

Chinese Leader Tops Meager Victory Day Guest List

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin (L) shakes hands with China's President Xi Jinping as India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi (R) looks on during the VI BRICS Summit in Fortaleza, July 15, 2014.

While Russia's celebrations this weekend to mark the 70th anniversary of victory in the Second World War will be some of the most extravagant since the end of the Soviet Union, tensions over Ukraine and sanctions against Moscow have left the international guest list significantly shorter than usual.

Of the 68 invitations Moscow sent out to heads of state for the three days of celebration, less than 30 have confirmed. Even fewer will attend the set piece military parade alongside President Vladimir Putin on Saturday.

"From a political point of view, Red Square will be empty," said Alexei Malashenko, a political analyst at the Carnegie Center in Moscow. "It's humiliating for Putin."

But the absence of most Western heads of state mean that Chinese president Xi Jinping, who will hold talks with Putin on Friday, is now the most prominent guest. Russian officials have sought to boost ties with China in recent months amid the Ukraine crisis, and Xi's visit to Moscow is his first since Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich was toppled from power in street protests in February 2014.

Military Ties

Victory Day Parade Roll Call

The following table represents the heads of state from around the globe that are set to attend the 70th anniversary Victory Day parade on Red Square on Saturday, along with whether the leaders of those same states attended the 60th anniversary event a decade ago. All data was obtained from media reports.

Region	Head of State attending in 2015?	Head of State attended in 2005?
The West		
United States	NO	YES
Germany	NO	YES
France	NO	NO
United Kingdom	NO	NO
Spain	NO	YES
Italy	NO	YES
Greece	YES	YES
Poland	NO	YES
'Pivot' to Asia		
North Korea	NO	NO
South Korea	NO	YES
Vietnam	YES	NO
Japan	NO	YES
BRICS		
Brazil	YES	NO
India	YES	YES
China	YES	YES
South Africa	YES	NO
Former Soviet Union		

Ukraine	NO	YES
Tajikistan	YES	YES
Turkmenistan	YES	YES
Belarus	NO	YES
Kyrgyzstan	YES	YES
Kazakhstan	YES	YES
Uzbekistan	NO	YES
Georgia	NO	NO
Azerbaijan	YES	YES
Armenia	YES	YES
Latvia	NO	YES
Lithuania	NO	NO
Estonia	NO	NO
Moldova	NO	YES

Sources: Media reports

It will not just be Russian troops marching on Saturday. Amid a sign of strengthening military ties between the two former Communist rivals, Chinese troops will be among the foreign soldiers also taking part in the parade.

"The Chinese people and the Russian people are great peoples," Xi wrote in an article in state-owned Rossiiskaya Gazeta on Thursday that highlighted the role of China in defeating fascism.

"In years of woe and hardship our inviolable military friendship was strengthened by blood. Today, the peoples of China and Russia will hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder facilitate development and contribute to the securing of a stable peace in the world and the progress of all humanity."

Moscow this week announced that the first ever joint exercises between Russian and Chinese naval units will take place in the Mediterranean Sea from May 11. Russia confirmed in April that the two countries had signed a deal under which Moscow will supply Beijing with sophisticated S-400 air defense systems.

Russia-China

The burgeoning relationship between the two countries, however, is not restricted to military cooperation. Their trade turnover in 2014 was \$88.4 billion, according to Russian statistics, and both leaders are looking to push this to over \$100 billion.

"I expect a breakthrough," Vladimir Petrovsky, an expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute for Far Eastern Studies, told reporters Thursday, adding that Xi will be looking to push forward China's plan to build a new economic route through Central Asia and Russia on the path of the ancient Silk Road.

"The most interesting thing is whether the two leaders will agree how to unite the Chinese plan for a Silk Road Economic Belt with the trajectory of development of Eurasian integration," said Petrovsky.

Xi will arrive in Russia from Kazakhstan, and he will stop in Belarus after Moscow.

A landmark agreement on cyber security to increase cooperation between Moscow and Beijing could be signed this weekend, Russian newspaper Kommersant reported Thursday. The document was originally slated to be finalized during Putin's visit to Beijing in November last year.

Not like Other Years

The prominence of Xi at this year's celebrations is in stark contrast to previous years when celebrations have been attended by most major world leaders.

For the 60th anniversary celebrations a decade ago, then-United States President George Bush and almost every European head of state travelled to Moscow.

A total of 53 heads of state made the trip in 2005.

Many are wary of associating themselves with a Russian display of armed might after the Kremlin's seizure of the southern Ukrainian region of Crimea last year, and amid a continuing confrontation between Russian-backed separatists and troops loyal to Kiev in eastern Ukraine.

This year's parade will be one of the biggest since the fall of the Soviet Union, featuring 194 pieces of military equipment, 143 planes and helicopters and 16,000 troops.

Who's Not Coming

One of the surprises of the guest list is the relatively poor showing from former Soviet Union countries. Neither the authoritarian President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, nor the aging leader of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, will be present at the parade.

"Even the Uzbeks have refused to come and see Putin on May 9th! Soon we will be isolated even in the former USSR," opposition leader and politician Gennady Gudkov wrote on Twitter on Thursday.

The leaders of the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will not be in attendance, nor will the Georgian or Ukrainian heads of state.

Other high profile non-attendees include Israel and Turkey. While secretive North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was initially expected to come to Moscow, he later formally declined the invitation.

Some leaders have appeared to strike a compromise — visiting Moscow for the celebrations, but not attending the military parade. German Chancellor Angela Merkel will skip the parade and arrive on Moscow on Sunday to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and hold talks with Putin.

"Our Festival"

Absences have raised hackles in Russia, where victory against Nazism in the Second World War remains an ideological keystone for the Kremlin.

"To ignore the opportunity to demonstrate your relationship to the Soviet Union's struggle against fascism is disrespect," the last Communist leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, said Thursday, according to the Interfax news agency.

Those who have chosen to come to Moscow include the leaders of Egypt, Zimbabwe, Venezuela and Cuba. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon will be present.

Heads of European Union countries attending include those from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Greece and Cyprus — but only the Cypriot president has confirmed his presence at the parade.

The Kremlin has still not officially released a list of all those flying to Moscow for the celebrations, despite reportedly promising to do so by the end of April.

Faced with a slimming guest list, some officials have sought to stress that the celebrations are Russian in essence, and that they cannot be spoiled by international no-shows.

"Above all, it's our festival," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said earlier this week, according to the Russian RIA Novosti news agency. "An invitation is not a notice to report to an army recruitment center."

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17