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AN INCOMPLETE “CORONATION”: CHINA’S MILITARY PARADE AND PRESIDENT XI JINPING’S US VISIT

Kenji Minemura

- What was the purpose of the military parade?
- What does his melancholic expression indicate?
- What kind of political backlash is possible?

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The unexpected presence of China's most prominent retired official, more so than any display of the latest weaponry and fighter jets, surprised onlookers at the September 3 military parade. The onlookers were stunned when former president Jiang Zemin mounted the podium at Tiananmen and took his place next to President Xi since Jiang's lack of appearance in public for nearly a year had prompted Internet rumors that he was in poor health or had been arrested.

The appearance of Jiang on center stage, standing tall and looking proud, dispelled those rumors. During the parade, Xi would occasionally turn and speak to Jiang, who seemed to be putting on a brave front, displaying an air that seemed to be unconcerned about the rumors of his fall from the actual seat of power. Placing both hands on the railing and looking placidly down on the scene below, Jiang displayed the same air of dignity he had when he retired ten years ago. In contrast, Xi never let his stern expression slip, looking guarded during what should have been his moment in the sun, removed the long shadow of behind-the-scenes powerbrokering that defines Chinese politics.

The beginning of 2015 marked a new phase of Xi's grand plan to tighten his grip on power. He had intensified the anti-corruption campaign he initiated in 2012 by thwarting attempts by Jiang and other retired officials to interfere in political matters and blocking similar moves by dissident factions within the party. The military parade on September 3, legally designated as "Victory over Japan Day," was intended to demonstrate his solid power base over both the military and the party. His visit to the US to meet President Obama shortly thereafter would show his fellow Chinese and the rest of the world his rise and prominence as a global leader. This series of "coronations" was aimed at harnessing the momentum for this October's Plenary Session, where "post-Xi Jinping" appointments are to be discussed. In a democracy, the people's mandate is granted through the electoral process. Yet, in a one-party system, establishing legitimacy is the most important factor in retaining political authority.

Xi's careful planning remained on track until just before the parade. His anti-corruption campaign had managed to unseat a number of Jiang's right-hand men, casting doubt over Jiang's influence. Additionally, a review article, published in the August 10 edition of the People's Daily, carried the tone of a

declaration of victory over Jiang: “Some leading cadres not only plant ‘trusted aides’ [in key positions] during their time in office to create favorable conditions in which they can exercise their power in the future, but also remain unwilling to give up control of important affairs in their former departments many years after their retirement.”

This harsh criticism, clearly leveled at Jiang, coincided with the typical timing for the Beidaihe conference. This event had, until this year, reflected the lingering influence of the “gerontocracy,” led by Jiang and other retired senior officials, through their say in key personnel assignments. Yet, according to one Communist Party official, Jiang was not in attendance at this year’s conference. As the sun was seemingly setting on the political life of the “emperor” who had reigned as de facto powerbroker for a quarter-century, an ill-timed “accident” occurred.

On August 12, more than 160 people were tragically killed in an explosion at a chemical warehouse in Tianjin Municipality’s Binhai New Area industrial zone, also host to a number of Japanese companies. Chemical plant explosions subsequently occurred in other industrial areas, including Shandong and Henan Provinces. This proved to be a major blow to Xi’s ruling circle, who were already under intense pressure to enact economic countermeasures to address the sudden plunge in stock prices.

The military parade itself illustrated other legitimacy issues for Xi. Russia and South Korea were the only major countries whose leaders were present. The European and American leaders invited by China skipped the event, and even Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe canceled his planned post-parade trip to China, a choice that erred on the side of caution.

During Xi’s visit to the United States, the summit meeting with President Obama focused in great part on the cyberattacks in which Chinese involvement was suspected. The tone of the meeting, along with the timing of the Pope’s first visit to the White House, left little opportunity to establish a more amicable rapport between the two nations. While officials from the Chinese government had asked the US on several occasions to change the Pope’s itinerary, their requests fell on deaf ears.

Despite recent attempts to tighten his hold on the Party, none of Xi's aspirations have been ultimately realized. This has been corroborated by a relative of a former high-ranking Chinese official who noted that, "Xi encountered political backlash from Jiang and the powers close to him." In the future, it is highly likely that Xi will be compelled to tone down his anti-corruption campaign, and will find it necessary to engage in "political coordination" with Jiang and other retired senior officials on key personnel and policy matters. With the 19th Party Congress scheduled for autumn 2017, the CCP is once again entering "a season of politics." One cannot help but note signs of a new struggle now that the "immortal emperor" has made a comeback. 🌸

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