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• CHINA REAL TIME REPORT

# Missile March: China Parade Projects Patriotism at Home, Aims for Awe Abroad

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0 COMMENTS

*By Andrew S. Erickson*



Soldiers of China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA) stand in armored vehicles during the military parade to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of World War Two in Beijing on September 3, 2015.

REUTERS

The [greatest military parade in Chinese history](#) sent strong messages to [multiple audiences](#) Thursday. Chinese viewers were informed that under the Chinese Communist Party's irreplaceable leadership, their nation repelled Japanese invasion, has reunified—*largely*, and is now rightfully reclaiming “great power” status. But amid [political pomp and circumstance and patriotic pride](#) as citizens rallied round the red flag was a core external military function: [detering potential foreign adversaries](#) who might otherwise interfere with Beijing's completion of the latter two missions.

That's one reason why [so much advanced hardware was on display](#), and why [so much of it was missiles](#)—some of China's most potent weapons, which could pose some of the greatest threats to the U.S. and its allies in the unfortunate event of conflict. Comfortable as he is with wielding political power and military might, Chinese President Xi Jinping doesn't want a war. Rather, he seeks to awe his potential adversaries into submission—or at least grudging acquiescence—regarding Beijing's “core” interests and territorial claims. And you can't deter much without revealing armaments that an opponent would take seriously.

Hence the need to show a big stick—many big sticks, in fact; several newly revealed to the world. Don't be distracted by the striking marching formations. What matters most: No fewer than seven missiles on parade were from China's foremost set of major missiles, the *Dongfeng* (DF) series: the [DF-10 anti-ship missile](#); the DF-15B short-range ballistic missile; DF-16 and DF-21D medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs); the DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM); and the DF-5B and DF-31A intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

All the major missiles were labeled with their English abbreviations in big white letters, likely to help guarantee that their presence isn't lost on foreigners.

Perhaps most dramatically, as part of an “Antiship Ballistic Missile Formation,” China displayed its [DF-21D ASBM](#) for the first time ever. Announced as an “assassin's mace” at the parade, [if properly targeted](#), this missile has the [potential to disable ships](#) including U.S. carrier strike

groups, the centerpiece of American seapower. [No other nation has such a system](#); Washington and Moscow remain [constrained by a treaty](#) they signed in 1987.

Also paraded for the first time: the DF-26, China's first missile [capable of striking Guam](#) with a conventional warhead from a homeland-based launcher. In the Strangelovian logic of deterrence, a non-nuclear payload is seen as more "usable," rendering deterrence more "credible." The DF-26 as was described at the parade as a new missile with nuclear, conventional, and anti-ship variants. Yet another debutante fatale: the [DF-16 MRBM](#), reportedly [capable of striking military bases in Okinawa](#).

The ICBMs were displayed to enhance nuclear deterrence, and to remind potential adversaries that the DF-31A can be transported by road and is easily concealed, while the DF-5B is equipped with [multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles \(MIRVs\)](#) that would greatly complicate intercept by a ballistic missile-defense system.

Beyond the DF-series, the PLA paraded many air defense and antiship missiles, together with UAVs that might help target them. This was the first public appearance of the *Yingji* (YJ)-12 [antiship cruise missile \(ASCM\)](#). Part of an "Antiship Missile Formation" with the older YJ-83 (ASCM), the [YJ-12](#) is estimated to have sea-skimming, or low-flying, terminal approach at Mach 2.2, making it extremely difficult to defend against, and 150 kg semi-armor piercing, high-explosive warhead.

And this was only a portion of China's missile might: We'll have to wait to see the [DF-41 ICBM](#), [YJ-18 ASCM](#), [Wu-14 hypersonic glide vehicle \(HGV\)](#) and some other cutting-edge systems another day.

Finally, as China's commander-in-chief, Xi understands clearly that shiny hardware alone cannot confer military might. A set of well-coordinated military organizations and their effective command and control is likewise essential. That's likely why Xi appears poised to announce a [sweeping set of reforms to restructure the PLA](#). A recent *PLA Daily* issue contains a

[particularly pointed article](#) suggesting that the Party's Army is on the cusp of major change. Xi's announcement in his pre-parade speech that 300,000 PLA troops would be cut provides reason to believe that these reforms are now officially under way.

In sum, while playing to a domestic audience on center stage, Xi also sent a clear message across the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Pacific: China has arrived as a great military power, and its interests must be taken seriously. The PLA has ways to strike military bases and ships in the region that it finds menacing. It has growing options against U.S. facilities in Guam, and beyond. No location in even the continental U.S. is safe from Chinese nuclear weapons. These increasingly numerous, sophisticated missiles will be difficult to defend against. Please therefore keep China's interests in mind so that these weapons need never be used.

Thus armed, China is in another category entirely from the vulnerable "[semi-colony](#)" of 70-plus years ago, a status that countless Chinese long labored to transcend. Yet deterrence is complex, and must be managed carefully. The U.S. has a range of countermeasures against these and other Chinese weapons, as well as potent offensive weapons of its own. The key is for Xi to convey both confidence at home *and* cooperativeness abroad. The latter cannot be demonstrated with prepared speeches or pageantry, only with positive contributions over time. [That's the show the region, and the world, will be watching](#)—even more intently than Thursday's missile-muscle-march down Eternal Peace Avenue.



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