

India-China Cooperation in Counter-Terrorism: Q & A

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By Col R. Hariharan

Here are my answers given to a columnist's e-mail questions on the subject.

1. The main source of anti-India terrorism is Pakistan. In the event of a hijacking, for instance, by a Pak-based group, will Sino-Indian co-operation be possible? What is the scope of operational cooperation in counter-terrorism between India and China?

This question on operational cooperation in counter-terrorism between India and China covers two different issues: one pertains to aircraft hijacking and the other relates to the scope of such cooperation in general.

China is a party to two multilateral treaties relating to hijacking. Under the Hague Hijacking Convention of 1970 (Convention on Suppression of Unlawful Seizure of Aircraft), China has agreed to prohibit and punish hijacking of civilian aircraft (other than aircraft of customs, law enforcement and military). Based on the principles of this convention China must also prosecute the hijacker if he is not extradited.

As a signatory to the Beijing Convention of 2010 (Convention on the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Relating to International Civil Aviation) adopted after the 9/11 Al Qaeda terrorist hijacking, China has also agreed to criminalise terrorists using civil aircraft as a weapon and the use of dangerous materials to attack aircraft or other targets on the ground as well as for the illegal transportation of bacterial, chemical and nuclear weapons.

So if India seeks China's operational cooperation in a case of hijacking, China will be expected to positively respond under these two conventions. One can expect China to conform to this requirement, as it increasingly wants to be accepted by the international community as

a responsible power in keeping with its growing global influence. Moreover, China is a promoter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) formed with the primary aim of fostering cooperation and coordination through networked action among the member-countries against terrorism. And China has invited India to join the SCO.

However, as if the hijacking is carried out by a Pak-based terrorist body, China's response is likely to be qualitatively different. If the hijacker lands the aircraft in Chinese territory we can expect the response to be swift as it would be difficult for the Chinese to discern the aim of the terrorist group. China hates Pak-based Jihadi terrorist groups and suspects their hand in the increasing Uighur extremist acts in Xinjiang. It is also wary of Tibetan insurgency sprouting once again.

However, Indian Special Forces are unlikely to be permitted to carry out the operation to apprehend the hijackers on Chinese soil. The PLA Special Forces have been carrying out intense training in refining their anti-hijacking drills. Anti-hijacking, hostage rescue, and bomb disposal now form part of the counter terrorism training regime of the Police and People's Armed Police (PAP) also in the last three years after Uighur extremists' stepped up their acts. So China would not like India or any other country to carryout operations against hijackers. To do so would be a loss of face for China.

However, if Pak-based hijackers are apprehended, Pakistan would not want China to hand them over to India. As Pakistan is a close and long-standing strategic South Asian ally of China, Beijing would be averse to handing over the apprehended hijackers to India. So the extradition process could be delayed using bureaucratic and legal process as a ploy. China might provide provided secret access to Pakistan to meet with the hijackers in custody before India is extended the same facility. In the unlikely event of the hijackers managing to take off (or being let off) in the aircraft after using Chinese territory as an intermediary stop, China can be expected to share all available information with India. Of course China is likely to take into consideration of Pak sensitivities while sharing such information.

2. To what extent have joint military exercises contributed to confidence building between India and China?

Mutual confidence is built by understanding achieved through cooperation between the two countries. Even between two democracies, say the U.S. and India, military plays only a small but important part of the confidence building process. Joint military exercises provide hands on opportunity to build professional and social networking between the two forces at various levels which helps the Process to progress.

Indian and Chinese armed forces enjoy have a totally different say in the overall confidence building measures between the two countries. Indian armed forces are creatures of the government. They have a very limited say in even in strategic security issues. Progressively their role has been pruned over the years to that of being on 'listening watch' (to use military terminology).

Nothing illustrates this better than the India-China Defence and Security Consultation programme meeting held in New Delhi February 24, 2014. It was co-chaired by Indian Defence Secretary RK Mathur and Deputy Chief of General Staff of the PLA General Wang Guanzhong.

The decision to hold the joint military exercise Hand-in-Hand 2014 was taken at this meeting.

Unlike Indian armed forces, the PLA enjoys an exalted status as one of two 'sword arms' (the other being the government) of the Chinese Communist Party to further the Party interests. This gives PLA a vastly superior status in deciding national policy let alone on strategic security policy. Moreover, the Chinese General Staff Department lays great emphasis on military diplomacy and has a foreign relations institute to train its officers.

Indian armed forces at present can play only a peripheral role in confidence building measures between the two countries. And as a corollary, the joint military exercises serve as the barometer of progress of the confidence building process between the two countries rather than a major influence in shaping it.

China's joint military exercises with most of the other countries including the U.S. are at platoon or lower levels. The focus of these exercises is mostly on basic techniques of counter-terrorism or "drills" as the Chinese call it.

The fourth "Hand-in-Hand" India-China anti-terrorism joint exercise lasting nine days has concluded last week. The armies of the two countries organised the first-ever "Hand-in-Hand" joint exercise in Yunnan in 2007 as a part of the overall confidence building measures agreed upon by the two countries. The second Hand-in-Hand exercise was organised in Belgaum in 2008. About 60 troops (a company minus) from both sides participated in these exercises.

The exercises were to be an annual feature. However, India called off the 2009-exercise after China denied a regular visa to the Army Commander of the Northern Command to attend a meeting in China as he belonged to Jammu and Kashmir, which it said was a disputed territory. However, both countries agreed upon resuming the annual training event after China relented and started issuing regular visas to Jammu and Kashmir residents last year.

The third joint exercise was held in Chengdu in November 2013 with 144 troops (nearly two companies) from the Sikh Light Infantry and an equal number of PLA troops participating. According to the Chinese media, the 10-day exercise included demonstration of weapons, exchange of tactics and training in arrest to suspects and rescue of hostages.

These low level, basic exercises have limited value in confidence building between the two armies. At best they contribute to providing a window of opportunity towards confidence building at higher levels in the future.

However, naval forces are an exception to this; the world over they have a culture of joint exercises and cooperation at sea. Indian Navy and PLA-Navy also have taken part in joint and multilateral exercises at sea.

3. Have all the military exercises between India and China so far focussed on counter-terrorism only? Why?

This question is probably best answered by the army chiefs of both countries. PLA's main focus in training for the last four years has been at two levels: on refining its joint operation capabilities in a modern C3IS battlefield scenario and the other on improving their basic drills at subunit level.

China has been using joint exercises with the armies of other nations to broaden the PLA's military knowledge as well as understand their operational techniques particularly relating to counter-terrorism. Indian army has a rich experience in combating extremism, and insurgency and its Special Forces are trained in counter-terrorism strategies. So China's interest in Indian army's combat techniques in counter-terrorist setting is understandable.

PLA has been carrying out regimental level combat group (equivalent to Indian army's brigade combat group) exercises mostly with Russia to improve its ability to optimise its modernised weapons and delivery systems and logistics by improving the coordination between the three wings of armed forces in what the Chinese call 'informatized' scenario (it refers networked command, control and information systems using land, sea, air and space) of modern battlefield. Even in these exercises the emphasis has been on counter-terrorism operations at the regimental group level.

China's singular focus of China on counter-terrorism is probably related to the CPC's concern in maintaining internal harmony due to ethnic minorities dominant in the border regions of the country like Tibet and Xinjiang, which have sustained movements demanding independence for over five decades. China has a long history of warlords from these regions challenging the central authority. Considering this, it would be reasonable to conclude India-China joint exercises also focus on counter-terrorism at the request of China.

4. Aren't other agencies like NSG and CRPF the ones who will respond first in a terrorism situation? Why then do the Sino-Indian counter-terrorism exercises involve the

China considers all unconventional armed anti-state threats as terrorism. The PLA controls the armed police forces used in counter-terrorism operations along with troops. These operations are controlled by the military district accountable to the military regional headquarters. Police work is also closely coordinated with the military operations.

In India the Home Ministry of the state or the Centre controls uses state and central police forces and paramilitary forces for operations against unconventional anti-state threats including terrorism. The operation against Left Wing Extremism is a case in point. Of course armed forces Special Forces are also requisitioned in certain operations i.e., 26/11 operations. Army is given charge of operations in exceptional circumstances as in Jammu and Kashmir or in the North East when the Centre feels the situation is beyond the capability paramilitary forces.

The command and control of such operations has always been amorphous as we have not been able resolve it satisfactorily between the Home and Defence departments.

With such doctrinal differences between the two countries in handling such threats, it probably makes more sense for China to organise joint exercises with Indian army rather than with central paramilitary forces.

(Col R Hariharan a retired MI specialist on South Asia is associated with Chennai Centre for China Studies and the South Asia Analysis Group. E-mail: haridirect@gmail.com [1] Blog: <http://col.hariharan.info> [2])

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