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Executive Summary

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Xi Jinping's Attendance at Russia's Victory Day Parade: China's Regional Strategy and Its Implications for ROK-China Relations

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Background of Xi Jinping's Attendance at Russia's Victory Day Parade

On May 9, 2025, Russia held a large-scale ceremony in Moscow to mark the 80th anniversary of Victory Day. Chinese President Xi Jinping attended the event for the first time in ten years, his last appearance having been in 2015. A day earlier, on May 8, Xi met with Russian President Vladimir Putin for a bilateral summit, where he pledged to further deepen cooperation between the two countries, showing off the strength of the growing China-Russia partnership.

China is seizing the opportunity presented by the Trump administration's renewed *America First* policy, which has deepened tensions between the United States and its allies and partners. By highlighting these fractures, Beijing seeks to erode confidence in U.S. global leadership and expand its own international influence. While Xi's participation in the event and his public show of solidarity with Moscow could have potentially limited China's diplomatic flexibility, his decisions appear to have been strategically calculated based on several considerations.

1. *Expansion of China's Strategic Leverage Amid the Shifting Dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine War*

The Trump administration's *America First* policies and its push for a peace deal in the Russia-Ukraine war—widely perceived as favoring Moscow—has strained U.S.-Europe relations. This shifting dynamic has created a new strategic space for China to maneuver. Even if China increases its support for Russia, it is difficult for European countries to align with U.S.-led anti-China efforts as actively as they did during the Biden administration. Amid growing global economic uncertainty driven by

Trump-era tariff policies, China seems to have reasoned that it can ease European countries' discontent and strengthen cooperation by offering economic incentives and participating in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction.

2. Strengthening Anti-U.S. Solidarity Through Closer Ties with Russia

As the Global South emerges as an important geopolitical actor in the international community, China has identified it as a “key force in the transformation of the international order” and is actively promoting cooperation with the Global South. In this context, Xi's high-profile demonstration of solidarity with Russia serves a dual purpose. Beyond reaffirming Sino-Russian bilateral ties, it strengthens China's position in multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These moves support Beijing's effort to advance alternative global governance discourse, including its Global Security Initiative, which seeks to differentiate China's global vision from that of the United States.

3. Undermining the Trump Administration's Domestic and International Standing

The Trump administration has shown a conciliatory stance toward Russia during its push for a peace deal, steering negotiations in Moscow's favor. This approach is likely driven not only by a desire to boost domestic political standing through an early end to the war, but also by a strategic calculation aimed at driving a wedge between China and Russia—an approach referred to as the “Reverse Nixon Strategy.” However, Xi Jinping's attendance at Russia's Victory Day parade and his public display of solidarity with Moscow were tantamount to exposing the ineffectiveness of this strategy, signaling that U.S. efforts to divide Beijing and Moscow are failing. This diplomatic signal could be interpreted as a policy failure, potentially damaging the Trump administration's standing both at home and abroad.

China's U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific Revealed at Russia's Victory Day

At the Sino-Russia summit held on the sidelines of Victory Day, both countries pledged to deepen cooperation across a wide range of domains—military, economic, and cultural. At the same time, they also expressed shared views and intent to cooperate on foreign and security issues in the Indo-Pacific region, including the U.S. alliance system, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the Taiwan issue. China's foreign policy orientation toward the region was revealed as follows.

1. Countering U.S.-Led Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific with Russia

Building on the 2024 Sino-Russian Joint Statement, China and Russia reiterated that the United States and its allies' pivot to the Asia-Pacific region undermines regional peace and stability. They voiced strong opposition to the creation of a so-called “nuclear-sharing” military alliance targeting China and Russia, the deployment of nuclear weapons in the region under the name of “extended deterrence,” and the deployment of ground-based intermediate- and short-range missile systems.

Given these concerns, China is expected to continue leveraging its partnership with Russia to counter U.S.-led security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. Although Russia's active involvement may remain limited due to its ongoing war, it may still seek to reinforce this alignment through small-scale joint military exercises, signaling strategic convergence. These exercises may gradually increase in frequency and visibility, aimed at deterring regional states from deepening cooperation with the

United States.

2. Leveraging the North Korean Nuclear Issue to Pressure U.S. Allies in the Region

In line with the previous year's joint statement, the 2025 joint statement between China and Russia made no reference to the resolution of North Korea's nuclear issue or denuclearization. Instead, it reaffirmed Pyongyang's position that its nuclear and missile development is a legitimate form of "self-defensive nuclear deterrence." Compared to the 2024 statement, the call to end coercive measures against North Korea was expanded from targeting solely the United States to include "relevant countries." This means that China may use the North Korean nuclear issue as a means to pressure U.S. allies in the region, such as South Korea and Japan. In other words, China is expected to echo North Korea's rhetoric and intensify diplomatic pressure on Seoul and Tokyo, claiming that the ROK-U.S. and trilateral ROK-U.S.-Japan joint military exercises are destabilizing the region.

3. Reaffirming a Decisive Response to Foreign Intervention in the Taiwan Issue

In February 2025, the Trump administration removed the statement "We do not support Taiwan independence" from the U.S. State Department's U.S.-Taiwan relations webpage. This was followed by the administration's *Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance* as reported by the Washington Post on March 29, which explicitly states that the United States would not allow China to invade Taiwan. Against this backdrop, Xi Jinping's Victory Day speech framed Taiwan's return to China as an important component of the post-war international order. He asserted that supporting Taiwan independence not only interferes in China's domestic affairs but also constitutes a direct challenge to the international order. Through this framing, Xi reaffirmed Beijing's resolve to respond decisively to any foreign intervention in the Taiwan issue.

Implications for ROK-China Relations

Recent conciliatory policies toward South Korea—such as granting visa-free entry to South Korean citizens—combined with the current political turbulence in Seoul, have led to growing optimism in South Korea about a potential improvement in bilateral ties. However, as outlined above, China is more likely to prioritize countering U.S.-led security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific than resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. It is also expected to adopt a more assertive stance on the ROK-U.S. alliance and ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral security cooperation. As a result, diplomatic frictions between Seoul and Beijing in the areas of foreign policy and security are likely to intensify. In navigating these developments, the South Korean government should take the following considerations into account.

First, it is important to recognize that China's foreign policy toward South Korea prioritizes exploiting perceived weaknesses in the ROK-U.S. alliance over respecting South Korea's national interests. Recently, there has been a growing public opinion in South Korea that a balanced diplomacy between the United States and China should be pursued. This view is shaped by multiple factors, including distrust toward the Trump administration, China's recent overtures, including the visa exemption, and backlash against domestic political instability. Expectations for improved bilateral ties have emerged within China as well, especially as Seoul's new leadership emphasizes pragmatic diplomacy grounded in national interests.

However, it would be a mistake to believe that groundwork has been laid for improving bilateral ties.

ROK-China relations are increasingly shaped by broader geopolitical dynamics and the shifting security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, rather than bilateral concerns alone. Going forward, China is expected to use the restoration of bilateral ties as an excuse to pull Seoul closer through engagement while simultaneously applying pressure to weaken the U.S. alliances in the region. The South Korean government should recognize these dynamics and formulate its China policy from the standpoint of strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance and South Korea's standing in the international community.

Second, South Korea should activate diplomatic channels and engage in dialogues with China, clearly communicating its strategic principles and red lines. While maintaining the ROK-U.S. alliance is critical to addressing the North Korean nuclear threat, the Trump administration's push for allies to assume expanded roles in checking China has introduced new complications, particularly concerning the strategic flexibility of the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). China views such developments with deep concern and will closely monitor any changes to USFK's operational posture. As the South Korean government negotiates with the Trump administration on issues such as tariffs, defense cost-sharing, and the strategic flexibility of the USFK, discussions related to the Taiwan issue will also take place. China is likely to use these developments to pressure South Korea into limiting its alignment with the United States, even when doing so runs counter to Seoul's own security interests.

In preparation, the South Korean government must internally set red lines and principles that are non-negotiable and communicate them confidently in its dialogues with China. At the same time, Seoul should emphasize that, in the absence of tangible progress on denuclearization, it has no choice but to strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance and deepen trilateral security cooperation with Japan. By framing this position as a response to North Korea's actions and not as containment of China, South Korea can more effectively encourage Beijing to take a responsible role in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. This approach not only safeguards Korea's national interests but also lays the groundwork for more stable and constructive ROK-China relations over the long term.

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(‘시진핑의 러시아 전승절 참석: 중국의 지역전략과 한중관계에 대한 함의’,
<https://www.asaninst.org/?p=99538>)