

## COUNTERING TERRORISM AND REDUCING STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY: ANALYSING ‘SHAPING’ MULTINATIONAL MILITARY EXERCISES

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### **Abstract**

*The post-Cold War period has witnessed a significant increase in ‘shaping’ multinational military exercises, which are considered a valuable instrument of defence diplomacy. Shaping multinational military exercises aim to encourage the partner military's role and adapt relationship to reduce strategic uncertainty. Since 2014, Pakistan's conduct and participation in multinational military exercises have increased significantly. Pakistan conducts four such exercises to reduce strategic uncertainty: recruitment, capacity-building, role-forming, and trust-developing. This article, therefore, argues that Pakistan pursues shaping multinational military exercises to mould the strategic thinking of both friends and potential adversaries to achieve foreign policy goals in a complex security environment.*

**Keywords:** Defence Diplomacy, Counter-Terrorism, Operation Zarb-e-Azb, Multinational Military Exercises.

### **Introduction**

**T**he post-Cold War period began with the emergence of strategic uncertainty, defined by the end of bipolar world order and consequences of globalization. It emerged due to growing transnational threats ranging from terrorism, organized crime, ethnic and territorial conflicts, resource scarcity, migration, and unequal economic development to environmental degradation.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, American political scientist and former Assistant Secretary of Defence Joseph Nye observed that hard power (coercive) would not be enough to shape desired outcomes and address transnational threats requiring international cooperation. Instead, non-coercive measures or soft power would equally achieve foreign policy goals in an uncertain security environment. Nye defines soft power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payments.”<sup>2</sup> An effective way of doing this is to use defence diplomacy, which centres on the premise that armed forces have a peacetime role in achieving the state's broader security and foreign policy goals. Defence diplomacy as an extension of soft power is an efficient, cost-effective mechanism for

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“confidence-building, trust creation, conflict prevention, and/or conflict resolution”<sup>3</sup> in an increasingly uncertain environment. In this context, Multinational Military Exercises (MMEs) are an important tool of defence diplomacy to secure a state’s preferred outcomes through peaceful means than coercion.

The post-Cold War period has also witnessed a significant increase in MMEs, particularly shaping military exercises. Traditionally, military exercises are focused on war rehearsals or deterrence, but shaping military exercises aim to moderate military relations between the states. Military planners are anxious because transnational threats, their location, time, and state responses are mostly unknown in an environment where technology is fast-changing. Consequently, major powers use shaping MMEs to reduce strategic uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> This paper, therefore, extends the concept of shaping MMEs to Pakistan’s military domain in the context of counterterrorism. Pakistan’s military uses shaping MMEs to encourage partner militaries to combat terrorism and insurgency in the region and reduce strategic uncertainty. This study proceeds in three parts. The first part proposes a conceptual framework to analyse Pakistan’s shaping MMEs. The second part describes Pakistan’s objectives to conduct shaping exercises, and the third part analyses Pakistan’s shaping MMEs since Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014) to dismantle terrorist networks in North Waziristan.

### **Shaping Multinational Military Exercises (MMEs)**

Military exercises, as peacetime activity, are like the bread and butter of soldierly life. States conduct multinational military exercises (training between two or more militaries) to increase interoperability, augment security and defence cooperation, and address common security challenges.<sup>5</sup> MMEs are “military manoeuvres or simulated wartime operations involving planning, preparation, and execution carried out for training and evaluation.”<sup>6</sup> These exercises test new procedures, operational concepts, and equipment. They also help collect information about allies and intelligence on potential adversaries.<sup>7</sup> Besides their training objectives and benefits, MMEs can be used to achieve strategic and foreign policy goals, such as reassuring friends and allies, supporting defence reforms and standardization, and deterring potential adversaries. Above all, exercising jointly with another state’s military can serve to bolster mutual trust and friendship.<sup>8</sup> MMEs create a platform for soldiers, sailors, and airmen to build rapport and trust through learning about each other’s unique skills, perceptions, and sharing of experiences.

Shaping MMEs are ‘influence operations’ that aim to change the military’s character, minimize strategic uncertainty and shape the regional security environment. Kyle Wolfley, in his research study, discusses how major powers shape MMEs with non-allies to reduce strategic uncertainties. He elaborated that states seek to manage strategic uncertainty, threat, and assistance to counter the threat through non-traditional shaping MMEs, i.e., recruitment, capacity-building, role-forming, and trust-developing. Firstly, recruitment exercises aim to join a defence agreement or coalition, consolidate relationships with allies, attract potential allies and partners as a form of

balancing against an adversary. Secondly, capacity-building exercises are conducted to enhance the capability of partner forces to safeguard their national security and promote regional stability. Thirdly, states use role-forming exercises to influence the role and practices of partner military in protecting the regime or deploy overseas for peacekeeping missions. Wolfley notes that capacity-building and role-forming exercises often draw similar language, such as building the capacity of partner military or bolstering the ability of partner state to assume greater responsibility for its security. However, role-forming exercises differ from capacity-building exercises in that the partner military is more advanced, and exercise involves more sophisticated tactics. Fourthly, trust-developing exercises are conducted to build trust and confidence between potential rival militaries to avert “inadvertent war through changing soldiers’ mutual perceptions from hostile to friendly.”<sup>9</sup>

The conceptual framework of this paper, thus, draws lead from the above-mentioned military exercises to analyse Pakistan’s shaping MMEs. Pakistan conducts such exercises by engaging allies, building the capacity of partner military, enhancing the role and practices of partner military, and developing trust with rivals or potential adversaries to minimize strategic uncertainty in a complex regional environment.

### **Counterterrorism and Shaping MMEs**

Pakistan’s conduction and participation in shaping MMEs focus on accomplishing strategic goals. Pakistan’s strategic imperatives rest on restoring peace in Afghanistan, countering terrorism, and deterring India while strengthening relations with major powers, consolidating ties with friendly states, operationalising CPEC, and ensuring maritime security in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). In the post-9/11 era, Pakistan’s strategic environment has been shaped by uncertainties in Pakistan-US relations, deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan, threats of terrorism, India’s hegemonic designs in the region, and its efforts to destabilize Pakistan. These challenges have adversely affected Pakistan’s security paradigm, political stability, economic development, and social cohesion.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Pakistan’s security and foreign policy focuses on challenges emanating from terrorism to its people and the region. In this context, the peacetime role of the military to achieve Pakistan’s foreign policy goals and reduce strategic uncertainty in its environment becomes significant.

It is important to note that the Pakistan Army has conducted a series of operations since 2001 to counter terrorism. During the early days, terrorists managed to revive their strongholds in erstwhile FATA and returned most of the time. However, Operation *Zarb-e-Azab* was unique in its conception and execution. The strategy of seeking, destroying, and clearing the area employed a more significant emphasis over holding the area to prevent the re-emergence of terrorists. The restoration of peace and order, repatriation of IDPs, management of Pak-Afghan border to avoid terrorists’ infiltration back into adjacent areas, conduction of counter-radicalization programmes, and implementation of security policy focusing on internal safety and stability of the state served as the key to operation *Zarb-e-Azb* effectiveness.<sup>11</sup> Operation *Radd-ul-Fasad*

was launched in February 2017 to tackle security threats in settled areas and keep erstwhile FATA free from a resurgence of terrorists.<sup>12</sup> Though there were challenges to consolidate the gains, both operations destroyed the command and control structure of terrorists on a large scale. In recent years, violence has seen a noticeable decrease.

Pakistan took critical decisions to restore peace and stability on political, administrative, and socio-economics fronts. The merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and peaceful elections in tribal areas are landmark steps taken.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the Pakistan Army, with the assistance of civil administration, initiated development projects, such as the construction of roads, schools, electricity and water supply schemes, and the provision of the internet to facilitate traumatized civilians in tribal districts.<sup>14</sup> Pakistan has also skilfully employed defence diplomacy to pursue its foreign policy goals in an uncertain regional environment. The underlying assumption is that if Pakistan can overcome the challenges of terrorism and strengthen the security cooperation with partner states, it would lead to peace and security in the region, an essential requirement for the economic development of Pakistan, the region, and beyond through CPEC.

## **Pakistan's Shaping MMEs**

### *a) Recruitment Exercises*

Recruitment MMEs intend to attract potential allies and consolidate relations with friends to counter violent non-state actors. These exercises signal potential adversaries. Pakistan's increasing military and counter-terrorism cooperation with partners aims to reform the regional security environment. Pakistan views India's role in Afghanistan as a spoiler that seeks to destabilize the region. Pakistan Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, stated that "after 9/11, the world saw that Pakistan had become a front-line state. While Pakistan was making sacrifices in blood and treasure, India was busy laying terrorist networks using its soil and spaces in [Pakistan's] immediate neighbourhood and beyond."<sup>15</sup> Recruitment exercises signal Pakistan's increasing military cooperation with allies in this context. For example, the joint military exercises with China indicate that the two states cooperate more closely to counter terrorism and regional security.

### *b) Capacity-Building Exercises*

The capacity-building MMEs focus on improving militaries' planning, doctrine, and interoperability to address the challenges of terrorism in respective states and regions. A significant objective of Pakistan's capacity-building MMEs is to offer its expertise in counterterrorism operations and enhance the level of training of partner's military. Such exercises also provide the Pakistan military a benchmark to test new operational concepts and equipment related to counterterrorism.

c) *Role-Forming Exercises*

Pakistan uses role-forming MMEs to encourage the role and practices of partner military in protecting regimes and citizens from threats of terrorism. For example, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's joint military exercises strengthen the role of Saudi forces in maintaining national and regional security.

d) *Trust-Developing Exercises*

Pakistan conducts trust-developing MMEs to build mutual trust and confidence between Pakistan armed forces and foreign militaries. Through trust-developing training in peacetime, mutual perceptions of soldiers become friendly, thereby creating a climate of confidence and mutual understanding. Pakistan's policymakers are aware of the US and regional states' anxiety towards its role in the War on Terror. These misperceptions about Pakistan's counterterrorism operations undermine its strategic interests in the region. Acknowledging the advantages of shaping MMEs as a tool of defence diplomacy, Pakistan believes that the goodwill generated through shaping MMEs dispels the awkward feelings of mistrust of Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies and prevents confusion. A notable example of trust-developing MMEs is the Pakistan-Russia Friendship exercises, which significantly improve Islamabad-Moscow relations.

## **National Counter Terrorism Centre**

Following Operation *Zarb-e-Azb*, the Pakistan military instituted several training programmes to augment its counterterrorism campaigns. Correspondingly, the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) was raised to train domestic law enforcement personnel and foreign soldiers.<sup>16</sup> The training package revolves around developing troops' mental robustness transforming their combat orientation,<sup>17</sup> thereby significantly increasing the capacity to counter terrorism. NCTC develops counterterrorism skills of soldiers to operate in built-up or urban areas, improving their understanding of the entire spectrum of the threat and refining weapon handling and firing skills.<sup>18</sup> A Pakistan military official noted that "in our experience, this is not a battle with large forces. We have to learn how to fight in teams" to dislodge the terrorists from their hiding places and defeat them.<sup>19</sup>

### **Shaping MMEs at NCTC**

Pakistan's counterterrorism training module is in high demand, and the Pakistan military has used such training standards as part of defence diplomacy quite effectively. So far, the Pakistan Army has delivered counterterrorism training to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives at NCTC (see Table-1).

**Table-1:** Pakistan's Shaping MMEs at NCTC, Pabbi (Punjab)

Partner State	Exercise Codename	Date	Duration	Category of Shaping Exercises
Sri Lanka and the Maldives	Eagle Dash-I	January-February 2016	Two weeks	Capacity- Building
Saudi Arabia	Al-Shihab-I	March 2016	Two weeks	Role-Forming
Turkey	Ataturk-IX (held at Rattu & NCTC)	March 2016	Two weeks	Recruitment
China	Warrior-IV	October-December 2016	Eight weeks	Recruitment
	Warrior-V	January-February 2018	Two weeks	
Russia	Druzhba-III (Friendship 2018)	October-November 2018	Two weeks	Trust-Developing
Kazakhstan	Friendship 2017	November 2017	Two weeks	Capacity-Building
	Friendship 2021	August 2021	Two weeks	
China	Joint Anti-Terrorist Exercise (Jate-2021)	September-October 2021	Two weeks	Recruitment

(Source: Authors' compilation)

Pakistan conducted recruitment MMEs with China and Turkey at NCTC in 2016. With China, Pakistan's cooperation on counterterrorism has intensified in recent years, specifically after signing the CPEC agreement in 2015, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has witnessed militancy in the Xinjiang region, where there is a constant struggle between Uyghur separatists and Beijing. Also, banned terrorist groups like Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and TTP pose security threats to Chinese nationals working on CPEC projects in Pakistan. In this context, the recruitment MMEs are strategically significant for strengthening the Pakistan-China relationship, which provide more certainty over the region's nature and sources of threat. Pakistan-China 'Warrior' series of recruitment exercises focus on counterterrorism and its iterations held at NCTC.

On the concluding training exercise session, the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa said, "we will continue to offer our training services to defeat the menace of terrorism and bring peace." The Chinese Military Commander acknowledged "Pakistan Army for the highest standard of training and skills, an asset that China shall continue to benefit."<sup>20</sup> In 2021, the Joint Anti-Terrorist Exercise (JATE) was held in Pakistan under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). The first stage of JATE was conducted in respective SCO member states in July 2021, while the second stage was conducted at NCTC.<sup>21</sup> The exercise under the SCO security apparatus aimed to strengthen Pakistan-China relations for maintaining regional peace and stability.

In recent years, Pakistan and Turkey have deepened their defense relations and security cooperation. Turkey has raised the Kashmir issue at various diplomatic forums while condemning Indian atrocities in IIOJK. General Umit Dundar, Chief of the General Staff of Turkish Armed Forces, in a meeting with COAS General Qamar Bajwa, agreed

to increase military cooperation, especially in training and the fight against terrorism.<sup>22</sup> Pakistan and Turkey conduct joint military exercises under codename 'Ataturk.' Its ninth iteration was completed in 2016 at a high altitude in a deep snow environment and later in an urban setting at NCTC.<sup>23</sup> Besides building strong ties, the recruitment exercise with Turkey developed military and diplomatic support for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts in the region.

In 2016, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Maldives trilateral exercise, Eagle Dash-I, was held at NCTC. This capacity-building MME took place amidst threats from ISIS. More importantly, this exercise attempted to message a common adversary to avoid threatening regional security by sabotaging activities. General Raheel Sharif, the then Pakistan's COAS, stated that such exercises "will consolidate our special relationship between three forces and help eliminate terrorism from the region." While emphasizing training exercises to develop partners' capacity to deal with terrorism and play a better role in bolstering international security, the former COAS stressed that terrorism needs "a coordinated global response from us all."<sup>24</sup>

Pakistan also held capacity-building exercises with Kazakhstan military forces at NCTC. According to Nurlan Sabirov, a Kazakh military official, about 100 military personnel from both countries participated in counterterrorism exercises at NCTC in 2017. A participant noted that "special tactical training and several phases of exercises took place, including practicing storming buildings under the siege of mock terrorists."<sup>25</sup> Under the codename of 'Dostarym,' these joint exercises were held in 2017 in Pakistan and 2019 in Kazakhstan. Its third iteration in August 2021 focused on integrated synergy, interoperability, quick decision-making, and swift action at the tactical level. Special forces of both states took part in hostage and rescue, compound clearance, helicopter rappelling, and close-quarter battle exercises. It strengthened the capacity of Kazakhstan military forces to counter insurgent and terror threats effectively.<sup>26</sup>

Pakistan regularly conducts role-forming MMEs with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan views Saudi Arabia as a strategic partner that has supported Islamabad's diplomatic, economic, and security interests. In October 2015, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia held their first-time joint counterterrorism exercise, al Shihab-1, at NCTC. It took place when the Saudi Arabia-led coalition was fighting against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. Islamabad joined to protect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Saudi Arabia but made it clear that it would not take part in a military campaign in Yemen. Under these circumstances, Pakistan provided counterterrorism training to a 57-member Saudi Special Forces contingent to counter the threat to Saudi Arabia. This role-forming exercise also aimed at protecting the Saudi regime without direct military intervention or deployment of Pakistan's forces in Yemen. On the closing ceremony of al-Shihab-I, the then COAS General Raheel Sharif stated that "any threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia will evoke a strong response from Pakistan."<sup>27</sup> The training included cordon and search operations, airdropping, and helicopter lifting against terrorists and their sanctuaries. The exercise provides "an opportunity to explore new avenues of cooperation to fight terrorism and enhance skills."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the

training was an attempt to strengthen the role of Saudi armed forces to provide security to the regime and protect its citizens from terrorist threats. It also demonstrates Pakistan's interest in ensuring the safety of the Gulf region.

Trust-developing exercises between Pakistan and Russia seek to build confidence and trust to prevent potential conflicts. Both states are affected by the instability in Afghanistan and, consequently, accelerated defence cooperation to ensure stability in the region.<sup>29</sup> With the unexpected emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan, Islamabad and Moscow started institutionalising their defense and security framework to counter the ISIS regional affiliates, such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP). The counterterrorism exercises with Russian armed forces aim to develop mutual trust for matters related to regional security and diversify Pakistan's security relationships, reducing its dependence on the US.<sup>30</sup> The Special Operations Forces of the two states have conducted six training exercises under the codename 'Druzhba' (Friendship) exercises since 2016. Friendship exercises are conducted on an annual basis and focused on counterterrorism cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

### **Counterterrorism Training at Army Schools of Instructions**

Pakistan Army also delivers counterterrorism training at different schools of instruction. For example, Pakistan-China recruitment exercises 'Warrior' at Kharian (2018) and Cherat (2019) focused on counterterrorism operations, combat preparation, and intensive training on organization and coordination.<sup>32</sup> The recruitment exercise sought to minimize uncertainty in the complex regional environment. In 2021, Pakistan and Turkey recruitment exercise 'Ataturk-XI' was held at Tarbela. It included close quarter battle, cordon-and-search, fire and move techniques, helicopter rappelling, compound clearance, hostage and rescue operations.<sup>33</sup> Pakistan has also strengthened its military cooperation with African states in recent years. Pakistan and Nigeria have close security and defence cooperation. To enhance the capacity of the Nigerian military, the Pakistan Special Services Group (SSG) delivered eight weeks long counterterrorism training to Nigerian Special Forces in June 2017.<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Pakistan-Russia Friendship exercises provide the illustrative case study of trust-developing exercises. Two iterations of Pakistan-Russia Friendship exercises were held at Cherat (2016) and Tarbela (2020). In September 2016, Pakistan conducted its first bilateral military exercise with Russia, Druzhba-I, which shared the Pakistan Army's experience in the War on Terror. The exercise involved more than 200 military personnel from both states to conduct joint hostage rescue and cordon-and-search operations. Pakistan, on its part, was interested in learning the use of Russian military equipment suitable for Pakistan's counterterrorism operations, including combat aircraft and infantry weapons.<sup>35</sup> In August 2016, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces General Valery Gerasimov said that "the development of constructive relations between Russia and Pakistan is an important factor in ensuring regional stability and international security."<sup>36</sup> Islamabad attempts to reduce tensions and prevent any future conflict through these exercises,



## Shaping MMEs Overseas

Since 2015, Pakistan has been participating in several shaping MMEs with allies and partner states to understand each other's capabilities and approach towards counterterrorism. Overseas MMEs help demonstrate Pakistan's military counterterrorism capabilities to partner states, learn skills from them in an operational environment, attract potential allies, develop trust and strengthen security ties with the international community.

Pakistan Army has conducted recruitment exercises in China and the US. In December 2015, Pakistan held a joint exercise, YOUYI-V, with China in 2004. Its fifth iteration focused on enhancing counterterrorism skills and conducted in extreme weather conditions of northern China to gain from each other experiences in the War on Terror.<sup>37</sup> In 2016, Pakistan held a nine-day recruitment exercise with the US under the codename 'Inspired Gambit' in South Carolina to share experiences, particularly combatting terrorism and countering IED operations.<sup>38</sup> In March 2021, Pakistan participated in a two-week training event, Ex-Shake Hands, in Sri Lanka. This capacity-building exercise aimed to share the rich experience of two armies against terrorism and enable Sri Lanka to combat internal security threats. Pakistan and Sri Lanka have shared perspectives on South Asia's peace and security issues.<sup>39</sup> In December 2017, Pakistan also participated in a role-forming exercise, al-Shehab-2, in Saudi Arabia, while conveying a message that "the two countries are close allies and in case either of the two countries faces any security threat, they will come to each other's help."<sup>40</sup>

Pakistan and Russia have expanded the use of trust-developing MMEs. So far, three Friendship exercises have taken place in Russia in 2017, 2019, and 2021. In September 2017, the joint exercise, Druzba-II, was held in Russia. The two-week-long exercise involved more than 200 special forces from both states and focused on counterterrorism, hostage-and-rescue, and cordon-and-search operations. Russia's decision to continue with Friendship exercises despite New Delhi's unease and concerns demonstrated Pakistan-Russia mutual interests in the region.<sup>41</sup> Since 2018, Pakistan has also participated in MMEs under RATS (SCO). These exercises were held in Russia under the codenames of 'Peace Mission 2018', 'Centre 2019' and 'Caucus 2020'. These exercises bolster the counterterrorism capacity of Central Asian states and allay their mistrust regarding Pakistan's role in the counterterrorism campaign.

## Naval Shaping Exercises

The Indian Ocean is important for Pakistan regarding energy supply, trade, and security. Pakistan Navy regularly conducts shaping MMEs to counter non-traditional security threats in the maritime domain. For instance, in the northern Arabian Sea, a recruitment exercise under the codename 'Sea Guardians-2020' was held between Pakistan's and Chinese Navies to increase interoperability, create a safe maritime environment and augment the capabilities of both navies to address maritime terrorism and crime jointly. The People Liberation Army reportedly stated that it

would consist of training at the port and joint naval drill, including discussions, exchanges, workshops, joint patrol, and tactical simulation.<sup>42</sup> China's Ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Jing, commented that the exercise "fully reflects the good wishes of the Chinese and Pakistani Navies in jointly building a community of shared maritime destiny, and demonstrates the confidence and capability to guard marine peace and security jointly."<sup>43</sup>

To reduce the uncertainty associated with unpredictable threats in the Indian Ocean, Pakistan has been conducting multinational naval exercise 'Aman' (Peace) every alternate year since 2007. Pakistan uses this recruitment exercise to strengthen military collaboration, draw potential allies for maritime security cooperation and reduce potential threats in IOR. Pakistan Navy held Aman-2017 in the northern Arabian Sea. Navies from 37 countries participated, including Australia, China, Indonesia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, the UK, US, Russia, and Japan. Russia's Severomorsk anti-war ship, Altay Tug Boat and Dubna tanker, China's 24<sup>th</sup> escort naval fleet with its missile destroyer Harbin, guided-missile frigate Handan, and supply ship Dongpinghu were also part of the exercise. Around 700 troops participated in Aman-17. Pakistan Navy demonstrated their counterterrorism capabilities with "a dramatic demonstration of a shore-based hostage rescue, involving parachutes, hovercraft, drones, and much gunfire."<sup>44</sup> This recruitment exercise aimed to attract foreign navies for training and education purposes and promote Pakistan Navy as an effective instrument of the state's foreign policy. Pakistan's maritime security challenges, such as maritime terrorism, drug trafficking, and piracy, are multidimensional and multifaceted; hence naval cooperation is imperative to counter emerging threats.<sup>45</sup>

According to analysts, the need for maritime support for CPEC and growing Indian hegemonic designs in the region were the distinct subjects of Aman-17, sending strong political signals to New Delhi.<sup>46</sup> In the Aman-2021 naval exercise, 46 states dealt with maritime security and counterterrorism strategies. It put forward Pakistan's proposal of collective maritime security by developing partnerships amongst foreign navies to counter asymmetric threats to trade and energy security in IOR. According to Mary Hunter, the increased number of participants in the exercise indicates "an important positive development in perceptions of military powers towards the Pakistani military concerning terrorism." Commenting on Pakistan's role in countering non-traditional threats in the maritime domain, Hunter noted that Pakistan Navy is "facilitating multilateral counterterrorism training and discussions."<sup>47</sup> Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Nadeem Raza also expressed that the exercise "will promote regional cooperation and stability, greater interoperability and united resolve against terrorism and crimes in the maritime domain."<sup>48</sup> In November 2014, a capacity-building exercise, 'Taawun al Behr' (maritime cooperation), was held to manage non-traditional security threats,<sup>49</sup> minimizing IOR uncertainty.

## Air Shaping Exercises

Pakistan Air Force conducts recruitment exercises with China, the US, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to build stronger military relations and support Pakistan's objectives in the counterterrorism domain. The Shaheen series of exercises, since 2011, are being held annually between Pakistan and China. In September 2017, Shaheen-VI was conducted in China to perform rehearsals of air-to-air combat, close-air support, and air-to-ground operations.<sup>50</sup> In September 2019, Shaheen-VIII was held in China, with nearly 50 warplanes participating from both sides.<sup>51</sup> The Chinese Air Force troops also participated in Shaheen-IX held in Pakistan. Recognizing the Bholari airbase for its strategic significance, the then Pakistan Air Force Chief, Air Chief Marshal Sohail Aman, commented that it plays a "key role in safeguarding the CPEC project."<sup>52</sup> In August 2016, Pakistan Air Force participated in Red Flag exercises in Washington. It aimed to strengthen Pak-US military relations. Major General Rick B Mattson noted that "Pakistan brought a unique set of skills to the exercise, from their willingness to collaborate to their motivation to get the most out of the training scenarios."<sup>53</sup>

In October 2017, a multinational exercise ACES was conducted at the Air Power Centre of Excellence (ACE). The Royal Saudi Air Force and Turkish Air Force contingents participated in the two-week-long exercise. Eight states participated in the exercise as observers. The recruitment exercise aimed to bolster cooperation between air forces and strengthen modern concepts focusing on counterterrorism operations. Turkish team leader observed that "this international exercise was met with the same standard as the exercise of other countries of the world; sharing this professional knowledge and combat experience are true manifestation" of the Pakistan and Turkey relationship.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has explored Pakistan's shaping MMEs to reduce strategic uncertainty. Given the importance of defence diplomacy, Pakistan has complemented its counterterrorism operations by shaping MMEs to minimize strategic uncertainty in a complex security environment. Pakistan Army is eager to share its experiences to enhance the capacity of partner military while improving the capabilities of the Pakistan military by learning new counterterrorism skills. Shaping MMEs also provide unique opportunities to develop mutual trust and increase familiarity between armies to prevent conflict and avert war. Besides, shaping MMEs bolster military relationships and influence partner military roles and practices to address strategic uncertainty. Furthermore, Pakistan's conduction of shaping MMEs demonstrates its willingness and commitment to pursue multilateral collaboration against non-traditional security threats and hence, enhance regional and international security. Finally, shaping MMEs have become a valuable tool for Pakistan to improve its international standing and shape the regional security environment.

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