

Military Parades as Power Politics: Why Spectacle Still Matters in Global Rivalries

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Source: Gemini²

Introduction

Military parades represent far more than ceremonial displays of martial prowess; they constitute sophisticated instruments of statecraft that continue to shape international relations in the 21st century. From Beijing's massive Victory Day parade in September 2025, featuring Presidents Putin and Kim Jong Un in unprecedented unity, to France's traditional Bastille Day celebrations and North Korea's midnight spectacles, these choreographed exhibitions serve as theaters of power where nations project strength, forge alliances, and communicate strategic intentions. Despite predictions that globalization and technological advancement would diminish the

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² Google/Gemini, "Military Parades as Power Politics," October 4, 2025, generated in conversation with Gemini, accessed October 4, 2025.

relevance of such displays, military parades have experienced a renaissance, becoming increasingly central to contemporary geopolitical competition and diplomatic signaling³⁴.

The enduring significance of military spectacle in global politics reflects deeper truths about power projection, regime legitimacy, and the psychology of deterrence that transcend technological change. As authoritarian regimes seek to consolidate power and democratic nations grapple with evolving security challenges, these ritualized displays of force offer unique insights into how states construct national identity, manage international relationships, and communicate resolve to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Historical Foundations: From Roman Triumph to Modern Spectacle

The lineage of military parades as instruments of political power extends back millennia, finding its most influential expression in ancient Rome's triumphal processions. The Roman triumph represented the apotheosis of military spectacle, serving multiple functions that resonate in contemporary displays. These elaborate ceremonies, held to celebrate victorious generals and their legions, were "designed to demonstrate the power and authority of Rome to its citizens and to its enemies, serving as both a military and political event". The procession, which could last for days, featured captive leaders, spoils of war, exotic treasures, and the triumphant general in his chariot, all culminating at the Temple of Jupiter on Capitoline Hill⁵.

The Roman triumph established the template for using military display as a tool of legitimacy and deterrence. As one historian notes, these spectacles were "a magnificent display of Roman martial power, the glory of war, and the splendid rewards for victory". The psychological impact was deliberate and profound, serving to "reinforce Rome's military prowess, showcasing the might of the legions, and solidifying the loyalty of the Roman populace". This dual function—internal legitimization and external intimidation—remains central to modern military parades⁶.

The transformation of military spectacle in the modern era began with Prussia's disciplined army, renowned for its "jackbooted, lockstep discipline". The Prussian model influenced the development of military pageantry across Europe, establishing the aesthetic and organizational principles that would later be adopted by authoritarian regimes. The 20th century witnessed the

³ Guangyi Pan, "Understanding China's Victory Day Military Parade: Politics, Strength, Narrative - Australian Institute of International Affairs," Australian Institute of International Affairs, September 9, 2025, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/understanding-chinas-victory-day-military-parade-politics-strength-narrative/>.

⁴ "China's Victory Parade: Power, Optics, and Global Dilemmas," Asia Media Centre | Helping New Zealand Media Cover Asia, n.d., <https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/china-s-80th-victory-parade-power-optics-and-global-dilemmas>.

⁵ Frode Osen, "Roman Triumph: History, Significance, & Examples – Roman Empire," Roman Empire – for Those Thinking About the Roman Empire., November 25, 2023, <https://romanempirehistory.com/roman-triumph/>.

⁶ Geoffrey S. Sumi, "The Triumphal Procession," *A Companion to the City of Rome*, July 24, 2018, 581–97, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118300664.ch29>.

full flowering of military spectacle as a political tool, with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union elevating these displays to unprecedented scales of grandiosity and propaganda value⁷.



Source: The Conversation⁸

The Nazi regime's use of military parades at Nuremberg demonstrated how spectacle could be weaponized for ideological purposes. These events were "designed to promote nationalistic pride, reinforce national values, and instill a sense of fear". The visual language of domination, characterized by "streamlined silhouettes, tight jackets and black leather boots," was deliberately crafted to create what sociologist Klaus Theweleit described as power that "had to be seen, desired and even fantasized".⁹

Contemporary Manifestations and Strategic Functions

Modern military parades serve multiple strategic functions that extend far beyond their ceremonial veneer. China's 2025 Victory Day parade exemplifies the sophisticated use of military spectacle in contemporary geopolitics. The event, featuring "cutting-edge missiles, advanced fighter jets, AI-driven drones, and reconnaissance robots never seen before", was

⁷ "Spectacle in Antiquity & Beyond: Military Spectacle and Modern Autocratic Regimes," n.d., <https://www.bowdoin.edu/coursework/classics/class-exhibitions/spectacle/project5.html>.

⁸ <https://images.theconversation.com/files/670973/original/file-20250528-56-ah2uc7.jpg?ixlib=rb-4.1.0&q=45&auto=format&w=1000&fit=clip>

⁹ FlaglerLive, "The Authoritarian Message Behind Military Parades," FlaglerLive, June 11, 2025, <https://flaglerlive.com/the-authoritarian-message-behind-military-parades/>.

designed to achieve several interconnected objectives: demonstrating military modernization, signaling alliance relationships, and projecting deterrent capability.¹⁰



Source: Modern Diplomacy¹¹

The parade's geopolitical significance was amplified by its diplomatic choreography. The presence of Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un alongside Xi Jinping created what observers described as a "terrible threesome", visually representing an emerging authoritarian axis. This gathering served as a "bold challenge to the US-dominated global framework", while the absence of Western leaders underscored the deepening divisions in international politics. As one analyst noted, the diplomatic positioning was as important as the military hardware: "the parade will present two performances: missiles and formations in Tiananmen Square and a circle of friends on the reviewing stand".¹²

North Korea's military parades represent perhaps the most extreme example of spectacle as survival strategy. These events serve multiple purposes for the isolated regime: intimidating adversaries, demonstrating technological progress, and reinforcing internal unity. The 2023 parade, which marked the nation's third such event in a single year, highlighted the regime's use of military display as a response to internal pressures and external threats. As one expert observed, holding multiple parades within one year "requires the state's decision to centralize

¹⁰ Muhammad Tanveer, "Between Power and Principles: What China's Military Parade Means for EU Strategic Autonomy," *Modern Diplomacy*, September 6, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/09/06/between-power-and-principles-what-chinas-military-parade-means-for-eu-strategic-autonomy/>.

¹¹ <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/China-military-parade.jpg>

¹² Deng Yuwen, "China's Military Parade Is a Powerful Diplomatic Display," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/28/china-ww2-military-parade-putin-xi/>.

resources, including finances, manpower and other logistical capabilities, which underscores its urgent need to shore up internal solidarity".¹³



Source: VOA News¹⁴

The Psychology of Power Projection

Military parades operate on multiple psychological levels, exploiting fundamental human responses to displays of organized force and ritualized authority. The spectacle creates what fashion scholar Jennifer Craik describes as "a persona and a powerful collective presence," where uniformed soldiers generate associations with "power and eroticism, a garment long linked to theatricality and role-playing". This psychological dimension helps explain the enduring appeal of military displays across diverse political systems and cultural contexts.

The mass psychology of military parades taps into what sociologists' term "banal nationalism," where national identity is reinforced through ritualized symbols and performances. The Wagah-Attari border ceremony between India and Pakistan provides a compelling example of how military ritual can sustain and amplify nationalist sentiment. This daily spectacle, featuring "Pakistani Rangers in stark black uniforms and Indian Border Security Force in crisp khaki," creates an atmosphere described as "a battle without weapons, fueled by raw nationalism". The ceremony demonstrates how military pageantry can transform political competition into emotionally charged theater that "reinforces the idea that national pride is linked to military strength and the ability to dominate the other nation".¹⁵

¹³ Associated Press, "North Korea Begins Military Parade Amid Revived Tensions," *Voice of America*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/north-korea-begins-military-parade-amid-revived-tensions-/6544798.html>.

¹⁴ https://gdb.voanews.com/a96d494c-5675-4ea2-851b-078145785c18_w1023_n_r1_s_s.jpg

¹⁵ "A Battle Without Weapons That Fuels India–Pakistan Nationalism," Lowy Institute, n.d., <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/battle-without-weapons-fuels-india-pakistan-nationalism>.



Source: The Interpreter¹⁶

The authoritarian use of military spectacle exploits these psychological dynamics for regime legitimacy. Trump's proposed and later realized military parades illustrate how even democratic leaders can be tempted to employ spectacle for personal aggrandizement. Critics identified these events as rehearsals of "authoritarian ritual," noting that "by combining a military display with a personal celebration, Trump's birthday parade stages a grand spectacle of power". The psychological appeal of such displays lies in their ability to create identification with the leader while "exchanging democratic freedom for a vision of unity under a single figure".¹⁷

Soft Power Constraints and Strategic Contradictions

The relationship between military parades and soft power projection reveals fundamental tensions in how authoritarian states attempt to manage their international image. China's efforts to present its military displays as peace-promoting initiatives illustrate these contradictions. Despite proclamations that "China will always be a force for peace" and themes emphasizing "Justice Prevails, Peace Prevails, The People Prevail", the reality of advanced weapons systems and deterrent messaging undermines soft power objectives.¹⁸

Research on China's 2015 military parade demonstrates how "for an authoritarian state such as China, the focus of the leadership is on maintaining regime security, and because nationalism is often used to rally and mobilize the population behind the state... it complicates and often works against any soft power efforts". The display of military hardware, particularly systems like the

¹⁶ https://www.lowyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/styles/interpreter_article_image/public/2025-03/Wagah%E2%80%93Attari%20border%20comp.jpg?itok=zChgyR13

¹⁷ Irene Gammel, "Trump's Military Parade: A 'Big Big Celebration' or an Authoritarian Ritual?" May 29, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.64628/aam.gy9ddnhq7>.

¹⁸ Enrico Gloria, "Opinion – Why China Parades Power as Peace," E-International Relations, September 14, 2025, <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/09/14/opinion-why-china-parades-power-as-peace/>.

"carrier killer" missile DF-21D, sends messages that contradict peaceful intentions, leading Western media to focus on "which state leaders attended, highlighting that there were no state leaders from Western countries".¹⁹

This soft power deficit reflects deeper structural problems for authoritarian regimes attempting to project benign influence while maintaining deterrent credibility. The historical narratives used to justify military displays often rely on "hostile relations with other countries" and are "not the kind of narratives that 'shape the preferences of others through attraction'". The result is that "soft power will continue to be the weak link in China's pursuit of a great power position and status as long as what continues to count as 'Chinese' is defined in opposition to hostile 'others'".

Democratic Responses and Civil-Military Relations

The proliferation of authoritarian military spectacle has prompted varied responses from democratic nations, highlighting fundamental differences in civil-military relations and the role of military force in political legitimacy. France's Bastille Day parade represents the democratic model of military display, serving as "a central holiday in modern France, celebrating democracy and national pride". The French approach demonstrates how democratic societies can maintain military traditions while preserving civilian control and avoiding the personality cult dynamics characteristic of authoritarian displays.²⁰

The contrast between democratic and authoritarian military parades reflects deeper philosophical differences about the relationship between military power and political authority. Where authoritarian systems use parades to demonstrate "the seamless integration of the People's Liberation Army with the Chinese Communist Party", democratic displays emphasize "public engagement, institutional continuity, and democratic legitimacy". As one comparative analysis noted, "where China signals unity through control, America signals legitimacy through participation".²¹

Contemporary Implications and Future Trajectories

The resurgence of military parades in global politics reflects broader trends toward great power competition and the erosion of liberal international norms. China's 2025 parade, described as signaling "the beginning of a new phase in the reshaping of the postwar international order", demonstrates how military spectacle serves as both symptom and catalyst of systemic change.

¹⁹ Camilla T. N. Sørensen, "Constraints on the Soft Power Efforts of Authoritarian States: The Case of the 2015 Military Parade in Beijing," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 46, no. 2 (August 1, 2017): 111–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810261704600205>.

²⁰ Emma De Ruiter, "France Celebrates Bastille Day With Annual Military Parade in Paris," *Euronews*, July 19, 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/14/france-celebrates-bastille-day-with-annual-military-parade-in-paris>.

²¹ J. William DeMarco and J. William DeMarco, "Marching to Different Drums: The Army's Birthday Parade as Seen From China," *War on the Rocks*, July 29, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/2025/06/marching-to-different-drums-the-armys-birthday-parade-as-seen-from-china/>.

The event's impact extended beyond symbolic messaging to practical strategic calculations, with U.S. President Trump acknowledging the display's significance and instructing the Pentagon to "rebuild American deterrence".²²

The proliferation of military parades among authoritarian states suggests a coordinated strategy to challenge Western hegemony through synchronized displays of strength. The attendance of multiple authoritarian leaders at Beijing's parade, including representatives from Iran, Belarus, Cuba, and various African and Central Asian states, indicates the emergence of what some analysts describe as an "alternative world" order. This alignment creates what one observer called a "parade of patriotism or propaganda" that serves to legitimize authoritarian governance models while challenging democratic norms.²³

The technological dimension of modern military parades adds new layers of complexity to their strategic significance. Advanced weapons systems displayed in contemporary parades, from hypersonic missiles to autonomous drones, represent genuine military capabilities that affect regional power balances. Unlike historical displays that primarily served ceremonial functions, modern parades showcase operational systems that influence deterrence calculations and alliance structures.

Technological Evolution and Future Warfare

The evolution of military parade displays reflects broader transformations in warfare and strategic competition. Contemporary parades increasingly feature systems designed for multi-domain operations, including cyber warfare capabilities, space-based assets, and artificial intelligence-enabled platforms. China's 2025 parade showcased "AI-driven drones, reconnaissance robots, and even drones resembling 'robotic dogs'", indicating the integration of emerging technologies into military spectacle.²⁴

Modern military parades increasingly showcase advanced weapons technology as both a form of strategic signaling and a platform for defense exports, promoting domestic industries and projecting national autonomy in global competition. By displaying indigenous systems—such as AI-driven drones, hypersonic missiles, and autonomous vehicles—states attract international buyers and assert independence from legacy suppliers. Looking ahead, parades will likely evolve into displays of cutting-edge tech like quantum communication and directed-energy weapons,

²² "A New Strategic Chapter Unfolds," China-US Focus, September 30, 2025, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/a-new-strategic-chapter-unfolds>.

²³ "The Politics of a Military Parade - Engelsberg Ideas," Engelsberg Ideas, September 10, 2025, <https://engelsbergideas.com/notebook/the-politics-of-a-military-parade/>.

²⁴ BBC News, "China Military Parade: BBC Correspondents React to Beijing's Show of Strength," September 3, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c7545p2px5no>.

further blurring the boundary between ceremonial spectacle and actual demonstration of operational capabilities.

Regional Variations and Cultural Contexts

Military parades vary widely according to local traditions, political systems, and security needs, serving different symbolic and strategic functions. For example, France's Bastille Day parade highlights democratic values and civil-military balance, while North Korea's late-night displays reinforce regime control and ideological conformity. Similarly, in South Asia, India's Republic Day is intended to project strength in its rivalry with Pakistan, while the daily Wagah-Attari ceremony transforms border security into a recurring spectacle of nationalist contest. These diverse manifestations underscore how military parades reflect and respond to each country's unique political culture and security environment.

Middle Eastern military parades reflect the region's complex security environment and authoritarian governance structures. Iran's annual parades, which "often use these parades to show a hatred of the West, particularly of the US", combine anti-Western messaging with displays of indigenous military capabilities. These events serve multiple functions: deterring regional rivals, demonstrating resistance to international pressure, and consolidating domestic support for the regime.²⁵

Information Warfare and Global Perception Management

Modern military parades operate within an expanded information environment that amplifies their strategic impact through global media coverage and digital dissemination. The transformation of military spectacle from local display to global media event fundamentally alters their strategic significance and communication effectiveness. Social media platforms and international broadcasting networks ensure that parade imagery reaches global audiences, creating what scholars describe as "media spectacle" with far-reaching political implications.

The visual narrative constructed through military parades competes with alternative interpretations and counter-narratives in the global information space. Western media coverage of authoritarian parades typically emphasizes threatening aspects and international isolation, while host nations promote themes of peace, development, and international cooperation. This narrative competition reflects broader information warfare dynamics where competing powers seek to shape global perceptions of their intentions and capabilities.

²⁵ Benjamin Brimelow, "Trump Wants to Have a Massive Military Parade — Here's What They Look Like Around the World," Business Insider, February 8, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-military-parade-around-the-world-2018-2>.

Implications for International Security Architecture

Military parades have become key indicators of global power shifts, marking a move away from post-Cold War norms toward open displays of strength in resistance to Western hegemony. The rise in coordinated parades among authoritarian states, such as China, Russia, and North Korea, demonstrates not only ceremonial solidarity but deeper strategic and political alignment, challenging existing international institutions and showcasing advancements in military capability. As great power rivalry intensifies, military spectacle now plays a vital symbolic and practical role in shaping alliances, deterrence, and crisis management within a transforming international security architecture.

Conclusion

Military parades thus remain relevant not as anachronistic displays of martial glory, but as contemporary instruments of power politics adapted to the realities of global competition, information warfare, and alliance management. Their persistence and evolution reflect deeper continuities in human political behavior and the enduring importance of spectacle in the exercise of state power. Understanding these dynamics provides crucial insights into the nature of contemporary international relations and the challenges facing democratic governance in an era of renewed authoritarian assertiveness. In this sense, parades are intertwined with broader strategies of governance, nationalism, and soft power projection, bridging the gap between traditional military culture and contemporary geopolitical realities. Understanding these dynamics provides crucial insights into the ways states craft images of authority, manage internal cohesion, and project influence abroad—highlighting the enduring significance of spectacle in the conduct of international relations and the mounting challenges facing democratic systems in countering authoritarian assertiveness in the twenty-first century.