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# Joint Military Exercises and Confidence-Building: Theoretical and Applied Features

Monika Chansoria

The broad generic characterisation of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) is of them being a set of unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral procedural actions that primarily are put in place to decrease military tensions between state actors (nation-states) before, during or after actual conflict. States with security-related differences that could potentially lead to conflict should encourage channels to communicate regularly through consultative mechanisms with transparency measures that foster greater candidness of military cooperation. These could include pre-notification requirements, military exercises and related operating procedures. In today's conflict-ridden world, CBMs serve as an effective tool to make a breakthrough towards the larger goal of conflict resolution. The aim of CBMs is to help build a working trust by addressing the more amenable issues by means of substantive negotiations, which, in turn, could potentially allow parties to address the more contentious aspects of a conflict.<sup>1</sup> CBMs, thus, are not necessarily an end in themselves, but rather useful steps to negotiate and implement processes that could become bridges to reduce conflict situations between states.

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Dr **Monika Chansoria** is Senior Fellow and Head of the China-Study Programme, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

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### **Theory of Liberal Institutionalism and CBMs**

CBMs, defence cooperation and military engagement can be clubbed under the liberal institutionalist school that argues that international cooperation is not only possible but also highly desirable since it reduces transaction costs and makes inter-state relations more predictable. Institutional liberalism or liberal institutionalism for that matter, claims that international institutions

and organisations have aided the possibility of cooperation between states. Institutional liberalism is functional where states are treated as rational actors operating in an international political system wherein a chain of command structure cannot be enforced.<sup>2</sup> Robert O Keohane developed liberal institutionalism without necessarily rejecting realism, which is often pitted against liberalism.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, neo-liberal institutionalism is a school of thought arguing that nation-states often are interested in institutions which can result in joint profitable arrangements and compromises. This school of thought views institutions as the mediator and the means to achieve cooperation among actors in the system. What is significant is that the state and its interests remain the central subject of analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Negotiations involve a process of decision-making in which states jointly seek mutually acceptable solutions, which at times are high risk, to seek new ways of addressing the conflict. That is why a minimal degree of confidence is needed for negotiations to commence and develop. For the parties, CBMs have been found to be an attractive option because they are low-cost and low-risk activities.<sup>5</sup> Also, they can be implemented with limited resources and calculated risks. As CBMs are usually reciprocal in nature, they minimise the negative impact of the conflict and display

goodwill to push the negotiation process forward.<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, in the security/military field, classical military CBMs traditionally have focussed on avoiding escalation triggered by a misunderstanding of signals.<sup>7</sup> In a hostile atmosphere, any kind of behaviour of the other side is generally interpreted as being aggressive rather than being a possible deterrent. The aim of CBMs is to clarify the difference between intended aggressive behaviour and usual military activity, aimed at avoiding unintended escalation. Examples of such measures include communication hotlines, joint training programmes and exchange of military personnel.<sup>8</sup>

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### **Applicability of CBMs in the India-China Case**

In the China-India context, confidence-building measures, including the Panchsheel Agreement of 1954, had been part of India's evolving foreign policy-making during the early years of its independence. Many decades later, the interactions between India and China between 1988 and 1996 are considered very significant since they extended to undertaking CBMs in the military field. Two significant Sino-Indian CBMs agreements signed between the respective governments of these two countries came in the form of:

- The Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas, September 7, 1993.
- The Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control in the China-India Border Areas, November 29, 1996.

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It needs to be recalled here that a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between Beijing and New Delhi in May 2006 stipulating that both nations would hold joint military exercises. Military ties between the Indian and Chinese armed forces have been building up since December 2007, when the first joint counter-terrorism exercise “Hand-in-Hand” was held at Kunming, Yunnan province, China. One

company each from the Indian Army and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) participated in the exercise and Lt Gen Susheel Gupta, Deputy Chief of India’s Army Staff and Lt Gen Ma Xiaotian, Deputy Chief of General Staff (CGS) of the Chinese PLA were the observers from the respective sides.

Since then, all four India-China military exercises held till date have repeatedly focussed on drills to tackle insurgency and counter-terrorism operations, by conducting operations in a counter-infiltration environment. The second set of joint military combat exercises conducted from December 6-14, 2008, in Belgaum, Karnataka (in southern India), featured joint tactical manoeuvres and drills, with a 137-strong Army contingent from the 1st Company of the Infantry Battalion of the PLA’s Chengdu Military Area Command, and troops from the 8 Maratha Light Infantry Battalion of the Indian Army. The exercise focussed on joint tactical manoeuvres and drills, interoperability training and joint command post procedures, and culminated in a simulated joint counter-terrorism operational exercise. The larger aim of the initiative was to evolve a collaborative security mechanism among the Asian powers.<sup>9</sup>

Taking the joint military exercises further, Col Guo Hongtao, Staff Officer of the Asian Affairs Bureau, Foreign Affairs Office, Ministry of National Defence, told a visiting team of Indian journalists that “China

is considering India's proposal for more joint military exercises and it is at the stage of working level discussions." Guo said that the working level discussions will ultimately decide on when the exercise could be held while asserting that both countries should make a "substantive effort to expand bilateral cooperation..." The Indian journalists were visiting China on the invitation of the state-run All China Journalists' Association as part of the China-India Year of Friendship and Cooperation declared by the two countries.<sup>10</sup>

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Following this, Miaoergang, in China's Sichuan province became host to the third joint military manoeuvres in 2013. And, the latest and most recent India-China military exercise was held in November 2014, at the Aundh Military Cantonment, Pune, in western India. The Chinese contingent from the 13 Group Army, Chengdu Military Region, comprising one Infantry Company landed at the Lohegaon airfield in two IL-76 aircraft from China. The manoeuvres that were undertaken included using assault rifles, and grenade launchers as both sides practised tactical training and cordon and search operations. Special emphasis was laid on handling Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and special heliborne operations.

Upon being hosted by Lt Gen Bobby Mathews, Corps Commander of the Indian Army, Lt Gen Shi Xiangyuan, Deputy Commander of the Chengdu Military Command of the PLA said, "India and China can establish peace in Asia together. Both countries share a common culture and if they join hands, it can help fight terrorism." In further continuation of this statement, there has been a marked departure from earlier positions taken by China when it recently accepted India's initiative for a united pitch for bringing to justice "perpetrators, organisers,

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financiers and sponsors of terrorist acts” and sought an early conclusion of the India-moved resolution on a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism in the United Nations. At the 13th trilateral meeting of Russia, India and China (RIC) on February 2, 2015, it was reiterated that the purpose of the UN Convention was to punish those who support terrorism and not just its actors. External Affairs Minister

Sushma Swaraj was joined by her Chinese and Russian counterparts Wang Yi and Sergey Lavrov respectively, and subsequently, New Delhi, Moscow and Beijing jointly called for the early conclusion of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT), and a resolution aimed at addressing gaps in the international legal framework against terrorism. On the issue of Pakistan’s role in perpetrating terrorism, what stood out most noticeably, in a first of its kind positional shift, was that China did not attempt to defend Pakistan against accusations of sheltering, financing, or supporting terrorism. The latest RIC resolution supports a United Nations Convention on a comprehensive ban as well as action against countries to which terror is sourced – thus, affecting Pakistan. Notwithstanding that a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry avoided any direct answers on the subject, Beijing’s refusal to defend Pakistan in the face of direct questioning marks a departure from the past, when the Chinese government refused to condemn its ally.

It needs to be recalled that during the course of the first counter-terrorism dialogue since November 2008, held in Beijing in July 2011, China maintained its position of objecting in the UN to proscribing Maulana Masood Azhar of the terror outfit Jaish-e-Mohammed and two Lashkar-e-Tayyeba operatives, Azam Cheema and Abdul Rehman Makki, under the Al Qaeda and Taliban sanctions list. On the face of it, the

dialogue was interpreted as a step towards enhancing bilateral cooperation; however, there was no substantive development, with Chinese officials insisting that the information provided by the Indian delegation was “still insufficient” – which makes for a technical requirement under the relevant UN resolutions. Besides, details of Chinese arms worth \$2 million from TCL, a subsidiary of the Chinese arms producer China Xinshidai, provided by Anthony Shimray of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland – Isak Muivah (NSCN–IM), were also rejected by the Chinese delegation on the grounds that they could not act upon a “confessional statement” – regardless of whether it had been admitted in a court of law.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, a month later, in August 2011, hinting at a change of stance, China obliquely pointed at Pakistan for the deadly attacks in Xinjiang. According to a statement published in the *Global Times* by Pan Zhiping, Director, Institute of Central Asia at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, “Located in the southern part of Xinjiang, Hotan is close to the border with Pakistan ... Due to their affinity in religion and language, some Uyghur residents there are at risk of being influenced by terrorist groups such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement.” This brings into focus China’s prime concern vis-à-vis maintaining internal security and a crackdown against separatism and extremism in its Muslim-majority, far-western Xinjiang province. The Taliban militancy, Islamic terrorist organisations and remnants of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, pose a serious challenge to Xinjiang’s stability—often dubbed as China’s “bridgehead” to the West, sharing a 5,743 km boundary with eight countries: Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

According to security affairs expert, the late B Raman, “... operational cooperation to tackle counter-piracy between the Navies of the two countries is of far greater relevance to India and China.”<sup>12</sup> In this reference, in April 2014, India took the decision to send its naval stealth frigate *INS Shivalik* to participate in an international fleet review and

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maritime exercise hosted by the Chinese Navy – the first ever multilateral maritime exercise hosted by China. Putting prominence on the development, the Indian Embassy in Beijing issued a statement that participation of the *INS Shivalik* “... highlights the friendly exchanges and bilateral defence cooperation”, between India and China. The PLA Navy (PLAN) hosted the review and exercise in the northeastern port of Qingdao (headquarters of its North Sea fleet). Australia, South Korea, New Zealand and Indonesia were among the nations that participated in the exercise.<sup>13</sup> The PLAN officials expressed admiration that *INS Shivalik* sailed 4,500 miles from Port Blair to Qingdao, through the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, with neither an accompanying vessel nor an official from headquarters on board to supervise the exercises. This degree of autonomy reflected the confidence and experience of the Indian Navy on the high seas.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the above-mentioned participation of the Indian Navy in the exercise was seen as a step to increase naval engagement between the Indian Navy and the PLAN on more cooperative terms.

Besides, the maritime forces of the two nations are known to have collaborated closely in combating Somali piracy. The International Maritime Bureau recorded high levels of maritime piracy off the Somali coast in and around East Africa and the Gulf of Aden. The estimated global shipping industry loss stands at about US \$ 5.6 billion in 2011. India and China stepped up anti-piracy efforts since 2008 with the Indian Navy placing ships near Mauritius, Seychelles and the Maldives. China joined the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy patrols in late 2008 and closely cooperates with India in anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Somalia. In a sense, it can be argued that joint exercises act as a barometer of the overall progress of CBMs between nations, another example of which presents itself in the form of the Sino-Russian joint military exercises.

## Sino-Russian Joint Military Manoeuvres

Chinese and Russian naval exercises in the East China Sea as part of the Joint Sea 2014 drill were considered to be a first-of-its-kind initiative. It was for the first time that the PLAN worked so closely with a foreign maritime force. Beijing-based naval expert, Li Jie stated that the mixed drills meant that the exercises will operate more like in a real battle and showed that the two countries' strategic partnership had entered a high level of cooperation and coordination, even though both Beijing and Moscow insist on not being military allies.<sup>15</sup> The drill held in the northern part of the East China Sea included 14 ships, two submarines, nine fixed-wing aircraft and six shipboard helicopters according to the PLAN's web release. Chinese and Russian ships included the Chinese Navy's latest-generation *Zhengzhou* and *Ningbo* missile destroyer and Moscow's *Varyag* missile cruiser. As a matter of fact, the Type-052C destroyer *Zhengzhou* is the first PLA warship to be equipped with long-range missiles and detection equipment to combat enemy aircraft and military vessels. Tian Zhong, the officer directing the drill for the Chinese Navy told *Xinhua* that the warships would be divided into three flotillas, with submarines and ships confronting each other.<sup>16</sup> Chinese and Russian naval units have practised defensive and attacking manoeuvres, carried out escort and search and rescue operations, and raiding of hijacked ships.

Moscow and Beijing have upgraded the annual Joint Sea Drill since it was first started four years ago, with the People's Republic of China (PRC) using these manoeuvres with Russia to practise coordinating large and varied forces. For example, the 2007 live-fire drills in Chelyabinsk allowed

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the PLA to practise deploying and supporting a large military force at a considerable distance from mainland China. The same challenge was overcome with Peace Mission 2013 when PLA forces travelled more than 4,000 km from the Shenyang Military Region to the Chebarkul training field in the Urals. In recent years, the PLA has developed a cadre of Russian-speaking officers to coordinate with the Russian military, thereby promoting interoperability. According to Fang Fenghui, Chief of the PLA General Staff, "... [The] success of the joint drill demonstrated ... resolution to fight against ... evil forces." According to an earlier account, the Joint Sea 2013 exercise was perhaps the largest ever joint naval exercise between Russia and China with 18 surface ships, one submarine, three airplanes, five ship-launched helicopters and two commando units taking part. The joint manoeuvres witnessed a variety of activities including anti-submarine warfare, close manoeuvring, and the simulated takeover of a hostile ship. The opportunity was considered useful to practise logistical, command and control skills that are essentially necessary for large-scale naval deployments and improving the capacity to conduct long-distance operations.

In conclusion, it can be argued that isolation and absence of CBMs can increase distrust and pave the way for conflict escalation. It is in this backdrop that the joint military exercises between India and China and those between China and Russia have proven to be excellent CBM initiatives, providing some form of contact amid political and military tensions. In the theoretical context and its practical application in the India-China and Sino-Russian cases, it only becomes profoundly pronounced that CBMs need to be further built upon so that fertile ground for bilateral discussion, negotiation and cooperation can be adopted mutually.

## Notes

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