



## **India-China Military Relations: Scope, Issues and Challenges**

**Speaker:** Lt. Gen. J.S. Bajwa

**15 October 2014**

**Institute of Chinese Studies**

**Delhi**

India's defence cooperation activities encompass strengthening of defence ties with friendly foreign countries. The objective is to avoid hostility, build mutual trust, and cordial relations to contribute towards conflict prevention and resolution. India has two key schemes, namely, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme and the Special Commonwealth Assistance for Africa Programme. For the period 2013-2014, over 1500 vacancies have been given to various foreign countries for defence training in India. These are specialized courses for Young Officers' training, counter-insurgency and jungle warfare training, marine hydrography course, etc. These courses get assistance from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, and are subscribed to by foreign armed forces across the board. Many European trainees have returned to India as defence attaches after gaining comprehensive understanding of the country's defence structures and institutions. India also caters to the training requirements of various countries such as Bhutan, Mozambique, Uganda, and Lesotho by posting training teams on location.

The roadmap for India-China military cooperation was outlined in the 2012 meeting between the respective ministers of defence. The highlights of the plan and ongoing activities are as follows. Firstly, the senior military commanders from theatre commands on the Indian side and military regions on the Chinese side deployed along the India-China borders would exchange visits. The Indian Army's Northern Command, headquartered in Udhampur, and Eastern Command, headquartered in Kolkata, and the Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Chengdu and Lanzhou Military Regions fall within this ambit. Secondly, the border troops and middle-ranking commanders would also be part of delegations to each other's countries. Thirdly, the two countries' navies would focus on exchanging ship visits, cooperating in maritime search-and-rescue, and joint anti-piracy exercises. So far, the latter two have not been taken up. Fourthly, the two air forces are cooperating in aviation medicine and flight safety but no joint training has been agreed to. Fifthly, military trainees would also be exchanged between the respective training institutions. Lastly, young officers are being exchanged from all three arms of the defence forces.

The year 2014 was declared as the Year of Friendly Exchanges between India and China. But, there existed a gap since 2010 when China denied visa to two Indian commanders from Jammu & Kashmir and Arunachal

Pradesh respectively. Bilateral military cooperation has been resumed since the deputy chiefs of the two armies met in 2014 and General Dalbir Singh Suhag, Chief of Army Staff of the Indian Army, met with General Fan Changlong, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission of China. Joint exercises with special focus on counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency have now been planned to re-engage in cooperative training. It should be noted however, that no high-level large-scale joint exercises are on the table since these are activities which strategic allies with a strong threat perception against a common enemy engage in. So, it is limited to contingents of troops exchanging visits at this point and handling each others' firearms and conducting joint firing drills in teams of mixed composition.

A crucial component of military cooperation between India and China is the border personnel meeting. Three venues have been designated for this aim - Bum La in Arunachal Pradesh, Nathu La in Sikkim, and Spangul in Ladakh. There are two scheduled meetings every year and one each is hosted by India and China respectively. There is a hotline too between the border commanders on both sides. The meetings are used to convey violations of the jointly-agreed Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) to each other and ask for ad-hoc flag meetings for detailed discussions. Both sides jointly celebrate important festivals and days in various other meetings. Nathu La is of special importance for it allows bilateral trade to take place and traders can cross the border every Thursday. Spangul is located on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and it witnesses significant activity of senior PLA military personnel on inspection visits on the other side. Therefore, this sector remains critical by way of military alertness and preparedness for both armies.

During the discussion, many questions were raised with respect to the meaning and substance of military-to-military relations in a bilateral atmosphere which swings from friendly to tense and cooperative to hostile time and again. It is difficult to separate military diplomacy from political relations and their changing tone and tenor. The speaker opined that the army is a nation's hard power and that itself is its face. It is up to the nation as a political entity how it uses the army as a tool for diplomacy and as an alternate channel of confidence-building if political measures are not consistent in their efficacy. The Indian Army has conveyed to the PLA that any reservations against visiting a part of India which China believes to be disputed would not contribute to furthering military cooperation and thus would not be entertained. It was also discussed that due to the nature of India's civil-military relations, the armed forces have limited inputs into the highest levels of policy-making which might constrict military diplomacy from achieving some desired outcomes.

### **Disclaimer**

*The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by scholars, experts, diplomats and journalists, among others. This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.*