# Opinion – Why China Parades Power as Peace

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/09/14/opinion-why-china-parades-power-as-peace/

ENRICO GLORIA, SEP 14 2025

China's 2025 Victory Day military parade drew global attention as China flexed its growing military might and its claim to the status of a full-fledged great power. Some of the weapons on display were the new DF-5C intercontinental ballistic missiles and the country's so-called "strategic ace"—a land, sea, and air nuclear triad that strengthens its overall deterrence posture. Indeed, it is easy to view the spectacle as deterrence theater, a message to rivals that China has the tools to punish and survive escalation. Likewise, the presence of key authoritarian leaders, coupled with the absence of U.S. officials and their allies, further underscored an emerging non-Western coalition. Yet this only tells half the story. From President Xi Jinping's rallying speech to the release of 80,000 balloons and 80,000 doves, the parade was also performative, a spectacle designed to reinforce China's enduring commitment to peace even as it flaunts its growing strength.

At the opening of the ceremony, President Xi Jinping declared that "China will always be a force for peace," while soldiers on parade along the Chang'an (eternal peace) avenue proudly chanted in unison: "justice will prevail, peace will prevail, and the people will prevail". The prominence of "peace" at the parade underscores how deeply the concept has been woven into China's worldview and foreign policy logic. Nowhere is this clearer than under Xi Jinping's regime where China has repeatedly asserted that peace is part of the Chinese DNA. At a similar military parade held in 2019, he proclaimed that "the Chinese nation does not carry aggressive or hegemonic traits in its genes," linking the idea of harmony to China's 5,000-year-old civilization.

This indigenization of peace in Chinese culture and history reflects a broader effort to align the Confucian ideals of inclusivity amidst diversity with the modern practice of Chinese foreign policy. Crucially, such history-infused narratives have frequently surfaced in Beijing's rationalization of its role in global governance and ultimately, its self-image as a natural force for peace. This framing of peace as innate to Chinese civilization essentially closes the loop: for Beijing, its pursuit of peace is not a choice but a destiny.

China's pacifist posture is also grounded in constant references to victimhood. Beijing often invokes its history of suffering to argue that a nation once subjected to repeated aggression naturally cherishes the order and harmony it now enjoys. State media coverage of the parade, for example, stressed the heavy price paid by the Chinese people for victory in World War II, framing peace as both hard-won and costly. These victimhood discourses have long been a staple of Chinese foreign policy because they provide moral justification for otherwise coercive behavior. For instance, rather than acknowledging its punitive capacity outright, Beijing often couches its informal measures such as tacit sanctions against "offending" states, as justified or natural consequences.

Similarly, narratives of China's wartime victory emphasize its suffering of 35 million military and civilian casualties, about a third of all losses in World War II, and its role as the first nation to resist fascist aggression. These reminders supposedly lend credence to Beijing's self-portrayal as a power that is innately harmonious. In China's narrative, it is precisely through persistent victimhood that its claim to peace gains moral force. On the more practical side, China also frames peace as the foundation that guarantees prosperity and, in turn, order for its vast state. During the parade, Xi Jinping reaffirmed this commitment to peaceful development despite growing uncertainties and the persistence of "China threat" perspectives.

Peaceful development and peaceful coexistence have long been fixtures of Chinese foreign policy discourses, with

continuities running from Mao to Xi. At its core, they echo the liberal thesis that economic interdependence fosters shared prosperity, and with it, the conditions for lasting peace. This view is apparent for instance in Xi Jinping's trip to Southeast Asia earlier this year, where he repeatedly stressed that regional stability is inseparable from economic progress, casting China's influence as integral to the region's continued development. China thus continues to embrace the liberal promise of peace through prosperity to assure its partners, even if it sometimes parades its missiles and drones to make the point stick.

Like other great powers in history, China is obsessed with selling the idea of harmony and shared prosperity. What makes its vision distinct, however, is the narrative of suffering that underpins it, and ironically, the non-military (i.e. economic) appeal it projects to the world. Taken together, China's invocation of an innate 'genetic code' of peace, its appeals to historical victimhood, and its embrace of peaceful development underpin a narrative of peace that it strategically deploys to cast itself as a distinct, non-Western yet ultimately benign major power.

The missiles rolling down Chang'an Avenue and the optics of Xi flanked by Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un sent an unmistakably antagonistic message especially to Western audiences. Yet focusing only on this surface-level image risks overlooking the other half of the story—China's own articulation of what its capabilities were meant to signify. Alongside the display of military hardware, Chinese narratives on the day of the parade emphasized the defensive nature of the country's national defense policy. Beijing stressed that while it takes pride in its military advances, it remains committed to a no-first-use nuclear doctrine and continues to situate security within the broader context of safeguarding prosperity and development. By contrast, Washington's recent decision to revive the historic Department of War only reinforces Beijing's self-portrait as a force for peace, casting its rival as the one openly embracing assertiveness.

In presenting this pacifist stance, China seeks to frame its cutting-edge capabilities not as tools of coercion, but as markers of readiness as they aspire to claim a greater voice in global affairs. For China, the underlying logic is clear: military modernization is not only a prerequisite for major-power status, but also the necessary foundation for a global leadership that speaks for those left behind by the Western liberal order. For Beijing, flexing its strength is not a betrayal of peace but the very proof that it has the power to guarantee it. Chinese officials often argue that the world is in flux, beset by a governance deficit, while blaming the US-led West for unraveling the postwar international order. They also highlight the inevitable rise of the Global South as further proof that global governance reforms are overdue.

To this end, China has been quick to propose supplements to the existing UN-based system. At the SCO summit held just two days before the parade, Xi unveiled the Global Governance Initiative, signaling Beijing's intent to take a leading role in reshaping what it sees as a troubled order. This week, Xi doubled down on this agenda by emphasizing that countries of the Global South must be better represented in global governance, urging them to expand their participation through the growing BRICS bloc. Meanwhile, Washington's traditional leadership role is under greater scrutiny—not least because of its habit of weaponizing trade, including to its own partners and allies, in an effort to fend off an emerging multipolar world.

Against this backdrop, Chinese narratives frequently contrast America's apparent decline with Beijing's self-styled contributions to peace and global governance. Chinese academics have also emphasized that China's vision of peace is rooted in upholding the sanctity of the UN Charter, which can be framed as the living testament to the wartime victories of 80 years ago. Indeed, by tying peace to the UN Charter and the post-war international order it vows to defend and sustain, Beijing casts itself as the true heir to the victory of 1945. And the weapons on display during the parade were not just instruments of war, but symbols meant to signal that China is ready to safeguard peace, to shape global governance, and to claim its place as a responsible leader in an uncertain world.

But China's appeal to peace is best measured beyond words. The real test lies in how its partners, especially those on its periphery, perceive its actions, and whether Beijing can follow through on promises of global governance reform without overextending its capabilities. With the exception of states at the frontlines of territorial disputes, there is evidence that many of China's neighbors are drifting closer to Beijing. Economic pull is one reason, but growing doubts about Washington's staying power as an offshore balancer also work in China's favor. Beijing's narratives

double down on this point, consistently portraying American hegemony as waning, while U.S. foreign policy under Trump is cast as erratic and destabilizing.

Claims to peace and stability by major powers are always relative. Today, Xi Jinping is selling a multipolar order with China as an active player, while Washington offers little that inspires confidence. Against this backdrop, China flexes not only its military capabilities but also its vision to "fix" a postwar order it sees as betrayed by U.S. leadership. Whether performative or genuine, China's consistent appeals to peace must be judged in the context of an international order in flux. And its triumphalism on full display last week lends, if nothing else, a measure of credibility to its promise of peace and prosperity.

---

## About the author:

**Enrico Gloria** is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of the Philippines Diliman and a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of International Relations at Tsinghua University. His research focuses on China's rise, its foreign policy toward ASEAN, Sino-Philippine relations, and the role of discourse and narratives in major-power diplomacy. His work has been published in *The Pacific Review*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *Foreign Policy Analysis*. He also contributes commentary to outlets including *Rappler*, *South China Morning Post*, *East Asia Forum*, and *The Diplomat*.