



## **Exercise Shaheen II Operational PAF and PLAAF Exercise**

*By Air Vice Marshal Manmohan Bahadur VM (Retd.)*

*Distinguished Fellow*

*Centre for Air Power Studies*

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The Shaheen series of bi-annual exercises between the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) commenced in 2011 when, for the first time ever as part of Shaheen I, a PLAAF contingent with Su-27UBKs deployed to Rafiqui airbase in Shorkot, Pakistan. PAF flew its Mirage Vs, F-7PG and JF-17 during the two week exercise where Dis-similar Air Combat Training (DACT) was supposed to have been conducted, besides the usual air to ground and air to air work. The second part of the series, Shaheen II, took place in the past three weeks in Hotan (from 02 Sept 2013 and till 22 Sep 13) in the Xinjiang Uygur region of North West China. The PAF contingent again fielded Mirage Vs and F-7 PGs and it has been claimed that this is the first ever exercise conducted by any other country in Chinese airspace.<sup>i</sup> An APP report said that " The prime objective of the exercise is to excel in air combat capability with a focus on air power employment in any future conflict."<sup>iii</sup> The PLAAF participated, as per one report, with J-10, J-11 and JH-7s.<sup>iii</sup>

The exercise details available till now point to an interesting aspect of Shaheen II -- though Pakistan's latest acquisition, the Sino-Pakistan JF-17 is operational with two Squadrons of the PAF, it has not been sent to participate in this exercise and instead the legacy Mirages and F-7PGs took part. Normally, in international exercises, the front line operational aircraft are put through their paces. Though there may be caveats in fielding some equipment due to commercial or security sensitivities of countries of origin of the equipment, no such issues could have been forthcoming in the case of JF-17 which is a joint China-Pak product. While it is every country's prerogative to decide on the aircraft composition, the absence of the JF 17 from Pakistan raises doubts such as a question mark on the reliability of the aircraft with respect to flight line availability or the lack of training of aircrew of this relatively new aircraft in PAF's inventory to operate from airfields of slightly higher elevation (Hotan is at 4,600 feet). The absence of its frontline fighter, the F-16, from *both* Shaheen exercises, leads one to conclude that there are possibly American restrictions in place for the PAF when it comes to interaction with the Chinese. How much this is for 'show' is open to conjecture because as per an Australian think tank<sup>iv</sup> Pakistan had surreptitiously made available to the Chinese R&D establishment the F-16A on its inventory in the late 1980s when the J-10 was in the design phase. The participation of J-10s of PLAAF is however noteworthy as PAF pilots would have been able to

exercise with this modern fighter in the Chinese inventory and one that PAF is going to acquire in the next couple of years -- did PAF pilots fly in Chinese J-10s as part of the Exercise would be an interesting piece of information one can look forward to.

Now that the Exercises are over, one needs to look into the gains that the two sides expected from such deployments. In Shaheen I, where the PLAAF took its Su-27, it afforded Pakistani pilots the chance to fly this frontline Russian origin aircraft<sup>v</sup> which has some commonality with the Su 30s of the IAF. Though differences in the radar and the avionics on board would be major qualitative dissimilarities, but in DACT certain lessons would have been drawn by the PAF aircrew. For the PLAAF, whose tactics have a heavy Russian bias because of their background it would have exposed its aircrew to Western style combat tactics and procedures since the PAF has a Western grounding in these aspects. A similar learning exchange would have taken place in Shaheen II, besides the training value in coordination and interoperability of the two Air Forces. Communication protocols and command and control procedures would also have been topics of exchange.

The choice of Hotan as an exercise venue has drawn an interesting observation from the Jane's Defence Weekly which links the choice of Hotan Prefecture to the restiveness in China's Uighur community and says that it is in Beijing's interest to showcase an international exercise being staged there.<sup>vi</sup> Be that as it may, the regular holding of this series of exercises could presage increased operational cooperation between the Air Forces of the two countries who have embarked on close cooperation in the arms manufacturing arena, especially in the aerospace sector.

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#### END NOTES:

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20130909/DEFREG03/309090014/china-pakistan-Begin-Biannual-Air-Exercise-Shaheen-2> accessed 23 Sep 13

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iii</sup> <http://pakmr.blogspot.in/2013/09/sino-pak-air-forces-continues-joint.html> accessed 23 Sep 2013. See also Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) news report link [http://www.app.com.pk/en/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=240739&Itemid=2](http://www.app.com.pk/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=240739&Itemid=2)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-Sinocanard.html> accessed 22 Sep 2013

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.defence.pk/forums/military-photos-multimedia/105146-paf-plaaf-undertaking-joint-air-exercise-shaheen-1-a.html> accessed 22 Sep 2013

<sup>vi</sup> <https://janes.ihs.com/CustomPages/Janes/DisplayPage.aspx?DocType=News&ItemId=+++1585254> accessed 23 sep 13