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The Great Wall Parade

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My second day back in Beijing, and I was already under house arrest.

It was a sensitive time — the day before China’s 60th birthday — and I found myself stuck inside the gates of the city’s oldest diplomatic compound, where many foreign newspapers and television stations now have their offices.

Granted, this was partially of my own accord. The compound sits near the eastern end of the parade route, on the city’s legendary Chang'an Jie (Avenue of Eternal Peace), and a friend’s balcony offered a good vantage point. But because of high security, I had been told that if I left the compound, I wouldn’t be able to re-enter without a special ID card, and would have to watch the parade on television.

Getting my visa had been hard enough. My first application for a tourist visa had been rejected. “They’re very sensitive right now,” a travel agent in New York told me. I hired her as a line of defense against the Byzantine process, which includes filling out a form that asks about your itinerary or if you are a leper. I wrote a letter to the consulate, explaining that I wouldn’t be writing as a journalist while in China. I would be writing essays, I said, which was enough to convince them. On the verge of my flight, just to make it harder on myself, I misplaced my passport. When I checked in at the airport for a rescheduled plane a few days later, the computer that scanned my passport said, “Visa is not valid.” The computer was just kidding, it turned out.

Now the joke was that after struggling to get in, I couldn’t really leave.

My house arrest in the compound would be temporary and voluntary, and merely a side effect of Beijing’s careful preparations for a parade, which allowed for no unauthorized bystanders along its route. But there was something more threatening about these particular rules. A collection of dismal concrete high-rises surrounded by big walls and guards, the compound always had the feeling of a refuge and a kind of prison. To hammer the point home, I had heard, the parade, I had heard, would be first and foremost a show of China’s military might.

Most of these walls aren’t that hard to climb over. The Manchus invaded. These days, a piece of software, a virtual private network, can let your eyes wander outside China’s nanny internet, to such risque enclaves as Twitter or Youtube.

But there are bigger walls, harder to surmount. The house arrest, the real kind, is a favorite pastime of the Beijing police. They’re always likely to send grim looking men to camp out outside your apartment building if you’re an outspoken AIDS activist or a human rights lawyer, especially when US congressmen are in town, or a sensitive anniversary is approaching.

On National Day, every Beijinger was on a kind of vague house arrest: to those who hadn’t already evacuated the capital, the police advised against going outside, insisting instead that we watch the parade on television. The parade route along the runway-wide Chang’an Jie would be closed to the police. Only hand-picked performers and guests would be allowed near the center of the performance at Tian’anmen Square.

Most parades are lively affairs aimed at the throngs that line its route. This would not be that kind. An immaculate display of China’s top leaders, thousands of civilian performers, floats, soldiers and weaponry, this parade-as-propaganda would be made just for TV, with all the aerial shots, cut-aways, carefully selected close-ups and pans that entailed. The civilian section would be choreographed by Zhang Yimou, a once rebellious filmmaker who has become the Party’s go-to maestro for such spectacles, and would be carried by China Central Television to billions of viewers across China, but also, thanks to the network’s growing reach, across Africa, the Middle East and Eurasia. (Foreign
networks would be kept waiting all night for the right to cover the event, but there would be no other television broadcasts.)

I figured then that the prospect of getting some glimpse of the whole thing with my own eyes — and over the walls — was worth subjecting myself to temporary confinement within them.

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As I prepared my couch bed the night before, I was expecting to be awoken in the middle of the night by the pounding of an artificial thunderstorm, the kind that Beijing authorities make by seeding the clouds with iodine cannons whenever a big event comes to town. For the past two days the buildings nearby disappeared under the unrelenting veil of fog that characterized the city’s weather. A similar pallor swept the city in the days before the Olympics last summer, but was gone by the opening ceremony. I suspected that the weather during the parade would not be left up to chance either.

At around 1 in the morning, as if on cue, a rumble began. But this was a different sort of rolling thunder, with guns that did not shoot iodine: the tanks and missiles and radar trucks for the parade were lurching slowly past the compound to a staging area on Chang’an Jie, and out of sight.

I slept through this midnight parade, so I’d have to watch the television after all. I also missed a light rain that by morning had turned the sky a radiant blue. A couple of stout, wrinkled men with walkie-talkies were milling around outside the building, keeping things safe. From where I could see, the intersection where the second ring road meets Chang’an Jie had only the occasional car, and the sidewalks were empty save for some policemen.

Having witnessed the meticulous preparations surrounding the Olympics last year, moments like these are, however strange, not surprising. The guns, the perfect weather, the guards, are less an expression of power as they are evidence of a deep fragility. It’s like watching a Broadway musical from the orchestra with a simultaneous view backstage. You can see the colorful dancers and the meticulously designed set, but you also see the wires sticking out of the dancers’ backs, and the wooden frame holding up the skyline, and the stagehands getting ready to drop the curtain. Watching something like that demands your utmost attention, even as it asks you to keep suspending your disbelief.

The ceremony began at ten on the dot with a catalog of rusted slogans. “You’ve worked so hard,” and “We serve the people!” was the call and response as president Hu Jintao, speaking with a microphone, drove past 5,000 soldiers in a black Hongqi limousine. his still torso piercing the sunroof like a wax figure. As he glided emotionless past tanks and missiles, Hu set the stage for a decorous ceremony more dour than delightful. His car resembled a hearse.

Other slogans would be emblazoned on floats, like the one for scientific development, or the Mao Zedong Thought Formation. None were as impressive as the slogans formed by thousands of red and white placards held up by a flood of participants in Tianamen Square: “Be Ready to Fight with Bravery,” “Marching into a New Century,” “Do As the Party Says,” and so on. The pixel-perfect display reminded me of pictures I’d seen of the Mass Games in North Korea. “Don’t forget where North Korea learned it from,” a friend chirped.

As the senior leadership gathered again on the Tiananmen rostrum (alongside some mysterious guests, including an African dignitary, and the former Prince of Cambodia, Norodom Sihanouk), the place where Mao had inaugurated all of this on a sunny October 1, 1949, I remembered something the Chairman had once told his city planners. Proclaiming the development of the country, he dreamed of looking out from Tiananmen to see a forest of smokestacks in the distance. Today the sky was postcard blue above Mao’s portrait, partly the result, no doubt, of last year’s Olympic campaign to move factories away from Beijing, and to shut down industry for the week.

The soldiers goose-stepped past in their finery, including a group of females in white miniskirts and pistol holsters. Hu Jintao smiled briefly. And then all that weaponry began to slide down the Avenue of
Eternal Peace. Later, during the civilian parade, the announcer would describe a display of "young Chinese in the prime of life, pursuing their passion and dreams." Now it was force.

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In many ways, the military moment looked like the inverse of last year’s “we are the world” display at the breathtaking Olympics opening ceremony. But the parade was less a sign of the times than it was a reminder that the Party has no intention of playing with a martial tradition that extends far back into Chinese history. In fact, this wasn’t nearly as menacing as the camouflage parades that are organized for Kim Jong Il, or the vigorously anti-rightist parades made for Mao, or even the victory parades that were displayed for the Qing emperor, which could include enemies’ body parts.

Rather than serve as a blustery advertisement for China’s rise — a narrative that government ministers have been keen to play down since before the Olympics — this parade felt more like an infomercial for the country’s military wares. On offer, it seemed, was everything from “mechanized armaments to information armaments,” a missile “used for high value targets ... can fly at low altitudes to escape detection,” a navy that “has developed water surface craft,” an air force with “air defense radar and electronic counter measures.” Sixty percent of the weapons displayed have been approved for export, reported Forbes.

There were of course more ominous aspects to the martial march. The military’s “trump card,” as it would be described in China Daily, came last: a phalanx of 20-wheeled trucks carrying the Dongfeng-31A, China’s nuclear-tipped intercontinental missiles. They were, the announcer said, capable of reaching a target up to 11,000 kilometres away. As the weaponry passed, the parade, reported the newspaper, “reached a crescendo of excitement.”

“This is an extraordinary achievement that speaks to the level of our military’s modernization and the huge change in our country’s technological strength,” Liang Guanglie, the defense minister, said in a statement.

And eerily absent from the parade were some of the country’s most powerful weapons and troops: the ones devoted to cyberwarfare. Earlier this year, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair singled out China as “very aggressive in the cyberworld.” Weapons for that domain are not easily trotted down an avenue, and are presumably best wielded in secret.

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At one point, the announcer on CCTV said all of it — the 8,000 troops, the vehicles, planes and missiles — were key elements in China’s “steel Great Wall.” As a symbol at least, the wall wasn’t just built to keep people out. It was a stirring reminder to China’s citizens, if anyone needed it, to be proud. And, of course, it was a reminder of who’s boss, lest ideology failed to answer that question.

“Only socialism can save China,” President Hu Jintao had intoned at the start. “Only reform and opening up can develop socialism, develop Marxism.” But he passed right over the rub: the reform and opening of the 1980s didn’t rejuvenate socialism. It ushered in capitalism. If ideology was reborn after the massacre here in 1989, it was as a kind of medicine that the government would force down the country’s throat, a tank cannon to its head.

Now, twenty years later, China was throwing a sort of Potemkin birthday party on the same tragic spot, composed of shots of robotic soldiers, tidy officials and cheering citizens, all set to triumphant music and breathless commentary. It was like sitting next to someone at the theater who keeps leaning over to remind you that it’s all real and it’s all beautiful, even though you can see what’s happening backstage.

Maybe musical was the wrong metaphor. This felt more like a wake, in the guise of a celebration.

Later, peering out from the balcony, I finally caught a glimpse of the tanks and missiles as they passed back over the Jianguomen bridge. And then I remembered a chilling photograph I had seen,
taken in June 1989 from another balcony that must have been nearby: a couple cowering beneath that same bridge as a tank paused above.

This time, the tanks played a more ambiguous role. Lined up along the Avenue of Eternal Peace was China’s strong 21st century Great Wall — a method of defense, a source of pride, a tool for control, a logo. To China’s citizens, proud or beleaguered, the message on National Day didn’t need to be spelled out, but it was: “do as the Party says.” To the rest of the world, China’s missive was equally of might as it was of marketing. We could attack you, whoever you are, said Beijing — or we can give you a pretty good deal on some missiles.

Alex Pasternack writes regularly for Treehugger and Huffington Post. His last piece for China Beat was "Will China Put the 'Eco' Back in 'Economy'?"

Tags: National Day