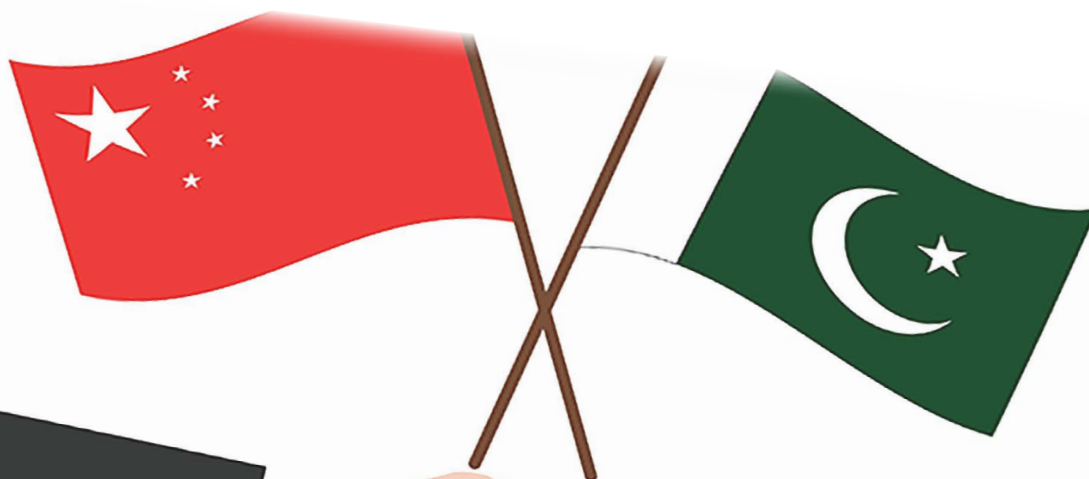


FORGING THE ARSENAL CORRIDOR: CHINA–PAKISTAN DEFENSE INTEGRATION AND THE NEW STRATEGIC SUPPLY CHAIN

Seong Hyeon Choi and Jagannath Panda



China's military partnership with Pakistan has undergone a significant transformation over the past decade, evolving from a traditional supplier-recipient relationship into a deeply integrated strategic arrangement. This issue brief examines how Chinese defense transfers, technology sharing, and industrial cooperation have reshaped Pakistan's military capabilities across the air, land, maritime, and emerging technology domains. It argues that Beijing's support serves not only to balance India's conventional military advantage but also to advance broader Chinese strategic objectives associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It explores Chinese debates regarding Pakistan's strategic value, highlighting perceptions of Pakistan as both a critical security partner and a source of long-term vulnerabilities. It further analyzes the growing integration of military supply chains, the strategic significance of Gwadar, and the emergence of trilateral dynamics involving Turkey. Finally, the issue brief assesses how evolving maritime security challenges, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz, may deepen defense cooperation and reinforce Pakistan's role within China's expanding Indian Ocean strategy.

The debate is no longer confined to whether China's military support to Pakistan is routine or exceptional: it now centers on whether this partnership is reshaping the very logic of deterrence and connectivity in South Asia and beyond. One view holds that Beijing's defense transfers simply enable Pakistan to maintain minimum credible deterrence against a

conventionally superior India.¹ Another contends that the scale, technological depth, and systemic integration of Chinese support have moved far beyond balancing, creating a new form of embedded strategic dependence with wider regional consequences.² Recent upgrades have rapidly transformed Pakistan's military profile, with the induction of advanced fighter aircraft,

layered air defense systems, next-generation naval platforms, and a growing emphasis on drones and digital warfare.³

At first glance, this is not a continuous modernization. Rather, it is a structural recalibration. China is no longer just a supplier; it is shaping Pakistan's defense ecosystem, doctrine, and long-term capability trajectory.⁴ At the same time, this evolving military partnership intersects with larger geopolitical currents: India's rising defense preparedness, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and a widening network of defense collaborations involving actors such as Turkey. The convergence of military supply, strategic geography, and economic corridors suggests

China is shaping Pakistan's defense ecosystem, doctrine, and long-term capability trajectory. This evolving military partnership intersects with larger geopolitical currents: India's rising defense preparedness, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and a widening network of defense collaborations involving actors such as Turkey. The convergence suggests that what is unfolding is not merely a bilateral defense relationship, but the emergence of a broader strategic architecture.

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This raises critical questions that frame the discussion ahead: Is China's defense engagement with Pakistan primarily about balancing India, or is it about building a deeper strategic corridor of influence? How does this military supply chain connect with and secure China's Belt and Road ambitions? And, in the shadow of emerging crises such as the Strait of Hormuz, what future trajectory will this defense chemistry take?

The Chinese Debate on Pakistan as a Military Partner

Chinese scholars and policy analysts rarely use the term "client state" publicly. Beijing avoids such language because it contradicts China's diplomatic narrative of "South-South cooperation" and "mutual respect." And instead framing the China-Pakistan relations as "All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership."⁶ Nevertheless, many strategic writings implicitly portray Pakistan as a dependent security partner whose military and economic vulnerabilities create long-term leverage opportunities for China.⁷ In this context, Pakistan is increasingly viewed not merely as a friend, but as a strategic platform for China's western Indian Ocean ambitions and continental balancing against India. These analysts argue that the relationship between China, India, and Pakistan is not a cooperative framework, but a rigid strategic triangle locked in place by rivalry and structural imbalance. Within this matrix, China leverages Pakistan to offset India's regional ambitions, India builds coalitions to check China, and Pakistan remains fixated on deterring its eastern neighbor. They argue that this complex cross-balancing effectively deters open conflict.⁸

One major debate within China concerns the extent to which Pakistan can remain militarily stable and institutionally reliable. Chinese analysts acknowledge that Pakistan's political fragility, economic crises, and internal militancy create operational risks for Chinese investments and security projects. The repeated attacks on Chinese engineers and workers in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have significantly altered Chinese perceptions. In many Chinese policy discussions, Pakistan is no longer seen only through the lens of geopolitical utility; it is also increasingly assessed as a security liability that requires continuous Chinese protection, intelligence coordination, and military assistance.

This has deepened the military-client dynamic. China today is Pakistan's largest arms supplier, with deliveries ranging from fighter aircraft and naval platforms to missile systems, drones, and surveillance technologies (see Figure 1). The JF-17 fighter program symbolizes more than defense cooperation; it reflects China's strategy of embedding Pakistan into a long-term Chinese military-industrial ecosystem. Pakistan offers China a rare opportunity to demonstrate its military technologies in a live strategic environment against a major regional power like India.⁹

Considering that China has not engaged in active combat since 1979, and that its recently developed advanced weapons have not been tested in combat—a weakness in the global arms sales market—Pakistan's operation of these Chinese-made systems in its frequent border confrontations with India could be part of China's strategy to prove their effectiveness and raise international interest attention in purchasing them. Operation Sindoor in May 2025, for instance, demonstrated Pakistan's role in testing Chinese weapons systems in live warfare, during

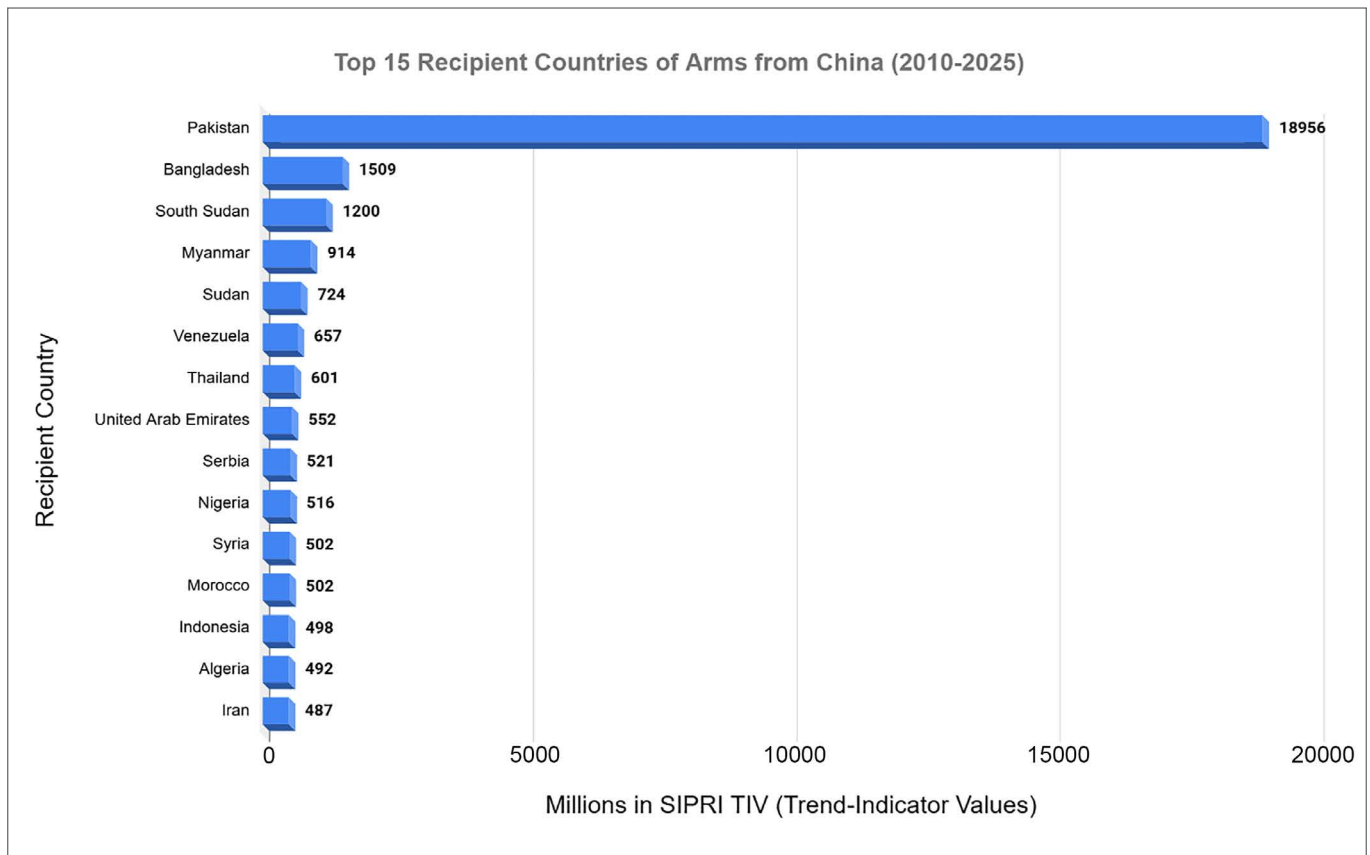
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which Islamabad scrambled the JF-17 and the Chinese-made J-10CE 4.5-generation fighter jets in response to Indian combat aircraft maneuvers, with the latter reportedly shooting down at least one French-made Rafale fighter jet using its PL-15 beyond-visual-range missile.¹⁰

Another important Chinese perception is that Pakistan serves as a low-cost strategic balancer against India. Unlike the Soviet-era alliance systems or American military alliances, China's approach is subtler and economically layered. Chinese scholars often argue that Pakistan helps “fix” Indian strategic attention on its western front, thereby limiting India's ability to fully concentrate on the Himalayan frontier or on maritime Indo-Pacific competition. In this thinking, Pakistan acts as a force multiplier for China without requiring Beijing to enter into direct confrontation.

As such, Chinese analysts increasingly view arming Pakistan with Chinese-made weapons systems as a necessary step to balance and deter India's relative military advantage over Paki-

Figure 1: China's Top 15 Arms Export



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (c) SIPRI

stan and other neighbors in the region.¹¹ Over the years, China has contributed to bomb design, and development of anti-ship ballistic missiles and high-explosive components in Pakistan. It has also provided support for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, and many have speculated that China has helped Pakistan with hypersonic weapons (such as the DF-17 MRBM).¹² This strategy could exploit India's vulnerability to a two-front warfare against two neighboring nuclear-armed states in a potential miscalculation scenario near the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC), limiting the extent to which New Delhi can extend its military power beyond a local regional war or actively challenge China's maritime outreach in the Indian Ocean.

At the same time, debates also reveal growing anxieties about overdependence on Pakistan.¹³

Some Chinese analysts question whether Beijing has invested too heavily in an unstable partner. The economic troubles surrounding CPEC, rising anti-China sentiment in parts of Pakistan, and Islamabad's recurring dependence on IMF bailouts have generated concerns about sustainability. There is also quiet recognition in Chinese circles that Pakistan's strategic utility derives partly from perpetual India-Pakistan tensions. If South Asia were to stabilize politically, Pakistan's leverage within Chinese strategic calculations could diminish considerably.

The naval dimension is especially important in contemporary Chinese perceptions. They argue that India has complicated South Asia's regional security environment through three main actions: expanding its 'Act East' strategy into the South

China Sea, attempting to become the net security provider for the Indian Ocean, and deepening its partnerships with the U.S. and its Indo-Pacific allies.¹⁴

According to these Chinese perspectives, India's maritime policy eventually clashes with China's "legitimate" strategic and economic imperatives in the Indian Ocean to secure its energy supply lines, as well as its maritime backyard in the Western Pacific, generating immediate tactical friction and mutual suspicion.

To neutralize these challenges, Beijing has steadily deepened its naval cooperation with Islamabad. For instance, last April, Pakistani and Chinese officials gathered in Sanya, China, for the official commissioning of Pakistan's first *Hangor*-class attack submarine. The new maritime vessel marked the initial delivery under a 2015 bilateral defense agreement valued at approximately USD 5 billion for a total of eight conventional submarines. This project will lead to technology transfer as well; the contract stipulates that while four platforms will be built in China, the remaining four will be constructed domestically in Pakistan.¹⁵ Weighing roughly 2,800 tons, these *Hangor*-class variants of China's Type 039A *Yuan*-class are equipped with advanced sensors, torpedoes, and anti-ship cruise missiles, utilizing Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) to significantly enhance Pakistan's undersea endurance.¹⁶

In this context, Gwadar is increasingly viewed not simply as an economic port, but as a long-term logistical node connected to China's wider Indian Ocean strategy. Chinese writings often avoid explicitly discussing military basing ambitions, yet debates surrounding maritime security, sea-lane protection, and "far seas operations" strongly indicate that Pakistan occupies a central role in China's western Indian Ocean calculations. Consequently, Chinese analysts consid-

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er Gwadar a suitable port for naval support of PLA operations in the Indian Ocean, with the construction of dual-use infrastructure capable of hosting both commercial and military vessels from China.¹⁷ In this sense, Pakistan is evolving from a continental buffer into a maritime strategic client. Paired with China's base in Djibouti, the region is shifting from a commercial fallback into a forward operational node for the PLA Navy. Ultimately, this provides Beijing with a critical geostrategic anchor to reduce its geographic vulnerabilities and secure transit pathways directly from the Arabian Sea.

In other words, Chinese debates on Pakistan reflect a mixture of dependency, opportunity, and caution. Beijing sees Pakistan as indispensable for balancing India, expanding Chinese military exports, and securing strategic access to the Arabian Sea. Yet it also recognizes Pakistan's structural weaknesses and unpredictability. The relationship, therefore, is no longer driven solely by ideological friendship or anti-

India convergence. Increasingly, it resembles a hierarchical strategic arrangement in which China acts as the principal security provider, financier, and technological patron, while Pakistan functions as a militarily dependent but geopolitically valuable partner within Beijing's broader Indo-Pacific strategy.

Strategic Convergence and Military Modernization

Pakistan's reliance on China for military modernization reflects both necessity and strategic choice.¹⁸ Faced with fiscal constraints, limited access to Western defense markets, and the persistent imperative of maintaining deterrence against India, Islamabad has increasingly turned to Beijing as a comprehensive defense partner. Over the past five years, this partnership has expanded across all major domains—air, land, sea, and emerging technological spaces—marking a transition from transactional procurement to systemic integration.

In the air domain, the co-development of the

“Military logistics, maintenance ecosystems, and technological standards are increasingly integrated, creating a long-term dependency that ties Pakistan's defense apparatus to Chinese systems. Pakistan thus emerges not just as a recipient of arms, but as a critical link in China's evolving geostrategic network.”

JF-17 and the induction of advanced fighter aircraft, such as the J-10CE have significantly enhanced Pakistan's operational capabilities, with Islamabad potentially expanding these air superiority capabilities acquired from China through reported deals for its purchase of the J-35A fifth-generation fighter jet. These platforms are equipped with modern avionics, long-range missile systems, and network-centric warfare capabilities, enabling Pakistan to operate in more contested and technologically demanding environments.

In particular, the co-development of the JF-17 represents Pakistan's integration into Chinese-standard weapons systems, which translates into increased interoperability and technology transfer between the two countries, replacing Pakistan's formerly Western-based fighter fleet. Moreover, China's investment in an on-site military aerospace industrial base in Pakistan for local licensed production of Chinese weapons systems further accelerates Pakistan's shift toward China. This is complemented by a robust and layered air defense architecture, including the HQ-9 long-range surface-to-air missile, designed to counter evolving aerial threats and provide a multi-tiered shield against advanced platforms. Pakistan has also recently inducted the Chinese-made Z-10ME attack helicopter to advance the modernization of its defense equipment, mark the first export deal of the Z-10.¹⁹

On land, the induction of modern armored systems and the co-development of platforms signal a move toward partial indigenization under Chinese technological guidance. This trajectory is exemplified by the mass induction of the VT-4 third-generation main battle tank (MBT), manufactured by China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), which is also known as Haider in Pakistan. The structural depth of this land-domain alignment is also reflected in

China's deep investment in Pakistan's domestic manufacturing pipelines, centered at Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT). Rather than relying on off-the-shelf imports, NORINCO's technology transfer to HIT has supported local heavy engineering and defense production capabilities, resulting in the jointly developed Al-Khalid MBT.

At sea, the acquisition of advanced frigates and deepening submarine cooperation reflect a growing emphasis on maritime security, particularly in the Arabian Sea and around strategic nodes linked to economic corridors, where the partnership with China is modernizing Pakistani naval power projection in the region, away from its legacy reliance on refurbished Western surface combatants. This transition is led by four Chinese-built Type 054 guided-missile frigates, also known as the Tughril-class in Pakistan, equipped with YJ-12E supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles and LY-80N surface-to-air missile systems. The Pakistani Navy also recently received the first of the eight Hangor-class conventional attack submarines acquired from China.

These developments are not isolated—they form part of a broader effort to build a full-spectrum military capability aligned with contemporary warfare requirements. The multifaceted nature of arms transfer from China to Pakistan moves beyond simple trade relations. By enhancing PLA interoperability and building a joint defense industrial base, this partnership carries broad strategic implications. Specifically, it enables the development of a potential joint task force to counter India's regional dominance and secure the Indian Ocean maritime corridor during South Asian contingencies.

Equally important is the shift toward emerging domains.²⁰ Unmanned systems, cyber capabilities, and electronic warfare are increasingly cen-

“In the shadow of the Hormuz crisis, the China–Pakistan defense relationship is likely to deepen further. Maritime cooperation will assume greater importance, with an increased focus on naval deployments, surveillance, and the protection of sea lines of communication. Gwadar’s strategic relevance could expand from a commercial port to a more integrated security node, linking economic and military functions.”

tral to Pakistan's defense posture. Chinese support in these areas reflects a shared recognition that future conflicts will be shaped as much by information dominance and technological agility as by conventional force structures. The cumulative effect is the emergence of a defense ecosystem that is increasingly synchronized with Chinese systems, standards, and strategic thinking.²¹

Balancing India and Embedding the BRI Supply Chain

At one level, China's military supply to Pakistan is clearly linked to the enduring India–Pakistan rivalry. By enhancing Pakistan's capabilities in critical domains such as air power, missile systems, and air defense, Beijing helps Islamabad maintain a degree of strategic parity.²² This, in turn, reinforces deterrence and complicates India's military calculus. However, to view this

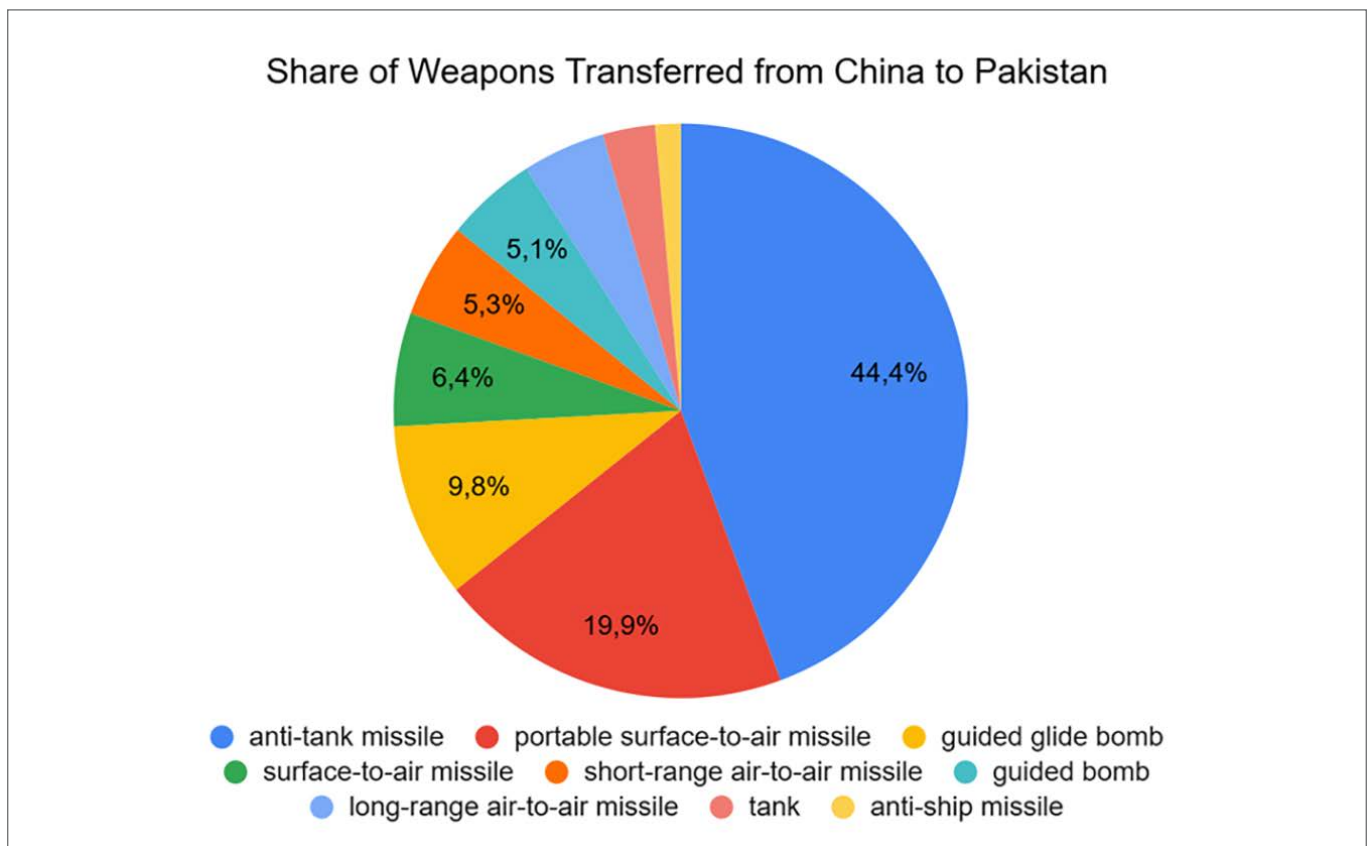
dynamic solely through the prism of balancing India would be to overlook a deeper and more consequential dimension.

In recent years, China’s arms supply to Pakistan has been increasingly embedded within its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).²³ Pakistan’s geography, linking western China to the Arabian Sea, makes it a critical node in Beijing’s connectivity ambitions.²⁴ Ensuring the security of this corridor is therefore not just a Pakistani priority but a Chinese strategic imperative. Military transfers, in this context, serve a dual function: they enhance Pakistan’s defense capabilities while simultaneously safeguarding Chinese investments and infrastructure.

A closer look reveals a discernible pattern in China’s arms supply.²⁵ The transfers are not random or purely demand-driven; they are structured around building a coherent, interoperable system aligned with Chinese supply chains. Air defense systems, naval platforms, and surveillance capabilities are designed to protect key economic assets, including ports, transport routes, and energy infrastructure (see Figure 2). The emphasis on maritime capabilities reflects the need to secure sea lines of communication linked to Gwadar and the wider Indian Ocean.

This pattern suggests that China is effectively extending its strategic supply chain through Pakistan. Military logistics, maintenance ecosystems, and technological standards are increasingly integrated, creating a long-term dependency

Figure 2: Share of Type of Weapons Transferred from China to Pakistan



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (c) SIPRI.

that ties Pakistan’s defense apparatus to Chinese systems. In this sense, the defense partnership becomes an extension of the Silk Road, in which economic corridors are reinforced by security architectures, and connectivity is underwritten by military capability. Pakistan thus emerges not just as a recipient of arms, but as a critical link in China’s evolving geostrategic network.

The China–Pakistan defense partnership is also intersecting with a broader set of relationships, most notably involving Turkey (see Figure 3). While not a formal alliance, the growing interaction among these three countries points to a flexible and pragmatic alignment shaped by shared interests and complementary capabilities. Turkey’s advances in drone technology, naval systems, and defense electronics add a new dimension to Pakistan’s military modernization,

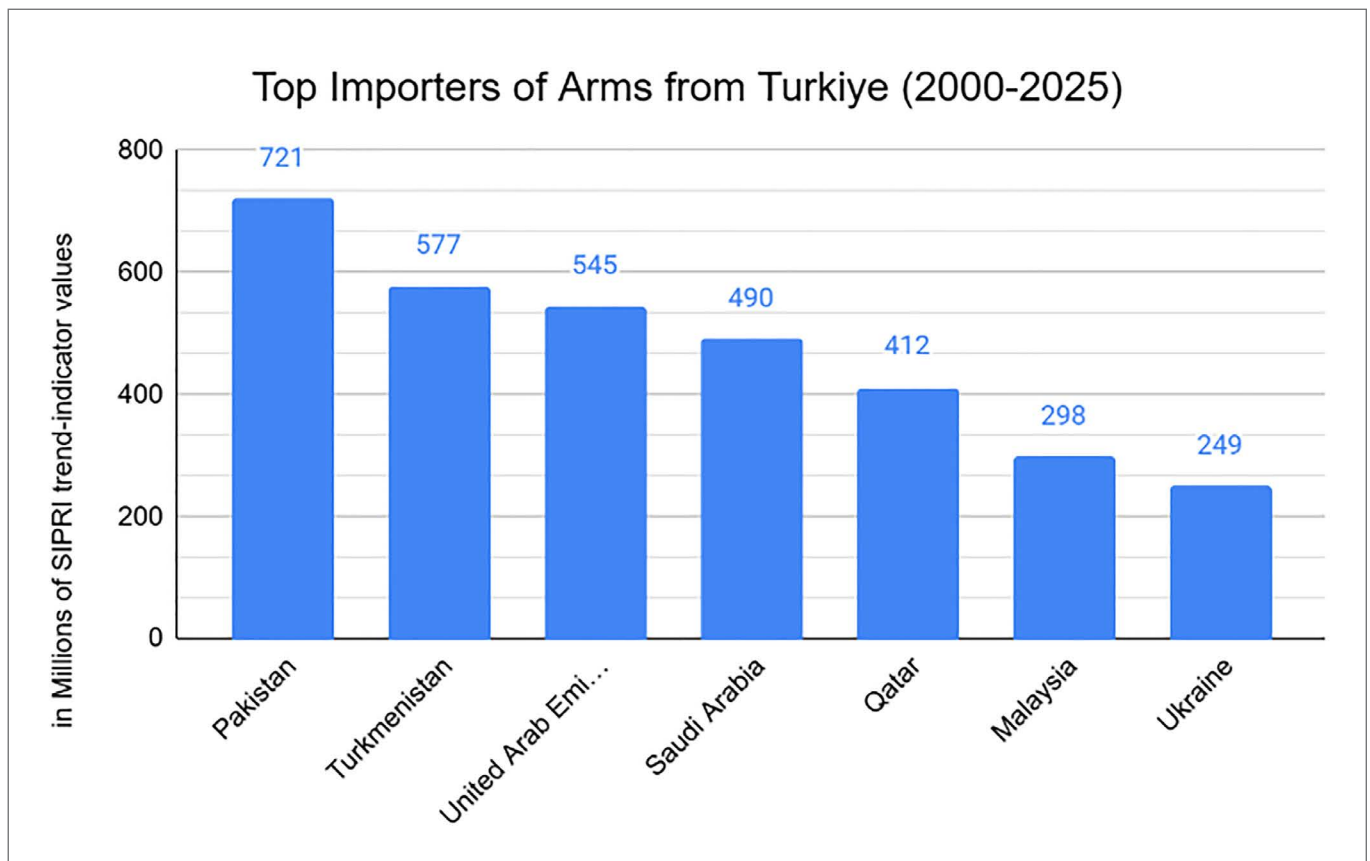
while China continues to provide scale, financing, and high-end systems.

This triangular dynamic reflects a wider trend in global security—where rigid alliances are giving way to networked partnerships. For Pakistan, this diversification enhances operational capabilities while retaining a core dependence on China. For China, it offers a means to expand influence indirectly and to integrate additional technological inputs into its broader defense ecosystem. The result is a layered and adaptive security arrangement that is likely to evolve further in the coming years.

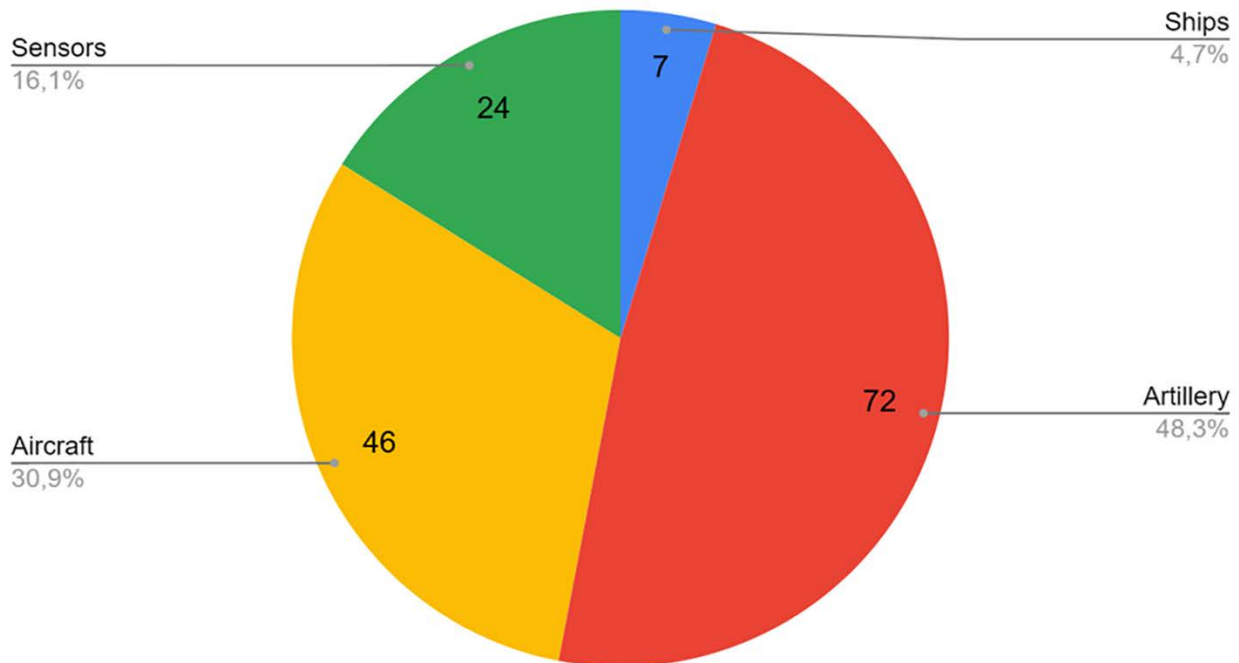
Future Trajectories: Defense Chemistry After the Hormuz Crisis

The evolving security environment around the Strait of Hormuz adds a new layer of urgency

Figure 3: Turkey-Pakistan Defense Relationship



Weapon Category Ordered by Pakistan from Turkiye (2000-2025)



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database (c) SIPRI.

and complexity to the China–Pakistan defense partnership. As one of the world’s most critical energy chokepoints, Hormuz has become increasingly central to global strategic calculations, particularly in the context of rising tensions and the potential for disruption. For China, which remains heavily dependent on energy imports from the Gulf, securing maritime routes is a paramount concern. Pakistan’s proximity to the Arabian Sea and its role as a potential logistical and strategic hub makes it an indispensable partner in this equation.

In the aftermath—or even the prolonged shadow—of the Hormuz crisis, the China–Pakistan defense relationship is likely to deepen further. Maritime cooperation will assume greater importance, with an increased focus on naval deployments, surveillance, and the protection of sea lines of

communication. Gwadar’s strategic relevance could expand from a commercial port to a more integrated security node, linking economic and military functions.

At the same time, the emphasis on rapid-response capabilities, including drones, missile systems, and integrated command structures, is likely to intensify. The need to operate in a contested and potentially volatile maritime environment will drive greater interoperability and coordination between Chinese and Pakistani forces. This could also open the door to expanded trilateral or multilateral engagements, particularly involving partners such as Turkey.

Looking ahead, the China–Pakistan defense partnership may evolve into a more outward-looking arrangement—one that not only addresses

bilateral security concerns but also contributes to a broader Chinese strategy of securing critical chokepoints and trade routes. The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia could significantly increase the presence of Chinese weapons in the Middle East.²⁶ This deployment could serve as a litmus test for future regional arms sales, demonstrating how Chinese-made systems perform in Middle Eastern warfare and how well they interoperate with the Gulf states' Western-standard systems. In this sense, Hormuz is not just a crisis point; it is a catalyst that could accelerate the transformation of the partnership into a key pillar of China's global strategic posture.

Summing Up: From Arms Transfers to Strategic Architecture

The trajectory of China's arms transfers to Pakistan over the past five years reveals a shift that is both profound and far-reaching. What was once a supplier-recipient relationship has evolved into a deeply integrated defense partnership, encompassing co-development, technological alignment, and long-term strategic planning. Balancing India remains a central element, but it is increasingly embedded within a broader framework that links military capability with economic connectivity and geopolitical influence.

The integration of defense supply chains with the BRI underscores the strategic depth of this partnership. Pakistan is no longer just a consumer of Chinese arms; it is a critical node in a wider network that connects infrastructure, security, and strategy. The emerging triangular dynamics involving Turkey further highlight the fluid and adaptive nature of contemporary security arrangements. In the final analysis, Beijing's military engagement with Pakistan transcends mere capacity-building; it is the construction of a new strategic architecture that binds defense,

economics, and geography together into one coherent whole. As this architecture continues to evolve, it will play a decisive role in shaping the balance of power in South Asia, the security of the Indian Ocean, and the future trajectory of global strategic competition.

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