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Security in One Belt One Road: Singapore's Role in Training Expertise

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Synopsis

The One Belt One Road (OBOR), also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013 to promote economic development and exchanges between China and over 60 countries is gaining momentum. Nevertheless, OBOR necessitates a wide range of security considerations along both the maritime and land routes.

Commentary

2016 BEGAN in China with the killing of three Chinese executives from China Railways Construction Corp in Mali during a terrorist attack at the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako. While non-traditional security threats characterise only a part of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative – also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China in 2013 to advance its economic, diplomatic and strategic objectives, several other crises may arise in a number of countries with substantial Chinese investments. These would include social confrontations between local and Chinese workers, environmental degradation issues as well as disputes over an apparent lack of corporate social responsibilities on the part of Chinese firms.

This has led to the evolution of Chinese private security companies (PSCs). Their business is to facilitate an efficient model that provides security assessments, scenario planning, crisis prevention and mitigation will be a key contribution towards the long-term international economic cooperation and sustainable development that is at the core of OBOR. Together, Singapore's academic institutions as well as the country's private sector have the expertise to promote training and facilitate knowledge transfer to Chinese PSCs will benefit the latter significantly.

Surge in Chinese Private Security Companies

China's demand for security services by private companies differs from the requirement of the United States during the Iraq and the Afghanistan conflicts; for unlike Washington, Beijing is not engaged in large-scale conflicts and is thus not obliged to outsource logistical and infra structural services in war zones.

Weak states that acquire Chinese technology and infrastructure granting exploitation rights of natural resources to Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), more often than not, do not have the capacity to assure adequate local security arrangements. Therefore, Chinese infrastructure and personnel become easy prey to politically motivated rebel groups, or even criminal gangs who perceive Chinese citizens as 'high-value' targets.

Nevertheless, hybrid conflicts and the growth of terrorist threats across the globe in the last 15 years have increasingly provided a fertile ground for the proliferation of a new breed of international private military security corporations. While Chinese SOEs in the energy sector have already reached a degree of maturity in the adoption of high standard security services – due to its earlier experience encountered in the African continent – most other SOEs involved in the OBOR are not yet cognisant of the threats they are going to face.

Beijing Takes Note

The problem has not gone unnoticed in Beijing. In the last five years, the People's Liberation Army's Navy (PLAN) has already showcased a mature crisis management capability in the evacuation of Chinese nationals from overseas hotspots, such as in Libya (in 2011) and more recently in Yemen. In the latter crisis, a joint effort between Chinese diplomatic missions in the region and PLAN warships operating in the Gulf of Aden managed to secure hundreds of Chinese nationals before transferring them from Yemen to Djibouti.

This kind of operations, due to the financial and political burdens that the government has to sustain, is not often a viable solution. Therefore, the employment of small-scale privatised forces may provide immediate benefits in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and economy.

At present, the growth of the Chinese security market far exceeds the shrinking budgets of industrialised Western nations available to corporations devoted to the private security sector. Therefore, international competition between PSCs in entering the Chinese market is fierce.

A common problem persists among these global private security firms, however, and that is related their hitherto "one size fits all" approach. A key issue here is that they fail to take into account the operational culture of Chinese SOEs. Their relative inexperience in surmounting the cultural barriers inherent in their engagement with Chinese companies oftentimes lead to missed opportunities. The learning curve imposed on the Chinese PSCs can be very steep indeed. Moreover, mistakes and "lost in translations" in this sector are not granted a second chance.

Singapore's Unique Position in the Regulation of PSCs

One of the several problems related to the employment and regulation of PSC's role begins with the lack of an unambiguous and mutually-agreed definition of what a private security firm really is. Unclear boundaries conflate mercenaries with private security companies, private military corporations or even global corporations that provide hybrid services.

One of the latest efforts in addressing the problem is the International Code of Conduct (ICoC) which even includes a Chinese version with its own particular set of guidelines. Still, the enforcement of the ICoC remains a daunting task. In this context, Singapore's unique position serves as a natural bridge between East and West, thanks to its mature financial, insurance and legal sectors, along with its high-skilled human resources with a proven track record in the security field.

Anti-piracy training, financial crisis mitigation and special risk assessments modelling are some of the "on the shelf" capabilities available. Furthermore, in addition to addressing the mid-term challenges in providing training to Chinese PSCs, Singapore could also take on the long-term challenge in conceptualising and updating the legal framework to meet the specific needs of regulating the international operations of those firms.

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