that. It captured an authoritarian convergence rooted in shared grievances and converging strategies, and it highlighted the challenge facing democracies that wish to preserve an open and stable order: maintaining the patience, unity, and policy discipline to act together. The test for the West is less whether it recognizes the signal—most capitals do—than whether it can convert recognition into sustained, collective action. If Beijing's parade was a demonstration of choreography and intent, the appropriate answer is not a counter-parade, but the quieter work of alignment: aligning narratives with interests, interests with instruments, and instruments with partners. That work is not glamorous. It is, however, what turns a photo into policy.

About the author:

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