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Issue Brief

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

PAF and PLAAF taking Pak-China friendship to new heights

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The air forces of Pakistan and China launched joint exercises on September 7, 2017. The exercise is part of the “Shaheen” training program launched by the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in March 2011. The



current exercise between the two air forces is the 6th joint exercise, named Shaheen-VI. While PAF has dispatched JF-17 Thunder fighter jets and early warning aircraft to join the exercise, the PLAAF deployed its J-11 fighters, JH-7 fighter-bombers, KJ-200 AWACS aircraft and ground forces including surface-to-air missile and radar troops to take part in the exercise. The training exercise will run until September 27, 2017.

Air Commodore Syed Muhammad Ali commented that these exercises will enhance bilateral relationship and strengthen the air forces of the two countries.¹ According to a PLAAF spokesperson, “to build a world-class air force, we need to learn from foreign armies and improve our capability to complete multiple tasks.”² The Chinese are well aware of the capabilities which the PAF possesses and were eager to launch these exercises.

This was reflected in a statement by Major General Zhan Houshun at the closing ceremony of the Shaheen-III exercise in May 2014, “PAF has conducted joint exercises with foreign air forces for a long time, obtained great achievements, demonstrated first rate training level and combat efficiency and gained rich experiences that are worth to learn and draw lessons from.” He further added that such exercises “will deepen, broaden and promote the friendship, exchanges and cooperation between China and Pakistan.”³

The air forces of the two brotherly countries have a very close relationship. PLAAF has assisted PAF in upgrading and modernising its air fleet and defence systems. PAF’s JF-17 Thunder combat aircrafts,

considered the backbone of PAF, have been jointly developed by Pakistan and China. The first block of JF-17s was manufactured and delivered in 2007 and this successful arrangement is still in place. Earlier in 2017, PAF inducted 16 new jointly manufactured JF-17s.⁴ The PAF has played a pivotal role in Pakistan's war against terrorism and maintaining stability in the region. The Chinese greatly value this contribution of PAF and are keen to support its advancement.

The PAF is also actively involved in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Apart from providing security, it is also enhancing industrial cooperation with Chinese manufacturers. With the establishment of PAF Aviation City earlier this year, there are now great opportunities for local and Chinese companies involved in the aviation industry. Development of aviation industry in Pakistan will further its ambitions of becoming a regional hub and supplement China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The success of these exercises goes beyond strengthening the capabilities of the two countries' air forces. They symbolise the close nature of China-Pakistan friendship and willingness of both sides to continue on the path of their shared destiny.



PAF and PLAAF (Chinese Air Force) pilots during Exercise "Shaheen-1" at an Operational PAF Base. (11-03-2011)

¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1252051>

² <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/228799-China-Pakistan-Air-Forces-Launch-Joint-Exercise>

³ <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/pakistan-china-conclude-shaheen-iii-air-exercise/>

⁴ <http://www.firstpost.com/world/pakistan-inducts-16-new-jf-17-thunder-jets-jointly-manufactured-with-china-to-air-force-3287020.html>