

China's Military Parade as Strategic Signaling: The Role of Advanced Weaponry in Shaping Global Security Perceptions

Original article

Received: 2025-09-26

Revised: 2025-10-08

Accepted: 2025-10-26

Final review: 2025-10-02

Peer review: 2025-10-02

Double blind

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A – Research concept and design, B – Collection and/or assembly of data, C – Data analysis and interpretation, D – Writing the article, E – Critical revision of the article, F – Final approval of article

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Keywords:

China, emerging technologies, Indo-Pacific security, military parade, strategic signalling.

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Abstract

Objectives: This study investigates how China's 2025 Victory Day parade functioned as an act of strategic signaling aimed at influencing international security perceptions, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. It seeks to answer the question: How do authoritarian states use visible military displays to send composite signals of capability and intent to diverse global audiences?

Results: The parade integrated advanced military capabilities, such as hypersonic missiles, stealth aircraft, drone swarms, and counter-drone systems, with political symbolism, including leadership rhetoric and alliance imagery. The United States and allied countries largely interpreted the event as escalatory, prompting deterrence-oriented responses. ASEAN states displayed strategic ambivalence, balancing concern with pragmatic engagement. Global South actors often viewed the parade as a legitimate expression of multipolar leadership and national sovereignty.

Conclusions: Military parades like China's are not merely ceremonial but serve as sophisticated tools of statecraft. They influence defence planning, alliance cohesion, and strategic narratives. The study introduces a visibility–ambiguity framework to decode such events and calls for greater awareness of how diverse audiences interpret public military signaling in contested geopolitical environments.

1. Introduction

On September 3, 2025, Beijing staged its largest and most elaborate Victory Day parade to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of Japan's surrender in World War II. The event was far more than a ceremonial act of historical remembrance; it represented a calculated instance of strategic signalling directed toward international audiences; particularly democratic states whose institutions prioritize transparency, accountability, and predictable security arrangements. China unveiled a wide array of advanced military platforms, including hypersonic missiles, stealth fighters, autonomous drones, and counter-drone systems, alongside political messaging that positioned the country as a guardian of peace amid global disorder. General Secretary Xi Jinping's binary rhetoric of "peace or war," flanked by Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, served not only to display technological might but to project a vision of multipolar authoritarian resilience that directly challenges liberal-democratic security norms. As such, the parade demands close analysis not only for its military implications but for its symbolic impact on democratic perceptions and institutional responses (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2023).

Military parades are not new in Chinese political life, yet the 2025 parade carried heightened significance due to the global security environment. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has transitioned from a phase of catch-up modernization to one of selective technological leadership, particularly in hypersonic delivery systems, nuclear modernization, and unmanned systems (Cooper, 2018). Scholars increasingly argue that these technologies transform deterrence dynamics by compressing decision-making windows, introducing new escalation risks, and complicating arms control frameworks (Acton, 2018; Tellis, 2022). In this sense, China's parade was not merely a domestic spectacle, but an intentional signal aimed at shaping international perceptions of both its capabilities and resolve.

Security in the Indo-Pacific is strongly influenced by how states interpret such signals. Perceptions of China's intentions diverge widely across the region: while the United States and its allies tend to view PLA modernization as threatening escalation, some ASEAN states adopt hedging strategies, balancing economic interdependence with security concerns (Kuik, 2020; Hayamaru, 2022). Research demonstrates that misperceptions, whether underestimating or exaggerating an adversary's intentions, play a central role in heightening the security dilemma (Jervis, 2021). In this regard, the public nature of parades provides fertile ground for both reassurance and misinterpretation.

The 2025 parade exemplifies the concept of strategic signalling, wherein states deliberately communicate military capability and political intention to influence adversary or ally perceptions (Schelling, 1980; Roberts, 2024). Scholars distinguish between operational signals, such as mobilizations or exercises, and what Balestrieri (2023) terms "lesser signals": highly visible but low-risk displays like parades, which can convey credibility while minimizing immediate escalatory danger. Parades thus occupy a paradoxical space: they are overt, public, and symbolic, yet their meaning is ambiguous, particularly in an era of emerging technologies (Mastro, 2022).

Hypersonic glide vehicles, nuclear triad modernization, and AI-enabled drone swarms, all prominently displayed in Beijing, sharpen this ambiguity. These systems can be interpreted as stabilizing measures to ensure deterrence credibility, or as destabilizing instruments of coercion and first-strike temptation (Acton, 2018; Czajkowski, 2022). Similarly, China's deliberate display of both offensive and defensive drone capabilities, loitering munitions alongside counter-drone lasers, reflects lessons drawn from conflicts such as the Russia – Ukraine war, where inexpensive unmanned systems reshaped battlefield dynamics (Gady and Kofman, 2023). The inclusion of these systems signals China's readiness to wage technologically sophisticated warfare but also invites questions about doctrinal intent.

Strategic signalling must also be understood in its audience effects. For the United States and its allies, the parade reinforces concerns about China's capacity to challenge U.S. extended deterrence and to contest the maritime balance in the Indo-Pacific (Colby, 2021). For ASEAN middle powers, however, the signals are more complex: some interpret them as a deterrent posture seeking stability, while others see them as coercive demonstrations that necessitate hedging (Chang, 2022; Zhang, 2023). For Global South observers, China's alignment with Russia and North Korea may be framed as evidence of an alternative order to Western-led security frameworks (Kolodko, 2020).

The research gap emerges here. Although substantial scholarship examines PLA modernization, relatively little focuses on parades as a distinct form of signalling that blends material capability with symbolic politics. Moreover, the interaction between visibility (parades as global broadcast events) and ambiguity (dual-capable systems and emerging technologies) remains understudied. Existing analyses tend to treat modernization as either capability development or doctrinal evolution, without fully integrating the signalling dimension of public displays.

This article therefore addresses two questions: (1) How does China's 2025 Victory Day parade function as strategic signalling, combining military capability and political symbolism? (2) What are the likely perception effects on global security audiences, particularly U.S./allied planners and Indo-Pacific middle powers? By analysing the parade through the lens of signalling theory and security dilemma scholarship, the paper aims to illuminate how emerging technologies intersect with political theatre to shape the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific.

2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in secondary data analysis. Direct access to internal Chinese military documents or classified assessments was neither feasible nor appropriate given the political sensitivity of the subject matter. Instead, the research relied on methodological triangulation, combining insights from peer-reviewed scholarship, policy-oriented think tank reports, and credible international media coverage. This approach allowed the 2025 Victory Day parade to be examined both as a material demonstration of military capability and as a symbolic act of political communication (Bowen, 2009).

The dataset was composed of three categories. First, academic literature on strategic signalling, deterrence, and the security dilemma provided the theoretical framework for

interpretation. Particular emphasis was placed on studies published in the last five years to capture contemporary debates surrounding emerging technologies and shifting Indo-Pacific security dynamics. Second, think tank reports were drawn from leading institutions such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). These sources offered detailed assessments of Chinese military modernisation, contextualised within broader trends in global arms development (Tellis, 2022). Third, media coverage from outlets including Reuters, AP News, and The Guardian provided real-time accounts of the parade itself. Cross-referencing across multiple outlets helped reduce narrative bias and ensured factual reliability.

The analysis was conducted through structured content analysis. Military systems displayed during the parade, hypersonic glide vehicles, stealth fighters, nuclear-capable bombers, and drone swarms, were catalogued and classified according to their technological functions, potential signalling intentions, and intended audiences. In parallel, symbolic elements such as Xi Jinping's rhetoric, leadership presence, and alliance optics were examined as discursive signals intended to shape perception.

Three theoretical strands guided the interpretation. First, strategic signalling theory conceptualises parades as "lesser signals": highly visible and low risk compared with mobilisations or deployments, yet still credible because of their deliberate design (Schelling, 1980; Hodgson, 2024). Second, the security dilemma framework highlights the ambiguity of dual-capable systems, which can blur the line between defensive reassurance and offensive escalation (Jervis, 2021; Mastro, 2022). Third, perception and misperception approaches emphasise that signals matter only insofar as they are interpreted by audiences, whose readings may diverge depending on political alignment, historical memory, or structural reliance (Kuik, 2020; Hayamaru, 2022).

To enhance validity, claims drawn from journalistic reporting were systematically cross-checked against scholarly and policy analyses. Attention was paid to discursive asymmetries: Chinese state media framed the event as peace-oriented and commemorative, while many Western outlets highlighted escalation and coercive intent. This reflexive awareness reduced the risk of reproducing single-sided narratives.

The study recognises several limitations. Reliance on secondary sources restricts access to insider perspectives and operational detail. Moreover, signalling is inherently interpretive; no analysis can definitively uncover Beijing's intentions, only reconstruct plausible readings. Audience perceptions are also dynamic, subject to change as geopolitical contexts evolve. Despite these constraints, secondary qualitative analysis remains the most appropriate method for capturing the symbolic and communicative dimensions of China's 2025 parade (Bowen, 2009; Mastro, 2022).

As shown in Figure 1, the analytical pathway developed for this study illustrates how the parade functions as a signalling event, how signals interact with structural dilemmas, and how different audiences decode them. The parade is thus treated not as an isolated performance but as part of a broader sequence of interactions, whose effectiveness depends on clarity of transmission, structural conditions, and interpretive outcomes.

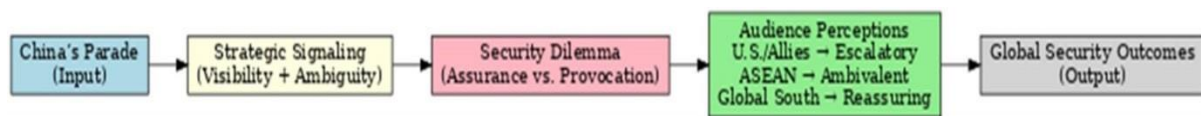


Fig 1. Analytical Framework of the Study

Source: Author's design based on Schelling (1980), Balestrieri (2023), Mastro (2022).

The parade is not an isolated display but part of a broader chain of interactions. Its effectiveness depends on how clearly signals are transmitted, how they interact with underlying structural dilemmas, and how audiences interpret them in context.

3. Results

3.1. *Military Capabilities as Signals*

The most conspicuous dimension of China's 2025 Victory Day parade was the display of advanced military capabilities. These were not simply technical showcases; they constituted deliberate signals embedded in the language of deterrence and credibility. Three clusters of capabilities stood out: hypersonic and nuclear systems, autonomous and cyber-enabled platforms, and fifth-generation stealth aircraft.

Hypersonic and nuclear systems

Foremost among the systems displayed were hypersonic glide vehicles and new variants of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), some reportedly dual-capable with both nuclear and conventional payloads. Analysts have highlighted that hypersonic are destabilizing because their speed and manoeuvrability compress adversary decision-making time, undermining traditional missile defence and strategic warning systems (Fetter, Thies and Mizin, 2024; Kristensen et al., 2025). By parading these systems, Beijing communicated two intertwined messages: deterrence credibility, that it possesses a survivable and penetrative strike force, and strategic ambiguity, that adversaries cannot easily distinguish between conventional and nuclear roles.

China also included elements of its evolving nuclear triad, with road-mobile ICBMs, strategic bombers, and ballistic missile submarines represented. This triad display signalled that China is no longer confined to a minimalist deterrence posture but is moving toward a more assured retaliation capability (Hiim, Fravel and Trøan, 2023). By showing the triad publicly, Beijing signalled to Washington and its allies that any attempt at coercion or disarming strike would face credible retaliation, while also reassuring domestic audiences of national strength.

Autonomous and cyber-enabled platforms

The parade also underscored China's investment in autonomous systems, including unmanned aerial swarms, undersea drones, and counter-drone technologies. Drawing on lessons from recent conflicts such as Ukraine, where low-cost drones reshaped battlefield dynamics, Beijing emphasized both offense and defence in the drone competition (Gady and Kofman, 2023). The inclusion of counter-drone lasers and microwave systems was particularly symbolic: China not only masters the disruptive low-cost drone game but also claims the ability to deny adversaries' use of such systems.

In addition, cyber-enabled command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) platforms were presented as part of the PLA's modernization drive. These platforms are not easily visible, yet their mention in official statements and representation through advanced vehicles signal China's commitment to building resilient and networked warfare capabilities. This was a subtle but important signal: while kinetic systems dominate parade optics, the future of warfare increasingly hinges on information dominance and electronic warfare (Tellis, 2022).

Stealth fighter and air power projection

The debut of the J-35A fifth-generation stealth fighter was another powerful signal. With advanced avionics, active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar, and a weapons payload reportedly comparable to Western fifth-generation aircraft, the J-35A represents China's ambition to achieve technological parity with the United States and its allies (Cooper, 2018). Airpower remains central to both deterrence and compellence, and by parading the J-35A, China showcased its ability to contest air superiority, project power in maritime domains, and symbolically break the perception of Western monopoly on fifth-generation platforms.

The air component of the parade also included long-range bombers with standoff cruise missiles, reinforcing China's ability to project conventional precision strike deep into adversary territory. Combined with hypersonic and autonomous systems, this creates a layered perception: China is capable of deterring at multiple levels of escalation, from low-cost drone harassment to survivable nuclear retaliation.

Integrative signalling

Taken together, these capability displays sent a multilayered signal. To adversaries, they indicated that China possesses both first-class kinetic systems and cutting-edge emerging technologies, complicating any attempt at strategic coercion. To allies and partners, they demonstrated Beijing's commitment to defending sovereignty and national interests with credible force. And to domestic audiences, they reaffirmed the PLA's transformation from a historically land-centric, manpower-heavy force to a modern, technology-driven military (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2023).

These signals were not accidental. Parades, by design, are carefully choreographed communication events. By combining nuclear-capable missiles, drone swarms, and stealth fighters in a single display, China was effectively saying: We can deter, we can deny, and we can project. The breadth of capabilities on display illustrated not just individual platforms but the integrated modernization of the PLA.

The parade's military dimension was most visible in the wide array of systems presented across land, sea, air, and cyber domains. Each capability was selected not only for its operational relevance but also for its communicative value. By juxtaposing next-generation platforms with legacy systems upgraded for modern combat, China sought to demonstrate both continuity and transformation in the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

In particular, the focus on hypersonic delivery systems, stealth fighters, and autonomous technologies suggested a shift toward technological leadership in areas that directly challenge U.S. and allied force planning. As shown in Table 1, these capabilities are categorized by type,

strategic function, and signalling effect, helping to clarify their intended message within the broader context of strategic display.

Table 1. Key Military Capabilities Displayed in China's 2025 Victory Day Parade

Capability Type	System Examples	Strategic Function	Signalling Effect
Hypersonic & Nuclear	DF-27 HGV, JL-3 SLBM	Assured retaliation, penetration	Deterrence & ambiguity
Air Power	J-35A stealth fighter, H-6N	Power projection, counter-air ops	Contesting air superiority
Autonomous Systems	Drone swarms, UUVs	ISR, saturation, disruptive ops	Innovation, adaptability
Counter-Drone Tech	Laser & microwave weapons	Denial of adversary UAV use	Defensive resilience
C3I & Cyber Systems	Advanced C3I platforms	Networked warfare, resilience	Modernization credibility

Source: Compiled by author from secondary data (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2023); Hiim et al. (2023); Czajkowski (2022).

The capabilities on display were not limited to traditional deterrence instruments but encompassed the full spectrum of warfare, from high-end nuclear systems to low-cost autonomous platforms. This breadth reflects China's strategic intent to signal layered deterrence: survivable nuclear retaliation at the top, conventional strike and air superiority in the middle, and disruptive autonomous technologies at the operational level. The addition of counter-drone systems and advanced C3I platforms conveyed not only offensive ambition but also defensive resilience and command integrity, emphasizing that the PLA is adapting to lessons from recent conflicts where drones and cyber vulnerabilities reshaped battlefields. By integrating these diverse systems into a single choreographed performance, Beijing sought to underscore that its military modernization is both technologically sophisticated and strategically versatile, complicating adversary calculations while reassuring domestic audiences of China's preparedness.

3.2. Political Symbolism

While military hardware dominated the optics of the 2025 Victory Day parade, its political symbolism was no less significant. The event was staged not only to project technological strength but also to choreograph images of political alignment, leadership resolve, and historical legitimacy. Political signals conveyed during the parade were just as deliberate as the missiles and stealth fighters paraded through Tiananmen Square.

Leadership presence and rhetorical framing

At the centre of the event stood President Xi Jinping, whose speech framed the commemoration as a stark binary: the world must choose between "peace or war." This rhetoric served multiple purposes. Domestically, it reinforced Xi's position as the guarantor of China's sovereignty and stability, portraying the Communist Party as the architect of peace in a dangerous international order. Internationally, the statement signalled that China sees itself

not as a disruptor but as a protector of stability, in contrast with narratives that portray it as a revisionist challenger (Hiim, Fravel and Trøan, 2023).

Xi's framing also echoed China's broader diplomatic narrative of "community of shared future," suggesting that the parade was not only about military strength but also about positioning China as the moral custodian of postwar peace. In effect, the juxtaposition of advanced weapons with the language of peace underscored the paradoxical message: China is armed, but for stability.

Strategic guest list: Putin and Kim Jong-Un

The presence of Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un was perhaps the most potent symbolic element of the parade. Their attendance communicated solidarity among powers frequently cast as adversaries of the U.S.-led order. For China, the optics of Xi flanked by Putin and Kim sent a powerful message: that Beijing is not isolated but embedded in a network of alternative partnerships that challenge Western dominance (Kolodko, 2020).

The political symbolism of this trio can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, it reassured domestic audiences and Global South observers that China is not facing Western pressure alone. On the other hand, it intensified Western perceptions of a de facto authoritarian bloc. Scholars of signalling argue that such coalition displays amplify the credibility of deterrence messages: a united front suggests greater costs to any adversary contemplating confrontation (Roberts, 2024).

Historical memory and legitimacy

Victory Day parades are deeply embedded in the Communist Party's strategy of historical legitimation. By linking the PLA's modern strength with the memory of defeating Japan in World War II, the leadership created continuity between past sacrifice and present capability. This historical invocation is not merely symbolic; it is politically functional, binding contemporary strategic aims with a narrative of national resilience and justice (Wuthnow and Fravel, 2023).

The 2025 parade, marking eighty years since Japan's surrender, particularly underscored this point. In China's official discourse, remembering wartime struggle justifies present-day vigilance and modernization. It also implicitly critiques Japan's own security posture, particularly its recent defence reforms and growing alignment with the U.S. and regional partners. Thus, the historical symbolism of the parade doubles as a strategic message: history mandates vigilance, and vigilance requires modernization.

Domestic consolidation and international projection

Domestically, the parade reaffirmed Xi's authority and the Party's central role in national defence. It demonstrated the PLA's loyalty, discipline, and modernization under his leadership. This form of political signalling is crucial in authoritarian contexts, where regime legitimacy is often tied to performance in delivering both economic prosperity and national security (Mastro, 2022).

Internationally, political symbolism extended to global audiences. To adversaries, it signalled unity with Russia and North Korea, complicating U.S. and allied strategies of isolating Beijing. To non-aligned states, it suggested that China champions multipolarity and resists Western hegemony. This duality, defiance toward the West, reassurance toward the Global South, illustrates the layered nature of China's signalling strategy.

Integrative political messaging

The political symbolism of the parade can thus be read as a deliberate orchestration of three interlocking messages:

- *Leadership resolve*, Xi as the embodiment of continuity between history, modernization, and peace.
- *Alliance solidarity*, Putin and Kim's presence as a visual signal of alternative alignments.
- *Historical legitimacy*, the invocation of World War II victory as justification for present-day power projection.

Together, these signals amplified the credibility of the military capabilities on display. Weapons alone could suggest mere technical power; political symbolism ensured that the message resonated as a comprehensive signal of intention and resolve.

Beyond hardware, the 2025 Victory Day parade was also a political performance carefully constructed to reinforce leadership authority, cultivate domestic legitimacy, and project strategic narratives abroad. Political symbolism was woven into the choreography of the event: Xi Jinping's speech, the presence of allied leaders, the invocation of historical memory, and the deliberate integration of military hardware with symbolic acts. Each element functioned as a signal in its own right, targeting specific audiences and shaping interpretations of China's intentions. As shown in Table 2, the major symbolic components are summarized along with their descriptions, intended audiences, and anticipated effects.

Table 2. Political Symbolism of the 2025 Parade

Symbolic Element	Description	Intended Audience	Likely Effect
Xi Jinping's Speech	"Peace vs. War" framing	Domestic & Global	Projecting stability narrative
Putin & Kim's Presence	Coalition optics with Russia, North Korea	West & Global South	Signals bloc solidarity
WWII Memory	Linking PLA strength to past sacrifice	Domestic	Legitimacy & continuity
Parade Choreography	Integration of hardware with symbolic acts	Global audiences	Blending capability & intent

Source: Author's analysis based on Kolodko (2020), Mastro (2022)

The political symbolism of the parade operated at multiple levels simultaneously. For domestic audiences, Xi's framing of a stark choice between peace and war, coupled with

references to wartime sacrifice, reinforced the Communist Party's legitimacy and positioned the PLA as the inheritor of national resilience. For global audiences, especially the Global South, the optics of bloc solidarity with Russia and North Korea conveyed that China is part of an alternative alignment challenging Western dominance. The careful choreography of integrating symbolic acts with visible military hardware further amplified the message that capability and intent are inseparable in Beijing's strategic narrative. Together, these political signals elevated the parade beyond a military exhibition, transforming it into a multilayered communication event designed to reassure some, deter others, and consolidate China's role as both guardian of historical memory and architect of future order.

3.3.Audience Perception

The ultimate effectiveness of strategic signalling lies not in the capability displayed or the symbols invoked, but in how these signals are perceived and interpreted by diverse audiences. The 2025

Victory Day parade was broadcast globally, and each audience, Western powers, regional states, and the Global South, read the same performance through different lenses. This divergence in perception is crucial, as it shapes defence policies, alliance behaviours, and the broader Indo-Pacific security architecture.

Western and allied perceptions

For the United States and its allies, the parade largely reinforced existing concerns about China's trajectory. Washington and allied capitals interpreted the unveiling of hypersonic missiles, stealth fighters, and nuclear triad modernization as evidence of a rapidly growing capability to contest U.S. military superiority in the Indo-Pacific (Colby, 2021). In allied discourse, the event underscored the erosion of U.S. extended deterrence, particularly for Japan, South Korea, and Australia, who rely on credible American guarantees (Frühling, 2021).

Western analysts also highlighted the risks of strategic ambiguity created by dual-capable systems. Hypersonic missiles, for instance, complicate early warning and missile defence, raising the danger of inadvertent escalation (Acton, 2018). Thus, what China might frame as a stabilizing assurance of deterrence was read in the West as an escalatory signal, deepening the security dilemma (Mastro, 2022).

ASEAN and regional middle powers

The perceptions among ASEAN states and Indo-Pacific middle powers were more ambivalent. Many Southeast Asian governments adopt what Kuik (2020) calls a "hedging instinct", seeking to balance economic engagement with China against security partnerships with the United States. For these states, the parade simultaneously confirmed China's capacity for coercion and its claim to regional leadership.

Some ASEAN leaders emphasized that China's invocation of peace, alongside military modernization, could be read as a reassuring signal, that Beijing seeks to deter conflict rather than provoke it. Others, however, worried that the explicit display of offensive systems, coupled with Xi's political rhetoric, might indicate a willingness to use force to settle disputes,

particularly in the South China Sea (Hayamaru, 2022). This interpretive divide reflects the structural dilemma of middle powers: they are simultaneously beneficiaries of China's economic rise and potential victims of its assertive security posture.

Global south and non-aligned perceptions

Beyond the Indo-Pacific, the Global South read the parade differently. For many non-aligned or developing countries, the optics of Xi standing with Putin and Kim resonated as a symbol of resistance to Western dominance. Ghiasy et al. (2023) note that China increasingly frames itself as a leader of an alternative global order, championing multipolarity and sovereignty. The Victory Day parade reinforced this narrative by connecting historical anti-imperial struggle with modern power projection.

In Africa, Latin America, and parts of the Middle East, China's parade was often portrayed in state media as evidence that the West no longer holds a monopoly on advanced military technology. Rather than seeing it as threatening, some governments interpreted it as a balancing force in international politics, potentially offering them more strategic space to manoeuvre.

The risk of misperception

A core insight from deterrence theory is that signals are vulnerable to misperception (Jervis, 2021). China's intention may have been to demonstrate resolve and deter adversaries while reassuring partners of its defensive posture. However, Western interpretations leaned toward escalation, ASEAN responses revealed ambivalence, and Global South perceptions suggested opportunity. This divergence creates a fragmented signal environment where the same performance produces contradictory effects.

Such fragmentation is dangerous in crises. If the United States interprets hypersonic deployments as escalatory while ASEAN interprets them as stabilizing, coordinated responses become difficult. Similarly, if Global South states view China's coalition with Russia and North Korea as a legitimate multipolar order, Western deterrence strategies may lose credibility outside their alliance networks.

Integrative assessment

The perception effects of the 2025 parade can be summarized as a triangular divergence:

- *Escalatory in the West*, where China is seen as undermining stability;
- *Ambivalent in ASEAN*, where signals are read both as reassurance and coercion;
- *Reassuring in the Global South*, where China is viewed as a counterweight to Western hegemony.

This divergence demonstrates that strategic signalling does not produce uniform effects. Instead, it amplifies the role of context, history, and alignment in shaping how messages are decoded. The consequence is an Indo-Pacific security environment marked not by consensus but by competing interpretations, which can either exacerbate instability or open room for manoeuvre, depending on how states choose to respond.

The effectiveness of strategic signalling lies less in the act of signalling itself than in how different audiences interpret the message. China’s 2025 Victory Day parade was globally visible, yet its reception was fragmented across regions. While Western powers perceived it as escalatory and destabilizing, many ASEAN states responded with ambivalence, reflecting their structural reliance on both U.S. security guarantees and Chinese economic ties. In contrast, much of the Global South viewed the event through the lens of multipolarity, interpreting it as a positive assertion of balance against Western dominance. As shown in Table 3, this divergence is illustrated by how key audiences decoded the parade, along with the corresponding policy implications.

Table 3. Divergent Perceptions of the Parade

Symbolic Element	Description	Intended Audience	Likely Effect
Xi Jinping’s Speech	“Peace vs. War” framing	Domestic & Global	Projecting stability narrative
Putin & Kim’s Presence	Coalition optics with Russia, North Korea	West & Global South	Signals bloc solidarity
WWII Memory	Linking PLA strength to past sacrifice	Domestic	Legitimacy & continuity
Parade Choreography	Integration of hardware with symbolic acts	Global audiences	Blending capability & intent

Source: Author’s analysis based on Colby (2021), He (2022), Kuik (2020).

The parade generated a triangular divergence of perceptions. For Washington, Tokyo, Canberra, and Seoul, it confirmed China’s capacity to undermine extended deterrence, thereby justifying investments in missile defence and alliance cooperation. For ASEAN middle powers, the signals were contradictory, at once reassuring through Xi’s peace-oriented rhetoric yet coercive through the overt display of offensive systems, leading to continued reliance on hedging strategies rather than alignment. For the Global South, the optics of coalition with Russia and North Korea resonated as a challenge to Western hegemony, enabling smaller states to navigate a more pluralized order. These divergent perceptions underscore the paradox of China’s signalling: the same performance can strengthen deterrence, fragment regional consensus, and expand multipolar narratives, all at once.

This complexity highlights the importance of perception management in strategic competition, where misinterpretation may exacerbate instability as much as material arms racing.

4. Discussion

4.1. Theoretical Contribution

This article advances the literature on strategic signalling by conceptualizing large, globally broadcast military parades as a distinctive class of “lesser signals” that sit between cheap talk and costly operational moves. Unlike mobilizations or forward deployments, parades are high-visibility, low-immediacy events: they incur reputational stakes without committing

forces to combat risk, yet they can still alter beliefs about capability, resolve, and coalition patterns (Lau, 2021). Building on this insight, the paper theorizes a two-axis Visibility–Ambiguity Framework: (1) visibility captures how widely and vividly capabilities and narratives are publicized; (2) ambiguity captures uncertainty about doctrine, employment, and escalation thresholds, especially salient with dual-capable and emerging tech systems. Signals located in the quadrant of high visibility / high ambiguity (e.g., hypersonic presented alongside nuclear modernization) exert strong belief-updating effects but also heighten misperception risk in crises (Macdonald, 2010; Mastro, 2022).

Second, the article integrates material and symbolic signalling by proposing the Hardware–Halo Model. “Hardware” refers to the observable performance envelope of systems, range, penetrability, survivability, while “halo” denotes the political theatre that surrounds them: leader rhetoric, coalition optics, and historical memory. The theoretical claim is that hardware without halo signals only capacity, while halo without hardware signals only intent. Parades co-produce both, enabling states to bind capacity to intent in a single stage-managed event, thereby strengthening credibility among some audiences while deepening suspicion among others (Kolodko, 2020; Hiim, Fravel and Trøan, 2023; Wuthnow and Fravel, 2023).

Third, the article specifies audience-conditioned signalling, linking the same visible act to heterogeneous reception across three cohorts, U.S./allied planners, ASEAN middle powers, and the broader Global South. By connecting signalling theory to the hedging literature, the paper shows how parades can simultaneously reassure and alarm, depending on alignment, economic exposure, and geographic stakes (Pu, 2024; Sarjito, 2025). This extends classic deterrence arguments by treating audience effects not as noise but as part of the signal’s intended design.

Fourth, the analysis contributes to debates on technology and stability by formalizing how emerging systems (hypersonic, autonomous swarms, resilient C2) modify the grammar of signalling. Following work on entanglement and compressed decision timelines, the paper posits two propositions: P1—Compression Proposition: the higher the speed and manoeuvrability of showcased systems, the greater the perceived time pressure on adversaries; P2—Entanglement Proposition: the more dual-capable and networked the systems, the greater the ambiguity about thresholds and red lines (Acton, 2018; Czajkowski, 2022; Tellis, 2022; Gady and Kofman, 2023). These propositions help explain why parades that combine nuclear assurance with conventional precision can be read as stabilizing by some and escalatory by others.

Finally, the article offers operationalizable indicators for future research: (a) signal composition (share of dual-capable vs. single-role systems), (b) narrative coupling (density of peace/defence rhetoric in leader texts), and (c) coalition cueing (presence of aligned leaders). Mapping these indicators across cases can test the Visibility–Ambiguity and Hardware–Halo claims comparatively (Cooper, 2018; Balestrieri, 2023). In sum, the theoretical contribution is to recast parades as engineered composite signals, blending technology, narrative, and coalition cues, that shape the perception equilibrium at the heart of Indo-Pacific security competition. One of the article’s main theoretical contributions is the Visibility–Ambiguity Framework, which maps how signals vary depending on the clarity of intent and the

openness of display. As shown in Figure 2, this two-axis model captures the interaction between signal visibility and interpretive ambiguity, offering a tool to classify different forms of strategic communication.

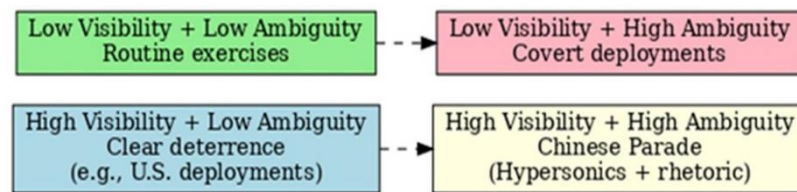


Fig. 2. Visibility–Ambiguity Framework

Source: Author’s conceptualization, adapted from Balestrieri (2023) and Roberts (2024).

China’s parade matters because it occupies a unique position within the spectrum of strategic signalling: it combines high visibility with high ambiguity. This combination maximizes international attention while simultaneously increasing the risk of misperception and miscalculation by diverse audiences.

4.2. Global Security Implications

The 2025 Victory Day parade carried significant implications for global and regional security, especially within the already fragile Indo-Pacific order. By parading hypersonic missiles, stealth aircraft, and autonomous systems alongside coalition symbolism, China communicated signals that reverberated beyond its borders. These signals shaped the security dilemma, influenced alliance dynamics, and contributed to evolving debates on deterrence stability.

Intensification of the security dilemma

At the structural level, the parade reinforced the Indo-Pacific security dilemma. For the United States and its allies, China’s presentation of nuclear triad modernization and hypersonic systems suggested that Beijing is moving toward capabilities that could neutralize traditional deterrence mechanisms. Western policymakers view such systems as compressing decision-making windows and undermining crisis stability (Wuthnow and Saunders, 2024). This perception feeds into U.S. strategies that prioritize forward-deployed assets, missile defence, and technological offsets such as the AUKUS partnership. In turn, China perceives these moves as encirclement, generating a spiral dynamic that escalates regional insecurity (O’rourke, 2024).

Impact on alliances and partnerships

The parade also affected alliance cohesion. For U.S. allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, the unveiling of hypersonic and stealth fighters confirmed the need to strengthen extended deterrence arrangements. Japan’s ongoing defence reforms, including counterstrike capabilities, are likely to be accelerated under the shadow of China’s parade messaging (Atanassova-Cornelis et al., 2024; Hughes, 2024). Meanwhile, for ASEAN states, the display intensified the hedging dilemma. On one hand, military modernization was seen as coercive;

on the other, Xi Jinping's rhetoric about peace provided some reassurance. This duality complicates efforts to forge unified ASEAN positions on China, keeping the region strategically fragmented (Yinghui, 2023; Lee, 2024).

One of the direct impacts of China's 2025 military parade on the region was the acceleration of defence procurement decisions among ASEAN countries. For instance, Singapore has fast-tracked the integration of layered air defence systems using AESA radar and medium-range surface-to-air missiles. Indonesia, while maintaining a hedging strategy, is increasingly considering the acquisition of anti-drone and cyber defence systems as part of its Strategic Defense Plan. Vietnam, concerned about China's maritime posture in the South China Sea, has reinforced its naval modernization through the procurement of patrol vessels and coastal missile systems.

Broadly, the parade strengthened the perception of an urgent need to enhance asymmetric capabilities and regional interoperability to counter the PLA's technological advances. In this context, Beijing's strategic signalling not only shaped perception but also concretely influenced ASEAN states to reassess defence spending structures and prioritize key military acquisitions.

Normalization of emerging technologies

Globally, the parade normalized the role of emerging technologies in signalling. By incorporating drones, counter-drone systems, and cyber-enabled platforms into the parade, Beijing effectively declared these capabilities as standard tools of strategic communication. This has implications for arms racing: if hypersonic and drone swarms become part of the signalling toolkit, other states may feel compelled to acquire comparable systems not only for operational use but also to remain symbolically credible (Tellis, 2022). The risk is a proliferation cascade where technology adoption is driven by signalling requirements rather than operational necessity.

Shaping global narratives

China's parade also impacted narratives of order. For Global South states, the optics of Xi, Putin, and Kim suggested that alternative alignments are viable. This reinforced China's self-presentation as a leader of multipolarity, contrasting with U.S.-led alliance structures (Rozman, Jones and Work, 2024; Tudoroiu, 2025). For Western audiences, however, the same imagery reinforced the perception of an authoritarian bloc, intensifying calls for stronger coalition-building among democracies. This narrative divergence contributes to discursive polarization, where competing orders are not only contested militarily but also symbolically.

Risks of miscalculation

Finally, the global implication of the parade lies in its potential to increase miscalculation risks. If adversaries interpret capability displays as offensive rather than defensive, the likelihood of inadvertent escalation rises. Similarly, if middle powers misread China's intentions, they may over-invest in balancing or under-invest in defence, creating vulnerabilities. Jervis (2021) reminds us that misperception is often the trigger for crisis escalation; parades like Beijing's, with their high visibility and high ambiguity, exemplify this risk.

Importantly, China's signalling through the 2025 parade also raises critical challenges for democratic states whose legitimacy is tied not only to material power but to normative commitments such as transparency, rule of law, and collective security. The authoritarian nature of China's signalling, combining controlled media narratives, high-ambiguity technology display, and historical reinterpretation, stands in contrast to democratic signalling mechanisms that rely on public deliberation, alliance coordination, and institutional oversight. As such, one emerging implication is the need for democracies to craft signalling strategies that emphasize openness, legal-rational norms, and defensive credibility, thus drawing a clear contrast with the coercive ambiguity favoured by authoritarian regimes. This normative dimension is especially vital as global audiences, particularly in the Global South, navigate between competing visions of international order.

From an operational perspective, China's 2025 Victory Day parade offers critical implications for military intelligence planning and force posture adaptation among rival or observing states. Intelligence agencies are likely to have dissected the event in detail to assess the maturity, deployment readiness, and doctrinal integration of the displayed platforms. The debut of hypersonic glide vehicles, drone swarms, and stealth aircraft in a choreographed, high-visibility setting enables foreign analysts to update order-of-battle assessments, refine wargaming scenarios, and recalibrate threat matrices. Additionally, the presence of integrated C3I and counter-drone systems signals a shift in the PLA's focus toward electronic warfare and resilience under saturation attacks, informing adversaries' investment priorities in countermeasures. Theatrical though it may be, such a parade effectively functions as a soft demonstration of capability evolution, which can reshape regional military exercises, forward-deployment decisions, and even the frequency of freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs). Thus, beyond its symbolic value, the parade acts as a data-rich open-source event with tangible consequences for strategic foresight and operational planning across the Indo-Pacific theatre.

4.3.Comparative Reflection

Placing China's 2025 Victory Day parade in comparative perspective highlights both continuities and contrasts with other states' use of military display as signalling. Examining Russia's Victory Day commemorations and the United States' power-projection demonstrations reveals how parades and displays serve as instruments of strategic communication, yet differ in their intended audiences, technological emphases, and discursive framings.

Russia: Continuity and resilience

Russia's annual Victory Day parade in Moscow has long been a stage for showcasing modern weaponry, affirming historical legitimacy, and signalling resilience against external pressure. Similar to Beijing's event, Moscow links contemporary strength to the memory of World War II sacrifice, embedding historical continuity into present-day messaging (Gady and Kofman, 2023). Yet, while Russia emphasizes continuity and resilience under sanctions, China's 2025 parade projected ascendancy and technological parity. Russia tends to spotlight systems under development or limited deployment to convey determination despite economic

strain, whereas China's focus was on systems nearing operational maturity, highlighting industrial and technological confidence (Hiim, Fravel and Trøan, 2023).

Both cases illustrate the role of parades in blending hardware and narrative, but with distinct emphases: Russia underscores survival under pressure; China underlines its rise as a peer competitor. The comparative lens suggests that while both rely on military parades for political legitimization, the tone diverges, Russia defensive and nostalgic, China assertive and forward-looking.

United States: Dispersed signalling through deployment

The United States rarely conducts grand domestic parades as instruments of international signalling. Instead, it practices dispersed signalling through overseas deployments, naval exercises, and flyovers. Carrier strike group patrols, bomber task force missions, and multinational exercises such as RIMPAC are the U.S. equivalents of high-visibility signals (King, 2024). Unlike parades, these involve operational risks, making them costlier signals in credibility terms.

Comparing U.S. practices with China's parade underscores the visibility–cost trade-off. While U.S. deployments demonstrate operational readiness and willingness to bear risk, they lack the carefully choreographed, symbolically saturated narrative of a parade. China, by contrast, compresses signals into a single stage-managed event, maximizing visibility and narrative density while minimizing operational cost. This distinction highlights how states adapt signalling instruments to political systems: authoritarian regimes prefer domestic parades with controlled imagery, while democracies favour dispersed operational displays that resonate with alliance partners.

Implications for signalling theory

This comparative reflection enriches signalling theory by showing that form matters. Russia and China employ parade-centric signalling, while the United States employs deployment-centric signalling. Both can shape perceptions, but they differ in ambiguity. Parades heighten ambiguity because they display capability without operational context, whereas deployments provide context but with higher cost and risk (Jasper, 2022; Abbas and Masood, 2024).

The juxtaposition also shows how audience effects vary. Russia's parades reassure domestic audiences and warn NATO but attract scepticism internationally due to credibility gaps. China's parade, with higher visibility and stronger economic underpinnings, commands greater global attention, though its reception diverges by region. U.S. displays reassure allies more effectively but may be less effective in shaping Global South perceptions, where visibility and spectacle matter.

While China's 2025 Victory Day parade was unprecedented in its scope and symbolism, it cannot be fully understood in isolation. States have long used public displays of military strength as signalling tools, but their form, cost, and intended audience vary considerably. Russia, for instance, relies heavily on its Moscow Victory Day parades to assert resilience and continuity under Western pressure. The United States, by contrast, rarely stages

grand domestic parades, preferring instead deployment-centric signals through carrier strike group patrols, multinational exercises, and bomber task force missions. These practices highlight how signalling is not uniform: some states favour symbolic displays rooted in historical commemoration, while others emphasize costly operational demonstrations. As shown in Table 4, the signalling instruments of China, Russia, and the United States are contrasted based on their key characteristics and target audiences.

Table 4. Comparative Reflections: China, Russia, and U.S. Signalling

Country	Signaling Tool	Characteristics	Main Audience
China	Victory Day Parade	High visibility, high ambiguity	Domestic, Global South
Russia	Moscow Victory Day Parade	Continuity, resilience under pressure	Domestic, NATO
U.S.	Overseas deployments, RIMPAC	High cost, operational credibility	Allies, adversaries

Source: Author's comparative synthesis from Hiim et al. (2023), Gady & Kofman (2023), Colby (2021).

The form of signalling reflects political system and strategic objectives. China combines Russia's reliance on symbolic commemorations with a forward-looking emphasis on technological parity, producing a hybrid signal that merges history and modernity. Russia's parades reassure domestic audiences of continuity and convey determination to NATO, but their credibility is often undercut by economic constraints and battlefield setbacks. The United States, conversely, invests in costly operational signals, which strengthen allied confidence but lack the theatrical symbolism that resonates with broader global audiences.

This comparison reinforces the theoretical claim that visibility and cost trade-offs shape signalling effectiveness. China maximizes visibility with low operational cost but at the price of heightened ambiguity. Russia emphasizes resilience but struggles with credibility. The U.S. projects credibility through costly deployments but misses opportunities to control narrative symbolism. China's 2025 parade thus represents a hybrid innovation in signalling, one that blends the symbolic density of Russia's parades with the technological emphasis of U.S. power projection. This hybrid approach underscores Beijing's ambition to establish itself simultaneously as a guardian of history and a challenger of contemporary order.

Conclusion of reflection

Comparatively, China's 2025 parade emerges as a hybrid case: it combines Russia's symbolic reliance on historical commemoration with the United States' emphasis on demonstrating cutting-edge technology. This hybridization reflects China's dual ambition: to root legitimacy in the past while projecting power into the future. The comparative perspective reinforces the argument that parades are not mere rituals but deliberate instruments of signalling, ones that, in China's case, are calibrated to shape perceptions across multiple audiences with maximum symbolic impact.

4.4. Policy recommendations

As authoritarian regimes increasingly use military parades to project power and challenge the liberal international order, democratic states must develop responses that go beyond force posturing and deterrence reinforcement. These responses must incorporate normative signalling, communicating democratic values, rule-based conduct, and institutional resilience, to counteract the symbolic appeal of authoritarian assertiveness. Parades like China's 2025 event are not just about weapons; they are about worldviews. Thus, democracies must respond not only with capabilities, but with narratives that emphasize openness, legitimacy, and inclusive security frameworks.

The analysis of China's 2025 Victory Day parade yields important policy lessons for both regional actors and the broader international community. Because parades are highly visible yet ambiguous signals, they demand nuanced responses that avoid overreaction while still addressing the structural risks of escalation. This section outlines recommendations across three levels: major powers, regional middle powers, and international institutions.

For major powers: Calibrating deterrence and dialogue

For the United States and its close allies, the parade reinforces the need to strengthen extended deterrence in the Indo-Pacific while avoiding actions that feed the spiral of insecurity. Investments in missile defence, resilient C2 networks, and counter-hypersonic research are necessary, but these should be paired with strategic dialogue mechanisms to reduce misperception (Van Hooft et al., 2022; Wilkins, 2023). Reviving arms-control discussions on dual-capable systems, an area largely neglected in current regimes, would mitigate ambiguity. Washington and Beijing could benefit from establishing hotlines or crisis communication protocols specifically tailored to emerging technologies such as hypersonic and drones, akin to Cold War-era nuclear risk reduction arrangements (Luo, 2022).

For ASEAN and middle powers: Strategic hedging with guardrails

For ASEAN states and other regional middle powers, the parade underscores the challenge of balancing economic dependence on China with security reliance on the United States. Hedging will remain the dominant strategy, but policymakers should develop guardrails that prevent hedging from sliding into vulnerability. This may include diversifying defence partnerships beyond the U.S.–China dyad, leveraging ties with India, Japan, and the EU, while investing in indigenous capabilities such as maritime domain awareness and cyber defence (Kuik, 2020; Hayamaru, 2022). ASEAN should also strengthen intra-regional confidence-building measures, including information-sharing on military exercises and crisis communication mechanisms, to reduce the risk that divergent interpretations of China's signals fragment regional responses.

For global south actors: Narrative engagement

For Global South states, the parade was often interpreted as a positive symbol of multipolarity and resistance to Western dominance (Oluyemi, Adisa and Elhudairi, 2025). While engagement with China provides strategic space, policymakers in Africa, Latin America,

and the Middle East should avoid being drawn into symbolic alignments that obscure long-term risks. Developing forums for narrative engagement, for example, within the Non-Aligned Movement or the African Union, would allow Global South actors to articulate collective expectations for responsible Chinese signalling, while retaining autonomy in security partnerships.

For international institutions: Expanding norms of transparency

Finally, international institutions such as the UN Conference on Disarmament and regional forums like the ASEAN Regional Forum should expand discussions on transparency norms for emerging technologies. Just as nuclear test bans and notification regimes reduced Cold War uncertainties, similar mechanisms for hypersonic tests or drone swarms could mitigate the destabilizing potential of parades as ambiguous signals (Braithwaite, 2024; Lockhorst and Taylor, 2025). Although consensus may be difficult, even partial agreements on pre-launch notifications or shared terminology could provide incremental stability benefits.

Integrative outlook

Taken together, these recommendations stress the importance of dual-track strategies: strengthening deterrence while institutionalizing dialogue, hedging while building regional guardrails, engaging narratives while preserving autonomy. China's 2025 parade illustrates how visibility without clarity can heighten risks; the task for policymakers is to reduce the space for misperception without eroding the legitimacy of deterrence. Only through such calibrated approaches can the Indo-Pacific avoid a drift toward crisis escalation driven as much by symbolism as by substance.

The policy implications of China's signalling can be conceptualized as decision pathways for different actors. As shown in Figure 3, these pathways illustrate how major powers, middle powers, and Global South states can calibrate their responses, ranging from deterrence and hedging to alignment and normative balancing.

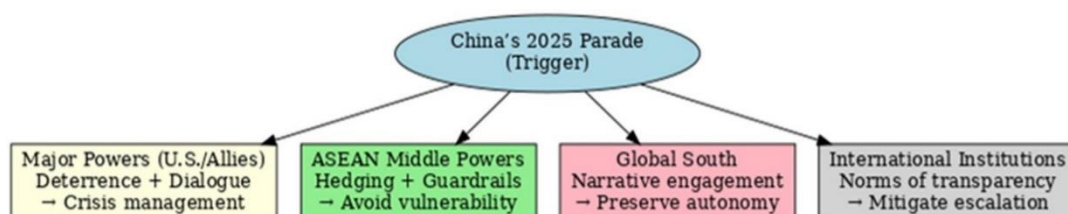


Fig 3. Policy Response Pathways

Source: Author's synthesis from Acton (2018), Hayamaru (2022), Kuik (2020).

Effective responses require dual-track strategies: strengthening deterrence without fuelling escalation, hedging without sliding into dependency, and promoting norms without undermining sovereignty. These balanced approaches are essential for navigating the risks posed by strategic signalling in an increasingly multipolar security environment.

Finally, democracies must lead the effort to define the rules of symbolic conduct in military signalling, including transparency norms, legal boundaries for emerging technologies,

and the promotion of collective confidence-building mechanisms. These value-based initiatives serve both strategic and moral purposes: they reduce escalation risks while affirming the democratic model of security governance. In this sense, responses to China's 2025 parade must not only secure the Indo-Pacific but also defend the epistemological foundations of democratic security itself, anchored in legitimacy, predictability, and shared norms.

5. Conclusions

China's 2025 Victory Day parade was more than a ceremonial commemoration of history; it was a deliberate act of strategic signalling aimed at shaping the perceptions of diverse audiences across the globe. Through the carefully choreographed display of hypersonic missiles, stealth fighters, autonomous drones, and counter-drone systems, combined with the symbolic presence of Xi Jinping alongside Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un, the parade communicated strength, unity, and a claim to historical legitimacy.

The analysis of this event underscores three central insights. First, parades should not be reduced to mere rituals. They are highly visible instruments that merge military capability with political theatre, designed to influence both adversaries and allies. Their visibility ensures maximum global attention, while their ambiguity allows room for flexible interpretation. Second, the implications of such signalling are far from uniform. For the United States and its allies, the parade reaffirmed perceptions of China as a rising military challenger, reinforcing calls for stronger deterrence. For ASEAN and other middle powers, it generated ambivalence, balancing reassurance with concern. For the Global South, it symbolized multipolarity and the possibility of an alternative to Western-led order.

Third, the parade illustrates how emerging technologies are transforming the language of military signalling. Hypersonic systems, drone swarms, and dual-capable platforms blur traditional lines between deterrence and compellence, creating new risks of misinterpretation. In this sense, China's performance highlights both the opportunities and dangers of using visibility and ambiguity as instruments of power projection.

The broader lesson is that strategic competition in the twenty-first century is increasingly fought through symbols as much as through weapons. The Victory Day parade demonstrated how narratives of peace, historical memory, and coalition solidarity can be woven together with advanced weaponry to send complex signals to multiple audiences. Yet this very complexity also heightens the risk of misunderstanding, miscalculation, and escalation.

Future research should explore several emerging dimensions of military signalling

First, empirical studies are needed to assess how military parades affect actual defence planning cycles in observing states, particularly in shaping procurement timelines and doctrinal innovation. Second, further work could analyse how authoritarian regimes tailor symbolic signalling for different audiences, global, regional, and domestic, and how these messages are received across varying media ecosystems. Finally, the interaction between symbolic military displays and AI-enabled strategic decision-making remains an underexplored area with critical implications for crisis escalation and deterrence stability. Addressing these gaps will be

essential for advancing a more precise understanding of modern strategic signalling in an era defined by technological disruption and geopolitical realignment.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers whose insightful feedback significantly strengthened the analytical depth of this article. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues at the Republic of Indonesia Defense University for valuable discussions during the early drafting stages. Any remaining errors are the author's responsibility.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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