Asia Rising Podcast – China Parade

Matt Smith
Welcome to Asia Rising a podcast of La Trobe Asia, where we examine the news, events and general happenings of Asia's States and Societies. I'm your host Matt Smith and this month saw China celebrate 70 years since victory against the Japanese invaders. The Chinese Communist Party held a massive military parade which was as much a celebration as it was a statement to the rest of the world. With me to discuss what we should take away from this event are two guests, Professor Nick Bisley, Executive Director of La Trobe Asia, welcome to you.

Professor Nick Bisley
Hi Matt.

Matt Smith
And Doctor James Leibold, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics and Philosophy at La Trobe University, welcome to you.

Doctor James Leibold
Thanks Matt.

Matt Smith
No-one was expecting China to go into this celebration half-heartedly, so I was hoping to get a bit of an impression just to start with from both of you, what kind of scale were we talking about with this parade and what did the Chinese invest in this?

Nick Bisley
Well it's the third biggest thing held ever in Tiananmen Square at least since the establishment of the Peoples' Republic, the previous two big military jamborees of this kind were held to celebrate respectively the fiftieth and sixtieth anniversaries of the Founding of the Peoples Republic of China. This is smaller and they count every tank and every soldier and every battalion they're very acutely aware of the significance and symbolism of size and scale.

So it was smaller in terms of the numbers of people involved and the tanks and the kit, but nonetheless it was huge in scale and size, something that would have cost millions and millions of dollars, plus massive opportunity cost to set the thing up. The city was shut down for weeks in advance, factories were closed previously to allow the normally very hazy, smoggy, polluted skies of Beijing to be clear. One wag on a twitter described the colour that they were seeking was 'anti-fascist blue' in the sky to get the spirit of the moment.

This was a divisional one Grade A big deal. A National holiday was called, in days leading up to it the citizenry were encouraged to get into the martial spirit of things. Television stations were reprogrammed with "Appropriate Material", and it was as much of a historical celebration, but also a kind of Royal Wedding feel to it, so people were encouraged to have block parties, and street parties, and get together to watch all of this and to celebrate and be positive. And in classic Chinese Communist Party Fashion it's an absolutely fabricated event but one which was thought down and choreographed to every last step.

Matt Smith
So to say that it was smaller was that strategically smaller than the 50/60 years celebration?

Nick Bisley
Very deliberate, and they sent out all this information about exactly how many things were involved from the biggest to the smallest.

James Leibold
These things follow a very tight scripted degree of precedence. You know, it's been the fifteenth of these military parades, most of them held in the 1950's, the 1960's they agreed that they would only be held every 10 years. It's quite well choreographed as Nick talked about, right down to the dress that officials had to wear, the type of cars used, but in some ways this was quite unprecedented in the sense that, in the past all the military parades have been held to celebrate the anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, this is the first time that China has held a military parade to mark another occasion, in this case the 70th Anniversary of Victory Day against the Japanese and this anti-fascist war.

Matt Smith
So this parade had a number of agendas to a number of different people and Xi Jinping probably had in his mind what this parade is all about and the people of China had their own vision of what it was all about and the outside world as well.

So what should we be taking away from all of this and what do you think is going on for Xi Jinping and what would he see this parade as being about?

James Leibold
I think I can speak to that domestically and Nick is in a much better place to talk about it internationally. Domestically I saw it as an attempt by Xi to sort of say 'I'm in charge'. And the reason I think he needs to do that is there's some fragility in his rule and he needs to push forward his agenda.

Since coming to power in 2013, he convened his 3rd Plenum of the Central Committee which was set up to push forward the reform agenda. It came up with 300 different proposals on the table. Thus far not a single one of those proposals has been pushed through, so he's very frustrated. One of the keys of the success of China's reform and opening up began in the 1980's with Deng Xiaoping was devolving power and decision making down to the provincial-level down to the prefecture-level even down at the county-level.

And in some ways Xi while he's quite powerful in Beijing and in Zhongnanhai, with the military behind him, he's kind of hamstrung, he's been frustrated in his ability to push through a lot of these reforms in a very complicated bureaucratic structure with a lot of vested interest. There are signs coming out of Beijing that a lot of decision making that he has gathered up around himself, (he's set up a lot of these leadership small groups with himself as Chair), a lot of that now has been devolved back down to the State Council. Essentially he is giving up his kind of 'work around' approach and try to push a lot of these reforms through the State Council. But whether State Council can do it, that's an unknown question at this stage?

Nick Bisley
There's a couple of things, I think one of the important symbolic things they were trying to do was, not just the 'I'm in charge' and Xi Jinping is very much the paramount leader, but also to really ram

home this sense of particular vision of Chinese identity. The Chinese Nationalism The Party has made central to what it does and why it's in charge.

Primarily the parade was about 1945 and the defeat of the Japanese and in the war that had been going on for eight years it was also about the broader struggle against imperialism, so one of the struggles during the celebration was a red carpet that was 121 steps long, each step was to represent a year since the start of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894. It's about the big long fight that China and Japan had that was in essence about a 50 year conflict in one way or another, but also more broadly this military march past shows the Chinese people, (and it was really intended for the Chinese people) that China was strong again and those foreigners who came and humiliated us and tore us apart and made us from being the biggest, proudest most important country on the planet to this backward, humiliated, disgraced people, that will never happen again and it won't happen again because of us, because of The Party. So there's a not too subtle message.

But the problem without getting too post-modern is, you have an intention to do something; you write a book - you make a play, you have no control over how people will interpret it, particularly outside of China. Interpretations either leave people very concerned about how China sees itself and its place in the world, i.e., China's put this nationalist identity which is about 'The world is out to get us and we have to protect ourselves from this hostile world, through the use of military power'.

You know if you're Xi Jinping you have to symbolise to your people that you are a powerful strong leader and you do it in the fashion as if it were 1951 or 1875 i.e. big bristling military power, then: A) you're probably not as strong as you think you are and B) it means that politically when contests happen, then the military is front of mind.

And so we've got a country that thinks about itself in deeply militarised terms that thinks about 'the world is out to get it', that thinks the world is presenting an identity to its population very explicitly, that brings them up to have a victimhood mentality and that is a pretty dangerous combination.

Matt Smith
It seems to be though, a portrayal that China is completely fine with putting forward because Xi Jinping's message was all about peace in his speech, and about a peaceful approach to everything and yet the parade said pretty much the exact opposite. And I don't think it entirely worried him what interpretation the world was going to take away from that at all. It seemed like he was quite happy for everyone to have a mixed message.

James Leibold
Well the military is a big part of his powerbase and he's one of the first Chinese leaders to come to power with some experience in the military, unlike his predecessor Hu Jintao, on anointment did take over the Chairmanship of the Central Military Commission, he's worked very hard to promote his generals up through the ranks and so in some ways you can interpret this parade as throwing a bone to his major supporters in the military.

In fact if you look back at the history of these military parades, the last two have occurred when Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin were quite far into their ten year term. This came in the third year and arguably Xi could Chair at least two more of these military parades before he steps down in 2022. So I think there's an interesting relationship going on between the military and Xi Jinping, and as Nick said, the danger of course is what if the military says, 'It's time that we actually stand up, we actually do something', Xi's going to be in a very difficult and weak position to say 'No'.

Nick Bisley
I think you're right that Xi doesn't care what people think. That's an important point that's often forgotten and I guess the other thing is in your other podcasts about Ancient Rome, I always forget the Roman general who came up with 'If you want peace – prepare for war'. That's where the adage comes from, that's what they're thinking. And certainly the language he used in his speech was about 'We're not going to do to others what others did to us', so we're not going to go out and invade and all that sort of stuff. And I don't think anyone – even the most paranoid conservative China hawk thinks China is going to do what the Soviet Union did and roll tanks across Eastern Europe and the like.

But the problem is there are a lot of disputes about territory which are becoming increasingly militarised and which involve the risks of very serious conflict. You know the disputed territories in the East China Sea, the islands that the Japanese call the Senkaku, the Chinese call Diaoyutai. The Americans have said "If something happens here, this is covered by our treaty", this is a very explicit trigger for a good old fashioned great power war. And what we saw in Beijing on 3rd September was a China which says 'We're up for it', and that for me is a really disconcerting sign.

That's it's not saying 'What does it mean to be China today in the 21st Century and to be proud of who we are', it means intercontinental ballistic missiles rolling down unconsciously.

James Leibold
Which they haven't used. I mean they haven't used any of their weapons, haven't fought a war since 1979 against the Vietnamese.

Nick Bisley
Which they lost.

James Leibold
Which they lost, and so there are a lot of people in the military who say 'Hey we've got these new toys, why can't we use some of them?' They look at the Americans and the Americans have been involved in Afghanistan, Iraq fighting against now ISIS, you put yourself in the mindset of the Chinese military and those generals and they want to have a go.

Matt Smith
So let's look at the guest list at the parade, all world leaders were nominally welcome but very few took China up on the offer. Vladimir Putin was there in a prime position as was Xi Jinping during the celebrations in Moscow earlier in the year which indicates the close ties that those two countries would like everybody to think they have. What else was in play here as far as the guest list goes?

Nick Bisley
The symbolism of who's there and where they stand really matters. None of the major Western Allies, (all of whom were invited to attend at the highest level) attended, they all sent basically about as junior a cabinet ministery-type of political figure as they could. So Australia sent the Minister for Veterans Affairs which is a master stroke, it's genius because it's exactly right – Cabinet Minister - perfect. Veterans Affairs, this is about Veterans, but boy it's junior. And that was the cue for all the major allies.

The only notable head of state who was there was President Park Geun-hye from South Korea and she had position No 1. Putin was on one side, Park was on the other side, Putin is part of the authoritarian fan club fine, but Park is American allied, democracy.

It's basically thought that she went because of Prime Minister Abe's statement on 15th August, so this was the 70th Anniversary and Japan was treated in quite the opposite way from the Chinese. Not a military parade or anything, it was a statement of trying to come to terms with the past by Prime Minister Abe which itself was quite controversial. Reached out in that speech metaphorically to China and made, what a lot of us thought were quite considerable concessions, not necessarily apologising and really kow-towing to the Chinese, but naming China, saying what Japan did wrong in China. There was an interesting passive voice aspect to it, but Korea was not mentioned by name once.

The Korean reaction was, in essence if you're going to treat us like that, we're going to Beijing. That's the general take on it, plus Korea sees China as actually quite an important partner, not just economically its No. 1 trade and investment partner, but also an important way of keeping a lid on North Korea.

Matt Smith
Briefly North Korea Kim Jong-un was going to go but didn't like where his seat was, so opted out.

James Leibold
For safety right, he hasn't left North Korea. He's been to Moscow once by all accounts.

Nick Bisley
He wanted to be right next to Xi Jinping. North Korea's Chinas only treaty ally and said 'As your treaty ally I should stand next to you', and as course Xi Jinping doesn't want to buy of this so it's just like 'Na, forget it'.

James Leibold
And for the domestic Chinese audiences, these parades are always an occasion to see who is in and who is out in terms of political leaders and there was a lot of talk after the parade about the appearance of Jiang Zemin, the former party secretary who is now 89 years old, often thought to be in poor health but he looked reasonably robust, he could stand up by himself and give a big thumbs up which people interpreted in various ways.

There was also a lot of discussion of Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping's immediate predecessor, the fact that he looked grumpy, he didn't want to be there, finally Li Peng the formal premier who declared martial law and orchestrated the troops to go in and clear the Tiananmen square in 1989, he was seen as looking quite feeble.

Nick Bisley
They weren't there in really …. because the way the Chinese political system has worked since Mao, essentially the party realised that Mao was a one-man despot and the thinking had been since Mao 'You had a paramount leader – you needed a paramount leader, but that person needed some checks and balances within the party, and the predecessor was seen as playing an important role in that so that whoever came before you lurks in the background just as a kind of counter weight'.

And that always creates a degree of tension in the Chinese political system, because you've got the previous guard behind you who potentially can always stymie what you are trying to do but it's seen in the party as an important way to ensure that Maoism doesn't happen again. And so the thinking at the moment is, you've got Xi Jinping, this guy who's been doing a Mao concentration of China and he has these tensions with his predecessor, and in particular Jiang

Zemin who's seen as the most important of his predecessors so having them all there says 'It's all ok, nothing to worry about here it's all in line'.

But as Jim says, it's such a closed society, the Kremlinology that goes on with the, who's sitting next to whom and what does the thumbs up mean and how high did his thumb go up? (Laughter).

James Leibold
Yeah, and Xi's anti-corruption campaign has targeted a lot of the allies of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, so there's tensions there; don't mistake that so they come together but it's carefully orchestrated, and we really don't know how much contact they have, probably very little outside these formal events.

Matt Smith
So this kind of celebration/show of force never happens in isolation so what else is going on around this parade at the moment?

Nick Bisley
Do you mean militarily what else are they doing?

Matt Smith
Yeah, there's a lot of flexing of muscles going on when China's concerned both internally and externally.

Nick Bisley
Militarily they're in about their 15th year of significantly increasing military expenditure. They're developing a whole range of new war fighting capabilities as the military basically calls it, 'kit to fight wars a long way from home.' To fight high intensity wars, to be able to extend China's physical military reach well beyond China, so historically the Chinese military couldn't go far literally off shore let along into places like the South China Sea or beyond.

At the moment they've got one aircraft carrier, they're developing another one, they're developing this time, ones that actually work well and are not complete death traps, new attack submarines, looking to use submarines as a platform to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles with nuclear weapons. At the moment all they've got is land based missile systems which are more easily defeated, submarine ones are almost impossible to defend against so it gives them a big edge in terms of their deterrent capability and they're looking to professionalise their military.

So at the moment it's close to 2 million men primarily under arms, most of whom are conscript and conscript armies these days are thought to be pretty second rate, very inefficient, very poor discipline and the like and so they're trying to turn it into an effective force. And this 300,000 man cut is presented as we mean business and in terms of peace? It means no, no, just part of your professionalization programme. You want a smaller better fighting force.

But what is China trying to do? China is trying to be in a position that soon, it will not feel that it is vulnerable to American military power. At the moment China depends for things like basic energy on stuff that's coming from land and sea but primarily by sea, through the Straits of Malacca, up the South China Sea and into the various Chinese ports on the Eastern Sea Board. At the moment the US Navy could choke that all off if they wanted to do that and the Chinese want to be in a position where America can't do that.

There's other talk about things like the string of pearls which is a notion of China having a series of military bases across the Indian Ocean. Most people thing that’s kind of – if that's going to

happen that's 50 years away – it's not.

Matt Smith
I was reading this yesterday about Africa.

Nick Bisley
Yeah stuff in Africa. This is not practical, they can barely get their ships to Africa at the moment, let alone have a base there. They do want be able to have a capacity to defend Chinese interests far from China and China is a trade dependant country and a lot of their trade sails across the Indian Ocean, and at the moment in the Indian Ocean, no one has a naval predominance there as the US has in the Western Pacific. It's a big expensive hard to do, politically challenging and their priorities at the moment are closer to home but this isn't going to stop any time soon.

Matt Smith
Jim, priorities closer to home?

James Leibold
Yeah well domestically I think there's a concern that maybe the reform process has kind of stalled. It's been two years since the 3rd Plenum, none of the 300 odd proposals have been pushed through successfully. There is concern that GDP growth is slowing, there are jitters on the Shanghai stock market, concerns that 'How do we jumpstart the reform process once again?"

The big question is the Chinese economy is: how do we shift the economic model away from an export investment model to a more domestic consumption model? In order to do that there's a whole raft of policies from WACO reform to SOE Reform that needs to be pushed forward at the same time. The problem with a lot of these reform issues, they're intertwined with other domestic issues and they're intertwined with a lot of deeply entrenched vested interests in this large Chinese bureaucratic system.

How to orchestrate that, push it through has been a difficult challenge. I mean, Xi Jinping initially thought the best way to do that was to concentrate power in his own hands but he's starting to realise that actually that method hasn't succeeded.

Matt Smith
So a sort of more united China would be a benefit to him and his interests?

James Leibold

Well he needs to find a way to get the system working again in breaking down vested interests. To do that, and do that successfully, you either had to have a lot of political capital that you can spend to push things through, or you had to carefully work the game, work the relationships and that takes time.

And he does have 10 years, I mean he's got 7 more years, but it's now an open question whether he'll be able to do that, whether he'll be able to succeed in pushing forward the reforms? Will he have enough time? What happens if the economy continues to decline, what happens…,

You know I'm not convinced that this whole thing couldn't unravel. I think he has grand ambitions that he will be there for the 100th Anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2020 / 2021, another large military parade, but that may not eventuate.

Matt Smith

Xi Jinping's house of cards. Very good. That's all the time we have today. You've been listening to Asia Rising the podcast of La Trobe Asia. My thanks to my guests today Nick and Jim, thank you both.

Nick and Jim

Thanks Matt.

Matt Smith

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