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## **China's WW2 Victory Parade: Why Park Is Attending**

*By Sukjoon Yoon*

### **Synopsis**

*South Korean President Park Geun-hye is attending Beijing's 3 September 70th anniversary celebration of Japan's defeat in World War II (WW2). Although this will lend international support to China at a time when it is becoming ever more assertive, she judges that a collaborative strategy through skillful diplomacy is best for peace and security in Northeast Asia.*

### **Commentary**

PRESIDENT PARK Geun-Hye's decision to attend China's 70th anniversary celebration of the Japanese defeat in WW2 comes at a time of growing Chinese assertiveness in the region. This notwithstanding, the South Korean leader seems to be of the view that peace and security in Northeast Asia is best secured through diplomacy and collaborative ties.

There are several other reasons behind Park's decision. First, it is a real test of the strategic cooperative partnership between China and South Korea. This event will consolidate Xi's position, allowing him to continue to root out corruption; it will be their sixth meeting, and signals a continuing commitment to cooperation based on mutual trust and on shared values and aspirations.

### **China's show of pride in rise**

Second, history has a key public role in this event. China is announcing to its own people and to its neighbours that it is no longer a weak and sickly nation, but a world power pursuing the 'Chinese Dream'. There is a clear message to Japan, in particular the war crimes which the Japanese inflicted on East and Southeast Asia during the 20th century have not been forgotten, nor can they be expunged by a few formal apologies, still less by the kind shown by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in his recent reference to the 'deep remorse' and 'heartfelt apology' of previous statements without actually offering a direct apology himself.

President Park's presence at this event, which commemorates the defeat of Japan but also the appalling suffering of the ordinary Chinese people, will demonstrate the sympathies of the South Korean people, who are also very disappointed with Abe's remarks, and concerned about the Japanese impulse toward historical revisionism.

Third, this event would have offered an opportunity for an ice-breaking meeting between President Park and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, had he decided to come. Now that Kim is staying away, the question of an ice-breaker in relations is very much up in the air. Nonetheless, it would be a tad too much to expect a breakthrough in inter-Korean reconciliation, especially after the recent artillery exchange in the demilitarised zone, but the context is very helpful: commemorating an end to Japanese colonial rule of the whole Korea Peninsula.

China, as North Korea's key ideological and economic partner, can hopefully act as a mediator in persuading Pyongyang of the benefits available from honest diplomacy: in the long term North Korea could become a normal country with access to significant economic support, but in the short term Kim must demonstrate his sincerity by easing tensions between the two Koreas.

### **Broader bridge-building**

Fourth, Presidents Xi and Park are both hoping to encourage broader bridge-building. China's recent assertiveness has upset many of its neighbours, and the grand strategy of 'One Belt, One Road', which aims to forge new interconnections across the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, has generated considerable disquiet. Park's participation in this event offers evidence to the US that relations with China can be skillfully managed, and in fact there are many issues which require more intelligent and nuanced diplomacy, including climate change, trade imbalances between China and its neighbours, and US investment in China.

Fifth, the most important reason for President Park to go to Beijing in September is the fundamental economic interdependence between South Korea and China. China is South Korea's largest trading partner, and South Korea is China's third largest. Ironically, the robust economic growth South Korea has enjoyed is also responsible for causing some coolness in the relations with China since it allows South Korea to provide more support for US military costs incurred in protecting against the unpredictable neighbour to the north.

By accepting China's rising military – as well as economic – influence in the region, without disturbing the security alliance with the US, South Korea is paving the way for the US to also come to a peaceful accommodation with China. President Park's visit to Beijing reflects majority opinion in South Korea that China will have the greatest impact on Korea over the next 30 years.

### **Geopolitical shifts**

For both China and the US, President Park's upcoming meeting with President Xi provides some useful context on regional issues, including North Korean military provocations, their apparent testing of a submarine-launched ballistic missile, and the simmering tensions in the South China Sea. Xi is visiting Washington in mid-September, and then Park goes in mid-October, so doubtless Park will confer with US President Barack Obama throughout this period, and Xi will also use Park as a sounding-board.

South Korea has deftly positioned itself as a middle power standing between these two major powers. Indeed the geostrategic ramifications of this new triumvirate may well replace some functions of the existing trilateral alliance of Japan, South Korea and the US.

For the Chinese and South Korean victims of WW2, history continues to cast a dark shadow, and Prime Minister Abe's quasi-apology further isolates Japan from the rest of the region. But times are changing: the great power competition between the US and China, according to one perspective, is gradually fading into the background, and a new strategic centre is emerging which acknowledges the profound interdependence of the regional economies. Peace and prosperity will ultimately depend much more on China's huge investment commitments to its 'One Belt, One Road' initiative than on the supposed US pivot to Asia, which has suffered from lack of resources.

By participating in this military ceremony in Beijing, President Park is demonstrating her strategic leverage: taking advantage of South Korea's cooperative strategic partnership with China without undermining the security alliance with the US. Ironically, this deepening of relations between South

Korea and China promises to be rather helpful for US diplomacy, and ultimately should even benefit its ally Japan.

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*Sukjoon Yoon PhD is a retired Captain of the Republic of Korea Navy. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy (KIMS). He contributed this specially to RSIS Commentary.*

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**Nanyang Technological University**  
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)