



## China-Pakistan Air Force Association in the Post-Cold War Era: An Overview

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### Abstract

*China and Pakistan have maintained a relationship for approximately 75 years, commonly referred to as the Sino-Pak relationship. The origins of this partnership can be traced back to 1963 and are based on mutual interests. Leaders from both countries frequently describe each other as their closest partners, often referring to one another as "all-weather friends." Although they have virtually no shared culture or historical connections, their bond primarily stems from military ties and a common interest in countering their mutual rival, India. Manjari Chatterjee Miller argued that the relationship between both countries was built of the aftermath of the 1962 border war between India and China. India became a prime concern for Pakistan and China with little hope of a China-India rapprochement on the border issue.<sup>i</sup> Shalini Chawla analysed that the security concerns have always dominated the minds of Pakistan's leadership. In shorts, India became the centre of the China and Pakistan relationship.<sup>ii</sup> Historically, the relationship between China and Pakistan was primarily focused on military cooperation and the transfer of defence technology. In recent years, however, this partnership has evolved significantly. The two countries are now actively engaged in naval cooperation, air force collaboration, and joint manufacturing. This shift towards air force collaboration and joint manufacturing marks a confident expansion into new areas of cooperation. This paper explores the air force relationship between China and Pakistan, focusing on the modernization of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) with Chinese assistance. The focus is solely on the air power connection in this all-weather partnership and does not cover Pakistan's nuclear and missile capabilities. The methodology employed in this paper is qualitative, utilising descriptive and analytical methods based on secondary data.*

**Keywords: China, Pakistan, defence and air force**



## Introduction

Pakistan became the first nation outside of the Communist bloc which established civil aviation relations with China. Both countries' civil aviation links were based on defence relations. The bilateral defence association is unusually strong and ranges from past nuclear assistance to naval cooperation to joint anti-terror military exercises and arms sales.

China has been regularly supplying arms to Pakistan for more than seven decades, followed by the United States and France. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute data shows that "Pakistan is China's biggest arms buyer, counting for nearly 47% of Chinese arms exports".<sup>iii</sup> Pentagon report explored that, "36 per cent of China's military exports went to Pakistan between 2003 and 2007."<sup>iv</sup> Paul J. Smith said in his article, "during the period from 2007 to 2011, Pakistan received 64% of the total volume of Chinese military exports."<sup>v</sup> Moreover, 70 percent of Pakistan's conventional armament is of PRC (People's Republic of China) design and almost 90 percent of its missile production is based on Chinese aid.<sup>vi</sup> In 2022, "China's Military Power report released which highlighted that how China seeks to achieve its "national rejuvenation" objective by 2049 with the help of international partners, such as Pakistan." Moreover, this report highlighted that China presented Pakistan as its only "all-weather strategic partner" while Russia as its only "comprehensive strategic partner with coordination relations".<sup>vii</sup> China supplies aircraft, ships, submarines, tanks, missiles, drones and many other things to Pakistan. China has a footprint in Pakistan's ballistic missile and nuclear programs. The greatest cooperation has developed in aviation arena in recent years.<sup>viii</sup> *Both countries association enhanced approximately in the last two decades. The estimated value of Chinese arms transferred to Pakistan in the past 15 years is nearly equal to the estimated value of arms transferred to Pakistan by China in the previous 50 years. Since 2015, China has provided nearly 75 per cent of all of Pakistan's imported arms.<sup>ix</sup> During the Cold War, Pakistan primarily received its weapons and assistance from the United States. However, due to increasing restrictions from Washington, Pakistan has started to turn to Beijing for military support. As a result of these sanctions, China has become Pakistan's main and most reliable ally. The sale of fighter aircraft is further strengthening the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan.*

## China-Pakistan Air Force Relations

Air power relationship between the China and Pakistan began in the 1970s. Both countries air cooperation started in 1963 when both countries signed an air agreement under which the national airlines of each country were permitted to operate in the other's territory. After this air agreement, China was given rights at Karachi and Dacca and Pakistan at Canton and Shanghai. This was the first air agreement between China and a non-Communist country.



Shalini Chawla noted that during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Pakistan primarily acquired arms from the United States for high-technology systems and from China for low-cost yet efficient systems, with a smaller portion coming from France.<sup>x</sup> Since the 1970s, the People’s Republic of China has been the largest assets provider to the PAF’s aviation by total volume. In 1966, the Chinese F-6 fighter entered the Pakistan Air Force’s inventory, followed by the introduction of other systems. The F-6 Rebuild Factory (F-6RF) at Kamra was established with Chinese assistance. China supplied F-6 fighters from 1971 to 1981. In 1973, China assisted in the establishment of the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex located in Kamra.<sup>xi</sup> In mid 1980s PAF received A-5Cs (Chinese MiG-19 ground attack variants) and Chengdu F-7s (Chinese MiG-21). By 1990, it had become the source of more than half of the fighters and aircraft. Shalini Chawla indicates that following the Kargil war, Pakistan's arms acquisitions, modernization, and development of air force capabilities have expanded. Pervez Musharraf’s regime played a very significant role in both countries’ joint ventures for aerial cooperation. In the regime of General Parvez Musharraf from 2002 to 2007, the US resumed armaments sales to Pakistan, which had previously been halted by US sanctions. Therefore, Pakistan and China air cooperation suffered to Pakistan- US alliance.<sup>xii</sup>

Over the last two decades, both countries have engaged in joint defence ventures instead of relying on imports or manufacturing for the Pakistan Air Force. In 2006, the Chinese President visited Pakistan. During this visit, the Pakistan Air Force signed a memorandum of understanding with the Chinese Electronic Technology Corporation (CETC) to jointly develop aircraft equipped with long-range early warning radars. “China has also confirmed the sale of six ship-based medium size Z-9C ASW helicopters to Pakistan navy, ‘three Type-347G Fire Control Radars’, F-7PG combat aircraft, 16 C-802 Anti-ship missiles and agreed to further supply it to Bangladesh 19T-37B trainer aircraft in 2004 to 2006”. According to report of MoDP “Pakistan has purchased six more batteries from ‘China Aerospace Long-March International LY-80 surface- to-air missile system’ for US \$373.23 million in the financial year 2014-15”.<sup>xiii</sup>

### China’s Air Equipment Delivery to Pakistan:-

Supplier	Weapon Designation	Years of Delivery	Weapon Description
China	F-7P	1993	Combat aircraft
China	K-8	1994	Trainer aircraft
China	F-7MG	2001	Fighter Aircraft
China	F-7 PG aircraft	2001-02	Combat Aircraft



China	Type-347 G	1997-2001	Fire control radar
China	A-5	2003	Combat aircraft
China	PL-12/SD -10	2004	BVR AAM
China	FM-80/HQ-7	2005	SAM
China	FC/JF-17	2006	Multi-role combat aircraft
China	J-10	2009	multi-role fighter aircraft
China	48 Wing Loong II UAVs	2018/2021	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
China	LY-80	2017	medium-range surface-to-air missile

Source- Shalini Chawla, "Modernization of the Pakistan Air Force", *Air Power*, 3 (2012): 75-96. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *Yearbook* (issues of various years) (New York: Oxford University Press) and Pakistan's major arms imports, as cited in Jasjit Singh, "Trends in defence Expenditure," *Asian Strategic Review*, 1998-99 (New Delhi: Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis, 1999), SIPRI 2002, 2004, 2005, United Nations Register of Conventional Arms for Pakistan C-130E Acquisition," *Air Forces*, January 2006, 22. *The Military Balance 2007*, IISS (London: Routledge, 2007).

### Remarkable Air agreements between PAF and PLAAF: JF-17 AND J-10

The PAF is the seventh largest Air Force in the world and the largest in the Islamic world, with around 450 combat aircraft.<sup>xiv</sup> China's relationship and assistance has played significant role in Pakistan Air Power. This collaboration has deepened more by the end of 2006 and extended further to 2007-08. The biggest milestone mark of China-Pakistan cordial relationship was the development of "JF-17 thunder aircraft". It was jointly developed by China and Pakistan and has evolved as "symbol of Friendship". In fact, JF-17 Thunder has emerged as "Pride of China-Pakistan friendship".<sup>xv</sup> "China and Pakistan entered into deal for combined development of a 'fourth-generation fighter aircraft", known as JF-17 (earlier called the FC-1). Both countries Aeronautical complex (Kamra and Chegdu ) is jointly producing the JF-17 Thunder fighter jet. During 2007 to 2009, PLAAF (People's Liberation Army Air Force) has delivered "12 Joint Fighter (JF-17) Thunder advanced jets to the Pakistan Air Force for flight tests and evaluation". Due to the features of the JF-17, the Pakistani Air Force has increased its order from 150 JF-17s to acquiring up to 250. According to Jane's Defence Weekly, it is in very low price. The JF-17 is one-third the cost of comparable aircraft produced by Europeans or Americans, making it a lucrative commercial venture.



Qandeel Siddique analyzed that the “JF-17’s preliminary purpose was to provide Pakistan’s Air Force with a cheap alternative to Western fighter jets, especially at the time when western countries had imposed sanctions on the country following the nuclear tests of 1998”. In 2010, Pakistan began local production of the JF-17 Thunder squadron. Additionally, in 2007, the Pakistan Air Chief announced that the country had finalized a deal to purchase two squadrons from China, which would serve as a backbone for the Pakistan Air Force, alongside the JF-17.

The J-10 is a multi-role fighter aircraft capable of performing both air-to-ground and air-to-air missions. It was designed by the Chengdu Aircraft Design Institute and manufactured by the Chengdu Aircraft Corporation (CAC). The J-10 has been in operation with the People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) since 2003. In 2006, Pakistani President Musharraf visited China. During this visit, Pakistan began negotiations for a deal to purchase 36 J-10 jets, which was signed in 2009. Indian defence experts and analysts stated that the transfer of technologies related to fourth-generation aircraft, such as the Su-27 and with J-10 to Pakistan would change the existing military balance in south Asia. Special Report of United States institute of peace (2021) highlighted that Pakistan had agreed to purchase 20–25 J-10s. Moreover, few analysts expect it to procure at least 90 J-10s through the 2020s and 2030s.<sup>xvi</sup> Indian strategical experts analysed that Beijing is providing its domestically-made J-10 fighter jets to Islamabad to counter balance India’s strategic edge which India gained after buying the French Rafale jets.<sup>xvii</sup> To further strengthen the defence relations and enhance air capabilities of Pakistan, Pakistan defence authorities decided to purchase “Chinese radar systems and SD-10 (ShanDian-10) ‘mid-range homing missiles’ to equip its 250 JF-17 fighters in 2010. SD-10, is air-to-air missile developed by China in 2002”. Pakistan plans to acquire up to 40 units of the Chinese fifth-generation stealth fighter, the J-35A. Developed by the Shenyang Aircraft Corporation, the J-35A is the second fifth-generation stealth fighter after the J-20.<sup>xviii</sup>

In addition to the JF-17, J-10, and SD-10, Pakistan signed an agreement to procure Chinese-manufactured airborne early warning aircraft, the ZDK-03, on a deferred payment basis. This aircraft was arrived in Pakistan in 2014. With this agreement, Pakistan became the first country to purchase this type of system, which China began manufacturing in 2004. The introduction of “Airborne Early Warning and Control System (AEW&CS) aircraft in the PAF has brought a revolution in air defence operations”. According to the Wang Zhigang (Chairman of the CETC), the ZDK-03 venture will be documented in the past of both China - Pakistan relationship, and also it will be a new mark of the all- weather strategic friendship of the both countries. Karakoram-8 fighter was first air combined project between “China National Aero Technology Import Export Corporation (CATIC), China Nanchang Aircraft Manufacturing Company (CNAMC) and the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC)”. In



January 2021, three armed drones, designed by Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group of China and sold by China National Aero-Technology Import & Export Corporation (CATIC), were inducted into the Pakistan Air force (PAF) reported by Al Mayadeen.<sup>xix</sup> In 2018, Pakistan's Aeronautical Complex and Chengdu Aircraft Corporation of China announced their collaboration to produce 48 Wing Loong II UAVs for the Pakistan Air Force. The Chengdu GJ-2, also known as Wing Loong 2, is an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capable of remotely controlled or autonomous flight developed by the Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group in the People's Republic of China. Wing Loong II has long-range strike capability with a satellite link.

In 2020-21 China participated in a joint naval exercise with Pakistan and supplied strike-capable Caihong and Wing Loong Unmanned Aircraft Systems to Pakistan. Indian strategical analytical said that these are spy vehicles, and Pakistan has been using these against India in the border region of Jammu. According to John Garver, –The primary and oldest rationale for China's entente with Pakistan also remains active: sustaining Pakistan's power in order to prevent India from concentrating its might against China.<sup>xx</sup> In 2021, China's official media publicized that decision to sell 50 Wing Loong II UCAVs to Pakistan, demanding that it “would be a nightmare for Indian ground formations in high-altitude areas.”<sup>xxi</sup> In the same year 2021, the Pakistan Army (PA) acquired the Chinese-made Air Defence (AD) system HQ-9/P called the High-to-Medium Air Defence System Surface to Air Missile (HMADSAM) system from the Chinese. H9-9/P, will significantly enhance Pakistan's capability against aerial threats, bringing to the fore another dimension of the collusive threat posed by India's two largest neighbours.<sup>xxii</sup> Apart from sell and buy relations, both countries are participating in joint air force exercises. China's People's Liberation Army Air Force and Pakistan Air Force have been conducting the joint exercises since 2011 which are hosted by both countries on an alternate basis. “The People's Liberation Army Air Force very few substantive exercises with other air forces, but it trains alongside Pakistan's military pilots every year in a multidimensional joint exercise known as Shaheen”.<sup>xxiii</sup> Both countries air forces participated in a joint exercise, Shaheen (Eagle) IX, in Sindh. After that, both countries also conducted the Shaheen-X joint air force exercise. The annual drill took place in the northwestern cities of Jiuquan and Yinchuan. These exercises were meant to “promote the development of China-Pakistan mil-to-mil relationships, deepen practical cooperation between the two air forces, and improve the actual-combat training level of the two sides.”<sup>xxiv</sup>



## Conclusion

China has been significantly increasing its engagement in South Asian countries for the last two decades, going beyond economic and development projects to encompass geostrategic and security interests. Pakistan is reliable partner of China in the region. China and Pakistan have a longstanding and deepening air power relationship that serves as a central pillar of their broader partnership. This collaboration encompasses joint fighter jet development, extensive military training exchanges, technology transfers, and strategic alignment. Together, China and Pakistan have established a robust and mutually beneficial air power alliance rooted in shared strategic goals, particularly concerning India. Although the air power relations began in the 1970s, they reached new heights in the post-Cold War era. Notable examples of this partnership include the J-10 and J-17 fighter jets, which symbolize their all-weather friendship. Initially, the air power relationship was primarily based on technology transfer. However, over the past two decades, both countries have successfully engaged in joint manufacturing of air power assets. Furthermore, they have participated in various naval and air power exercises, demonstrating their commitment to expanding collaboration. China aims to enhance Pakistan's defence sector across all spheres.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/article/how-china-and-pakistan-forged-close-ties?ref=european-bitcoiners>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/english/expert-speak/pakistan-air-force-assessing-capabilities-and-modernisation-trends>

<sup>iii</sup> Siemon T. Wezeman and Pieter D. Wezeman, "Trends in international arms transfers", *SIPRI Fact Sheet*, March 2013, 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Mutahir Ahmed, "Sino-Pakistan Relations and the Challenges of Post-Cold War Era," *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, 1 (2015): 41

<sup>v</sup> Paul J. Smith, "The tilting triangle: Geopolitics of the China-India-Pakistan Relationship", *Comparative strategy*, 32 (2013): 324

<sup>vi</sup> Ashok Kapur, *Pokhran and Beyond: India's Nuclear Behaviour*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4. Also see in Savita Pande, —China-Pakistan strategic relationship in the Post-Cold War Eral, (Ph. D diss., University of JNU, 2014), 152.

<sup>vii</sup> [Beijing relies on Pakistan to project its might, Pentagon report notes - World - DAWN.COM](#)

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.iadb.in/2025/05/31/chinas-military-aviation-support-to-pakistan-need-to-watch-india/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://claws.co.in/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Web-MP-103-China-Pakistan-Military-Cooperation-21-8-24-2.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/english/expert-speak/pakistan-air-force-assessing-capabilities-and-modernisation-trends>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.iadb.in/2025/05/31/chinas-military-aviation-support-to-pakistan-need-to-watch-india/>

<sup>xii</sup> [China-Pakistan: A journey of friendship \(1950-2020\) - Global Times](#)

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://defence.pk/threads/pakistan-buys-additional-medium-range-sams.444177/> also see in <https://delhidefencereview.com/2017/04/05/pakistan-army-inducts-chinese-made-ly-80-surface-air-missile-system-protecting-strategic-assets/>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.iadb.in/2025/05/31/chinas-military-aviation-support-to-pakistan-need-to-watch-india/>

<sup>xv</sup> [http://en.ce.cn/main/latest/201906/28/t20190628\\_32474741.shtml](http://en.ce.cn/main/latest/201906/28/t20190628_32474741.shtml)

<sup>xvi</sup> [sr-517\\_threshold-alliance-china-pakistan-military-relationship.pdf \(usip.org\)](#)

<sup>xvii</sup> [China, Pakistan to step up military cooperation | World News - Hindustan Times](#)

<sup>xviii</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/english/expert-speak/pakistan-air-force-assessing-capabilities-and-modernisation-trends>



xix [China-Pakistan military relations under strain due to substandard servicing, maintenance - The Economic Times \(indiatimes.com\)](#)

xx 1 John Garver, —China and South Asia, American Academy of Political and Social Science, 519 (1992):80.

xxi [The China-Pakistan Partnership Continues to Deepen | ORF \(orfonline.org\)](#)

xxii [The collusive threat: Chinese and Pakistani cooperation in strategic capabilities | ORF \(orfonline.org\)](#)

xxiii [Pakistan and China's Almost Alliance | RAND](#)

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