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Karakoram-2026: China and Pakistan Deepen Military Ties - What It Means for India



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Why in News

China and Pakistan conducted the **Karakoram-2026** joint military exercise in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region on **14-22 October 2026** - the **first joint-army-level exercise** involving regular army formations of both countries. According to an Indian Express analysis (Major-General (retd) G G Dwivedi), bilateral military cooperation is moving beyond a buyer-supplier arrangement towards **functional integration and interoperability** - compounding India's security challenge on the Northern border.

The Exercise at a Glance

- **Location and scope:** Xinjiang - bordering Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh; a focus on demanding high-altitude operations relevant to the PLA's **Western Theatre Command**, which oversees the border with India.
- **Two phases:** Phase One (until 19 October) - specialised tactics, close-quarter combat, **UAV/drone operations**; Phase Two - joint command, mixed formations, counterterrorism clearance operations, joint manoeuvres and coordinated fire drills.
- **Equipment:** entirely Chinese - small arms, armoured assault vehicles, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, drones and anti-drone systems.
- **Expanding series:** beyond the earlier naval (Sea Guardian), air (Shaheen) and counterterrorism (Warrior) exercises - now at army level. A joint patrol at **Mantika Pass (4,700 m)** in upper Hunza, Gilgit-Baltistan, preceded it.

Pillars of the China-Pakistan Nexus

- **Origins:** the 1963 boundary agreement under which Pakistan ceded the **Shaksgam Valley** (part of Gilgit-Baltistan) to China - cementing the strategic alignment.
- **Arms supplies:** China accounts for roughly **70-80% of Pakistan's imported military hardware** - J-10C/JF-17 fighters, Type 054 A/P frigates, Hangor-class submarines, HQ-9/16/17 air defence, Wing Loong drones.

- **Co-production:** JF-17s, Al-Khalid tanks, missiles, naval platforms - technology access for Pakistan, defence-industrial outreach for China.
- **Information and space:** intelligence sharing, BeiDou navigation, the "China-Pakistan Information Corridor".
- **Infrastructure:** CPEC and Gwadar port under the BRI.
- **Operation Sindoor (May 2025):** during the crisis, China reportedly accelerated deliveries of PL-15E air-to-air missiles and air-defence/electronic platforms; the ISPR chief claimed Chinese systems "performed extremely well" in the four-day conflict.
- **The Bangladesh dimension:** Dhaka plans J-10CE purchases, with pilots to be trained by Pakistan at Jessore airbase near the Siliguri corridor.
- **Integration signals:** intelligence reports suggest Pakistan Army officers are posted in key PLA Western Theatre Command formations and the CMC's Joint Staff Department.

Implications for India

- **An integrated two-front challenge:** the issue is no longer two adversarial neighbours separately but **converging capabilities** - joint training of mixed formations, integration of Chinese platforms into Pakistan's inventory, and a growing military presence in the Xinjiang-Karakoram region.
- **GS-III Security:** a live case study of border security and alliance analysis; India needs a "coherent national security strategy" addressing the convergence.

Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. The Karakoram-2026 joint exercise was held in:

(a) Tibet

(b) Xinjiang

(c) Gilgit-Baltistan

(d) Sichuan

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (b) In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region - bordering J&K and Ladakh; within the PLA Western Theatre Command area.

Q2. Under the 1963 China-Pakistan boundary agreement, Pakistan ceded which area to China?

(a) Aksai Chin

(b) Shaksgam Valley

(c) Hunza Valley

(d) Siachen

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (b) The Shaksgam Valley (part of Gilgit-Baltistan) - the foundation of the strategic alignment; India regards the cession as illegal.

Mains Practice Question

Q: "China-Pakistan military cooperation is evolving from a buyer-supplier arrangement into strategic integration." Analyse this statement in the context of Karakoram-2026 and discuss India's strategic options. (250 words)

Outline: Introduction - the first army-level exercise; evidence of integration - joint command, equipment standardisation, patrols, postings; pillars - arms, CPEC, information; for India - the two-front convergence; options - Northern-border modernisation, surveillance capability, diplomacy; conclusion - a coherent national security strategy.

FAQ

Short answer: Karakoram-2026 (14-22 October, Xinjiang) was the first joint-army exercise between China and Pakistan - focused on drone warfare, joint command and mixed formations. It signals deepening military integration, sharpening India's two-front challenge.

Q: How is Karakoram-2026 different from earlier exercises?

For the first time, regular army formations of both countries trained at the army level; earlier cooperation was limited to the naval (Sea Guardian), air (Shaheen) and counterterrorism (Warrior) series.

Q: How much of Pakistan's weaponry is Chinese?

Roughly 70-80% of Pakistan's imported military hardware - J-10C/JF-17 fighters, frigates, submarines, air-defence systems and drones - plus extensive co-production.

Q: What should India do?

Analysts say India must treat the China-Pakistan military relationship as an integrated two-front challenge - with Northern-border surveillance, modernisation and a coherent national security strategy.

Sources

- Indian Express Explained (11/15 November 2026): Karakoram-2026 - how China and Pakistan are deepening military ties
- SCMP: Beijing offers to boost corridor safety amid terror threat
- Note: exercise details are based on the IE analysis (author: Major-General (retd) G G Dwivedi); the Chinese defence ministry's original statements were not independently verified