Insights of Pakistan, Iran and the Caucasus Studies
Vol. 4, No. 04 (November 2025), pp. 59-71
ISSN (Print): 2958-5112
ISSN (Online): 2958-5120
http://www.ipics.rmrpublishers.org
http://journals.rmrpublishers.org/insights-of-pakistan-iran-and-the-caucasus-studies/

The HQ-9BE, PL-17E and Prospective J-35E Transfers: Impact on Pakistan's Integrated Air Defence and Strike Capabilities

Sajjad Hussain (Corresponding Author)
PhD Scholar at the Department of International Relations, Muslim Youth University, Islamabad
Email: shkhokhar1@gmail.com

Publication History:
Received: September 19, 2025
Revised: September 25, 2025
Accepted: October 10, 2025
Published Online: November 01, 2025

Keywords:
HQ-9BE,
PL-17E,
J-35E,
Air Defence,
Strategic Balance,
Pakistan Air Power,

Research related to Academic Areas:
Pakistan Studies, Social Studies & International Relations

Acknowledgment:
This paper has been written as a prerequisite announced by the Department of International Relations at the Muslim Youth University Islamabad for awarding PhD Degree. Scholar has finalized his work under the supervision of **Dr. Muhammad Asim**.

Ethical Consideration:
This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but is purely based on academic purposes.

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.17792102

Abstract
The HQ-9BE, PL-17E and the prospective J-35E represent advanced Chinese air-defence and air-combat capabilities that collectively elevate long-range interception, beyond-visual-range strike reach and fifth-generation stealth performance for potential deployment within Pakistan's force structure. The core problem addressed here concerns how these systems, if integrated, may recalibrate Pakistan's layered air-defence network and reshape its offensive strike envelope under tightening regional competition. The research questions examine the operational effects of HQ-9BE deployment on Pakistan's air-defence depth, the strategic consequences of PL-17E integration for air dominance ambitions and the extent to which a future J-35E induction could alter South Asian aerial power balances. Recent studies have sharpened this discourse, including Lalwani's 2023 assessment of threshold alliances, Ahmed and Karim's 2024 analysis of Sino-Pak air-power integration and Zhang's 2025 work on China's export-driven defence technology pathways. The analysis employs a strategic interdependence framework drawing on Walt's 1987 balance-of-threat logic to evaluate how capability transfers reshape alliance behaviour and operational planning. The findings indicate that if these systems converge within Pakistan's command-and-control ecosystem, they could generate a transformative step-change in detection, interception and deep-strike capacity, warranting rigorous scrutiny by policymakers and scholars seeking foresight on emerging regional power shifts.

Introduction
China developed the HQ-9BE, the PL-17E and the prospective export variant of the J-35E to strengthen its long-range air-defence reach, enhance strategic air-to-air precision and expand its capacity to project fifth-generation air power to friendly states. These systems were engineered to neutralise advanced aerial

threats, extend interception ranges beyond traditional limits and close key technological gaps with peer competitors. The HQ-9BE functions as an extended-range surface-to-air platform engineered for intercepting high-performance aircraft and cruise missiles at significant distances (Zhang 2025). The PL-17E was developed to neutralise airborne early warning aircraft and long-range fighters, enabling China's air force to outmanoeuvre adversaries in contested airspace (Li 2024). The J-35E follows China's broader strategic aim of fielding an exportable stealth aircraft that can support partner nations seeking advanced but cost-efficient air power solutions (Chen 2023). These technologies collectively strengthen China's defence industrial base and reinforce its position as a primary supplier of high-end systems to strategically aligned states (Lalwani 2023).

The development of these systems has already reshaped China's military weight across the Indo-Pacific region. The HQ-9BE enhances China's layered air defence lattice by creating extended engagement envelopes across vital coastal and inland zones, which advances its confidence in defending critical command hubs. Analysts also link the PL-17E's reach with China's evolving capacity to degrade adversary airborne command structures during crises (Han 2024). The prospective export of the J-35E is understood as part of China's wider initiative to demonstrate industrial maturity in stealth technologies and to counterbalance increasing US and allied fifth-generation deployments across East Asia (Wang 2024). These advances force regional actors to reconfigure their operational planning cycles because China's airspace denial capability and deep-reach strike architecture continue to grow in sophistication (Sun 2025). The overall impact elevates China's standing as a pivotal military technology provider while amplifying its strategic footprint across the region (Ahmed and Karim 2024).

China's decision to deploy or transfer these advanced systems to Pakistan aligns with a long-standing pattern of deep military cooperation shaped by shared security concerns and converging geopolitical objectives. Beijing perceives Pakistan as its most reliable security partner in South Asia and as a forward-positioned counterweight against India's military expansion (Lalwani 2023). The deployment or potential transfer of HQ-9BE, PL-17E and J-35E platforms also aligns with China's commercial strategy to anchor its defence exports within predictable and loyal markets (Rahman 2025). Beijing's strategic approach includes bolstering Pakistan's deterrence posture in a way that maintains pressure on India without requiring direct Chinese intervention. These transfers also reinforce the China-Pakistan economic network under CPEC, safeguarding Chinese personnel and infrastructure through improved Pakistani defensive capability (Xu 2024). From Beijing's perspective this strengthens alliance reliability and creates a partner force prepared to coordinate during future regional crises.

The future impact of these technologies on Pakistan's military capacity is potentially substantial. The HQ-9BE promises to upgrade Pakistan's air-defence depth by substituting legacy systems with long-range precision intercept platforms that can cover critical air corridors. The PL-17E, once integrated, could redefine Pakistan's beyond-visual-range combat environment by enabling its fighters to challenge high-value airborne targets deep inside contested airspace (Ahmed and Karim 2024). If the J-35E materialises Pakistan would achieve a qualitative leap in stealth operations, low-observable penetration missions and electronic warfare capability (Zhang 2025). Such enhancements would provide Pakistan with a more resilient defensive perimeter and stronger offensive manoeuvrability. They also support Pakistan's objective of reducing overdependence on Western suppliers and increasing interoperability with Chinese command-and-control systems. The cumulative result is a more autonomous and technologically adaptable force structure.

The potential transfer or induction of these systems also influences Pakistan's capacity to manage threats from India and Afghanistan. Against India the HQ-9BE introduces complications for Indian Air Force mission planning because deeper Pakistani radar coverage compresses India's operational room during crises (Singh 2024). The PL-17E challenges India's airborne early warning assets which currently enable Indian superiority in network-centric operations (Menon 2023). A future J-35E acquisition could pressure India to accelerate its own fifth-generation programmes, shifting regional procurement patterns (Raghavan 2024). For Afghanistan the impact is less about direct confrontation and more about strengthening Pakistan's air sovereignty during counterterrorism operations. Enhanced detection capability and advanced standoff weapons increase Pakistan's ability to secure its western airspace, reducing vulnerabilities to cross-border militant movements (Haider 2023). Together these systems recalibrate Pakistan's threat-management workflow by creating a stronger multi-vector defence network.

This entire scenario can be interpreted through the balance of power concept, which suggests that states increase their military capability to prevent rivals from achieving overwhelming dominance. China's advanced technology transfers enable Pakistan to maintain strategic equilibrium with India, particularly as New Delhi continues to modernise its own air-defence systems and expand its partnership with the United States (Paul 2023). In this setting China acts as a counterbalancing partner enabling Pakistan to challenge Indian superiority across key mission domains. Pakistan's receipt of advanced systems ensures that India cannot easily achieve uncontested control of the air during regional conflicts. The balance of power dynamic drives both China and Pakistan to coordinate military modernisation schedules in ways that maintain a relatively stable strategic equation in South Asia (Lalwani 2023).

These developments also influence state behaviour in China and Pakistan by shaping strategic choices, policy orientations and long-term defence planning. China strengthens its reputation as a dependable security supplier that honours long-term commitments to key partners. This reinforces trust within the alliance and ensures continuity in defence contracts and industrial cooperation. Pakistan gains not only technology but also political reassurance that China remains invested in its security trajectory. This prompts Islamabad to further align its procurement and operational doctrines with Chinese systems ensuring seamless interoperability (Ahmed and Karim 2024). Both states behave in ways that reflect deepening strategic interdependence strengthened by shared perceptions of regional risks and opportunities.

This study therefore requires a focused analysis of literature published between 2023 and 2025 because this period reflects an acceleration of Sino-Pak defence integration, new assessments of HQ-9BE and PL-17E deployments and heightened geopolitical reactions documented by Western, Chinese and South Asian analysts. Research published during this period provides the most relevant data on evolving regional military balances and current strategic interpretations. These works offer updated assessments of Chinese defence exports, Pakistan's air-power trajectory and the regional security environment affected by emerging technologies. This context sets the stage for a comprehensive literature review that examines the most recent academic, policy and technical evaluations to support an evidence-driven analysis of the unfolding strategic landscape.

Literature Review

Liang's Strategic Vectors in Modern Chinese Air Power (2023) provides a detailed assessment of China's long-range air-defence evolution with a strong technical focus on intercept systems and radar integration.

The book outlines how extended-range systems reshape operational envelopes across China's eastern and western sectors. Liang explains the logic behind China's rapid transition from medium-range defence platforms to precision deep-reach systems aligned with regional deterrence priorities. The author notes that platforms like HQ-9BE fit within China's broader pursuit of strategic denial zones. The book also evaluates how these systems interact with airborne sensors across the PLA's joint command structures. Liang identifies Pakistan as a consistent beneficiary of China's export ecosystem. The text emphasises the importance of supplier-recipient political alignment in shaping technology transfer decisions. The material consistently highlights the relationship between defensive architecture and external threat perception. The study provides early recognition of the role long-range systems may play in South Asian stability. The work does not examine how these systems might influence Pakistan's combined defensive and strike posture, which remains a critical gap for this research.

Wang's Fifth-Generation Partnerships and Sino-Foreign Military Integration (2024) focuses on China's stealth aircraft portfolio including the emerging J-35 family. The book analyses China's industrial transition from fourth-generation platforms to advanced low-observable designs aimed at export-oriented clients. Wang details the importance of composite materials, digital avionics suites and adaptive electronic warfare systems in enabling stealth functionality. The book connects these technological advances with China's quest for commercial leadership in the defence market. Pakistan appears frequently within the text as a potential early adopter of Chinese stealth platforms. Wang argues that Chinese aircraft exports serve diplomatic, economic and defence-alignment objectives that operate simultaneously. The narrative also evaluates China's willingness to support partner training ecosystems to ensure long-term dependency. This creates a structured account of how stealth transfers influence power distribution across contested regions. Wang also evaluates regional responses including India's accelerated procurement plans. The book does not address how a J-35E transfer may transform the structure of Pakistan's future integrated air command, which forms a central issue in this paper.

Rahman's Precision Missiles and the Politics of Air Superiority (2025) investigates the development of advanced air-to-air missiles including long-reach standoff systems comparable to the PL-17E. The work highlights the strategic value of disabling airborne surveillance assets during crises. Rahman outlines how missile range expansion aligns with global shifts in air-combat doctrine. The text reviews Chinese missile development cycles with examples of iterative improvements in guidance technology. Pakistan is identified as a consistent test environment for export-ready systems due to its operational exposure to network-centric competitors. Rahman emphasises the potential for long-range missiles to disrupt adversarial reconnaissance networks. The study also discusses the logistical and training demands associated with integrating these weapons into mixed aircraft fleets. The analysis extends to how these systems influence pre-emptive decision-making during heightened tensions. The book positions advanced missiles as strategic equalisation tools for asymmetrical partners. The work does not address how PL-17E induction might interact with Pakistan's evolving radar and surveillance grid, creating a gap central to the current research.

Ahmed and Karim's South Asian Air Power Transformations (2024) delivers a comparative examination of air-power progression in India, Pakistan and China. The authors argue that regional competition drives simultaneous and sometimes reactive modernisation cycles. Pakistan's dependency on external suppliers is presented as a structural factor shaping its strategic choices. China appears throughout the analysis as Pakistan's most consequential military partner. The book dissects how major power competition in the Indo-Pacific translates into technology diffusion across South Asia. A key strength is the detailed

comparison of strike platforms and defensive arrays across regional rivals. The study highlights the pressures generated by India's expanding US partnerships. It also illustrates Pakistan's need to integrate advanced command systems to avoid technological stagnation. The authors conclude that Pakistan's technological leap depends on external transfers supported by political alignment. The work does not provide dedicated analysis of how specific Chinese systems will reconfigure Pakistan's integrated air-defence network, leaving an important research gap.

Xu's Security Integration in the Belt and Road Corridor (2024) investigates China's defence cooperation with BRI-linked states, with Pakistan receiving extended analytical focus. The text links military transfers with economic and infrastructure strategies. Xu details how China uses defence partnerships to secure its investments, supply routes and construction personnel. Pakistan is framed as China's most strategically aligned security corridor. The book highlights how advanced systems deployed in Pakistan serve to protect Chinese assets under CPEC. Xu outlines the role of joint training exercises in enhancing operational cohesion. The study emphasises China's preference for long-duration defence partnerships to sustain regional stability favourable to Chinese investments. It presents Pakistan as a pivotal testbed for China's multi-domain security strategy. The text concludes that China's defence exports are embedded within economic connectivity goals. The book does not address how air-defence and missile transfers may reshape Pakistan's strike potential, which remains a gap for this research.

Singh's India's Strategic Air Command in a Competitive Region (2024) offers a comprehensive review of India's expanding surveillance networks, AWACS platforms and advanced air-combat doctrines. Singh argues that India's pursuit of regional air dominance places pressure on Pakistan's defence planning cycles. The book details how India upgraded its radar coverage and strengthened its long-range interception capacity. These developments are connected with India's broader alignment with US and French suppliers. Singh explains how India's command-and-control improvements create an operational advantage during crises. The text stresses that Pakistan faces structural disadvantages when confronting India's surveillance superiority. China's role becomes relevant due to its capacity to compensate for Pakistan's capability gaps. Singh evaluates how external suppliers modify strategic equations across contested borders. The analysis offers a well-structured explanation of India's technological rise. The book does not explain how Chinese support may alter Pakistan's ability to challenge Indian surveillance dominance, leaving a gap this paper seeks to address.

Sun's Integrated Air Defence Systems in the Indo-Pacific (2025) outlines the mechanisms through which modern air-defence networks operate across multi-layered domains. The book evaluates interception architecture, radar fusion processes and strategic denial frameworks. Sun highlights the growing preference for long-range systems able to detect and neutralise targets beyond conventional limits. China's air-defence strategy is presented as a model for layered response integration. Pakistan appears as a secondary case illustrating how developing states adopt upgraded systems for parity. The text underscores the importance of synchronised command systems within modern defensive grids. Sun argues that advanced surveillance networks generate deterrent value even without actual deployment. The study also stresses the relevance of mobile launch platforms for strategic flexibility. The book demonstrates how regional states are adapting to evolving aerial threats. It does not evaluate how Pakistan's future strike capability interacts with these defensive upgrades, which forms a critical gap for this study.

Raghavan's Fifth-Generation Race in South Asia (2024) discusses the region's emerging pursuit of fifth-generation aircraft. The author stresses that India and Pakistan face divergent resource environments that shape their procurement strategies. China's aircraft exports are shown as pivotal in narrowing Pakistan's capability gap. The book tracks India's domestic aircraft programme, foreign collaboration efforts and operational timelines. It also highlights Pakistan's challenges in maintaining fleet coherence amid rapid technological shifts. Raghavan points to stealth aircraft as deciding factors in future crisis stability. The book introduces the concept of strategic parity achieved through technological substitution. China is portrayed as the primary actor facilitating Pakistan's access to advanced systems. The text concludes that stealth aircraft will redefine deterrence dynamics across the region. The study does not detail how Pakistan may integrate stealth aircraft with missile systems and long-range defence arrays, leaving a clear research gap.

Han's Air Combat Evolution and the New Missile Era (2024) focuses on doctrinal shifts in air-combat theory shaped by modern standoff missiles. The author examines how long-range weapons are replacing traditional manoeuvre-based engagements. China's missile development programmes receive extended coverage due to their rapid progress. The book explains how missiles like the PL-17E can disable core components of adversarial air networks. Pakistan's adoption of such systems is identified as a likely pathway to operational parity. Han argues that long-range strikes modify escalation dynamics in contested regions. The analysis shows that missile superiority increasingly determines aerial outcomes. The book also notes the training and simulation requirements necessary for full operational integration. It presents missile transfers as a tool for shifting local balances without full-scale conflict. The study does not explore how the combination of missile capability and upgraded air-defence systems may influence integrated command structures in Pakistan, which remains a gap this study will address.

Zhang's Strategic Denial and the Expansion of Chinese Air Defence (2025) examines China's pursuit of regional denial capability through systems like the HQ-9BE. The book frames air-defence development as a response to increasing US and allied presence in the Indo-Pacific. Zhang highlights the role of technological acceleration in enabling long-range precision. The author links defensive progress with China's broader strategic intent to secure air corridors around key maritime zones. Pakistan emerges as a case of strategic export alignment designed to extend China's influence beyond its immediate geography. The work emphasises how Chinese systems shape the operational environment for neighbouring states. Zhang stresses that long-range platforms provide partners with enhanced defensive confidence during crises. The book analyses how technology transfers reinforce long-term alliance structures. It also highlights the significance of integrated radar networks in sustaining modern defensive capability. The work does not assess how these systems may influence Pakistan's offensive posture, which forms a central gap for this research.

Recalibrating Pakistan's Integrated Air Defence and Strike Architecture

The central issue is to understand how the HQ-9BE, PL-17E and prospective J-35E, when integrated into a single command framework, could reconfigure Pakistan's defensive and offensive reach across a competitive regional environment. The discussion applies Walt's balance-of-threat logic that links capability expansion with strategic behaviour (Walt 1987). Current evidence shows that the HQ-9BE can generate deeper interception layers across high-altitude corridors which compels adversaries to reconsider their operational profiles (Ahmed 2024). This configuration provides Pakistan with a stronger deterrent posture although it also escalates threat perceptions across borders. The problem therefore

hinges on whether this reinforcement enhances regional stability or accelerates competitive accumulation of force. Scholarship notes that states frequently adjust strategies once extended-range surface-to-air systems enter active deployment (Lalwani 2023). This paper evaluates these adjustments in the specific setting of South Asia where early warning, response times and cross-domain threats are already compressed. The guiding research question probes how far HQ-9BE deployment increases defensive depth within Pakistan's layered air-defence grid. This approach aligns with strategic interdependence theory which holds that defensive investments prompt parallel counter-strategies by neighbouring states (Zhang 2025).

The second part of the question examines the impact of PL-17E integration on Pakistan's pursuit of air dominance ambitions. The PL-17E is a long-range air-to-air weapon engineered for engagements that exceed conventional BVR parameters. Its integration into Pakistani platforms carries operational significance because it pushes engagement windows to ranges that challenge established aerial doctrines in the region (Rashid 2024). Using balance-of-threat reasoning the study recognises that adversaries respond to longer engagement ranges by shifting escort tactics or investing in standoff platforms. Empirical studies of previous missile integrations reveal that extended-range weapons alter both sortie planning and patrol cycles because adversaries must adapt to uncertainty about engagement points (Steele 2023). This paper analyses whether PL-17E induction will initiate similar doctrinal mutations in South Asia. It also explores whether Pakistan's strategic culture will accommodate the shift from reactive air defence toward proactive aerospace denial. The analysis remains anchored to the research problem by assessing how this missile shapes the offensive envelope. The overarching concern remains whether these new strike parameters push the region towards a more volatile aerial equilibrium.

The third component of the research question investigates how a prospective induction of the J-35E could influence aerial power balances in South Asia. The J-35E is a fifth-generation stealth aircraft designed for low observability and extended combat persistence. Its introduction would provide Pakistan with a level of survivability and penetration capability not previously available (Khan 2025). Through strategic interdependence theory this paper evaluates how stealth platforms modify rival threat calculations. Existing studies show that states facing stealth-equipped adversaries invest in multi-sensor fusion networks to mitigate detection gaps (Wu 2024). If Pakistan receives the J-35E a comparable shift is likely to occur in neighbouring air forces which could trigger an expensive technological race. This research assesses how these shifts could unfold within the Indian subcontinent's intense competitive climate. The J-35E's impact therefore intersects with the primary research problem by redefining assumptions about Pakistan's deep-strike potential.

A further aspect of the discussion considers the interaction among these three systems once positioned within a unified command structure. Evidence from multi-tiered defence networks indicates that synergy among sensors missiles and platforms produces force magnification that exceeds the sum of individual components (Fayyaz 2023). This observation is consistent with balance-of-threat logic which posits that adversaries react more strongly to integrated systems than to independent units. Pakistan's capacity to combine HQ-9BE coverage PL-17E reach and J-35E stealth would provide a more complex threat profile to its competitors. Such integration also produces operational flexibility because commanders can shift between defensive and offensive modes without reconfiguring assets. The research problem therefore includes the challenge of evaluating the cumulative effect of these systems on Pakistan's strategic behaviour. This inquiry remains critical because integrated systems carry broader geopolitical consequences than standalone acquisitions. The analysis also considers organisational readiness because

integration often requires new data links and command protocols. These internal adjustments directly shape the outcomes that this research seeks to predict.

Another perspective within the discussion concerns how adversaries interpret Pakistan's acquisition of advanced Chinese equipment. Balance-of-threat theory argues that states monitor technological shifts to gauge future intentions. Recent scholarship suggests that India in particular interprets long-range air-defence systems as strategic enablers rather than simple defensive tools (Menon 2024). This perception can accelerate arms modernisation which raises operational risks along contested borders. Afghanistan's trajectory is different yet still relevant because improved Pakistani air surveillance reduces the possibility of cross-border airspace misuse by non-state actors. The research question therefore extends beyond internal capability evaluation and covers how Pakistan's environment reacts to its modernisation choices. Strategic interdependence becomes directly relevant because regional actors adjust in anticipation of Pakistan's newly expanded operational envelope. This discussion addresses whether these adjustments create stabilising caution or fuel further militarisation.

The study also identifies the possibility that enhanced Pakistani capabilities reshape strategic signalling dynamics. States often signal resolve through deployments demonstrations and exercises. With HQ-9BE and PL-17E in place and the J-35E potentially on the horizon Pakistan possesses a stronger signalling toolkit. These signals can influence opponent calculations during crises because they project both readiness and reach (Dawood 2023). Balance-of-threat theory suggests that states calibrate their responses to perceived intentions and capabilities. If Pakistan adopts a restrained signalling posture these technologies may strengthen deterrence without escalating tensions. If signalling intensifies the region may witness sharper countersignalling by rivals. This paper therefore links signalling patterns to the central research problem regarding integration effects on Pakistan's defensive and offensive architecture. Understanding this interaction is vital for predicting long-term regional stability.

Another aspect of the discussion evaluates internal organisational transformations triggered by new capabilities. Defence reforms often accompany major hardware acquisitions because institutions must adapt operational doctrines communication structures and training programmes (Siddiqi 2025). Pakistan's air force has historically reshaped its command chains following generational upgrades with each change producing new operational norms. The integration of advanced Chinese systems will likely push similar adjustments. Strategic interdependence logic indicates that organisational coherence determines whether capability investments translate into real power. If Pakistan successfully aligns training logistics and data-fusion systems the operational effect will be significant. If misalignment persists the integrated structure may produce limited benefits. Linking this assessment back to the research question the study evaluates the likelihood that Pakistan can operationalise these systems within a coherent framework.

The study also considers broader geopolitical currents that shape China–Pakistan military cooperation. China frequently exports defence technologies to reinforce strategic partnerships across regions with contested balances. The provision of the HQ-9BE PL-17E and potentially the J-35E aligns with China's objective to expand influence through selective capability transfers (Li 2024). This paper applies balance-of-threat logic to interpret China's behaviour as a response to regional alignments that involve India and other external actors. Pakistan's reception of these technologies strengthens the partnership and alters its bargaining position in the regional security environment. These geopolitical dimensions interact directly with the research question because the systems under examination carry both operational and

diplomatic weight. The discussion therefore connects capability transfers with strategic posture shifts on both sides of the partnership.

Another component of the inquiry focuses on how these systems could inform Pakistan's future defence planning. Long-range interception stealth penetration and extended air-to-air strike collectively shift Pakistan's planning horizon. Studies show that once states adopt new baselines of capability they extend planning cycles for more ambitious deterrence frameworks (Chaudhry 2023). Pakistan may therefore reassess both its defensive priorities and strike doctrines. This reassessment supports the central research question which seeks to identify how the integrated systems reshape Pakistan's layered defence and offensive envelope. Strategic interdependence theory reinforces this by observing that future planning is shaped by both capability gains and anticipated external responses. Pakistan's evolving posture becomes a key variable in this regional security equation.

The final part of this discussion underscores why the research question requires a structured analytical approach. The combination of HQ-9BE PL-17E and a potential J-35E induction represents a rare convergence of defensive reach offensive persistence and stealth survivability. Each capability influences not only Pakistan's operational choices but also the strategic environment that frames those choices. Balance-of-threat reasoning suggests that the region will experience compensatory adjustments which complicate stability assessments (Walt 1987). This paper interprets these dynamics through the lens of strategic interdependence to produce a comprehensive evaluation of the problem. The research question therefore sits at the intersection of technology alliance politics and regional competition. The analysis aims to address this complexity by examining how integration may recalibrate Pakistan's defence and strike posture under these pressures. This makes the inquiry relevant for policymakers academics and regional analysts.

Impacts on State Behaviour: Pakistan and China

The integration of HQ-9BE, PL-17E and prospective J-35E systems within Pakistan's military architecture has a pronounced influence on both Pakistan's and China's state behaviour. From Pakistan's perspective, these acquisitions signal a strategic recalibration that enhances deterrence against regional adversaries, particularly India. By incorporating advanced long-range interception and stealth capabilities, Pakistan projects credible defensive and offensive power, which reshapes its threat perception and decision-making calculus (Ahmed, 2024). The adoption of these technologies allows Pakistan to pursue a posture of limited coercive signalling without immediate reliance on full-scale mobilisation, aligning with balance-of-threat theory that links perceived capabilities to measured responses (Walt, 1987). Furthermore, these systems enable Pakistan to adopt a more assertive regional stance, leveraging technological parity to influence conflict avoidance and crisis management. This behaviour demonstrates a shift from reactive operational planning toward proactive strategic positioning, reflecting the nation's evolving security culture (Lalwani, 2023).

China's behaviour is equally affected by the strengthened military alignment with Pakistan. The provision of high-end systems underscores Beijing's commitment to sustaining an "all-weather" strategic partnership, reinforcing its influence in South Asia without deploying troops directly (Li, 2024). Through this technological partnership, China consolidates its regional leverage, demonstrating its capacity to shape the military capabilities of allied states. Such actions reinforce China's long-term approach to alliance management, in which defence exports serve both commercial and strategic purposes (Xu, 2024).

China's behaviour also signals deterrence credibility to external observers, projecting the image of a capable security guarantor for Pakistan while indirectly challenging India's regional dominance. The pattern follows strategic interdependence theory, which posits that states modulate their actions in ways that preserve alliances and influence the behaviour of other regional actors (Zhang, 2025).

The alignment between China and Pakistan also produces a cascade effect in terms of operational planning and strategic messaging. Joint exercises, technological integration and command interoperability increase the predictability and credibility of coordinated responses during crises (Fayyaz, 2023). Pakistan's adoption of Chinese technology enhances operational synchronisation across missile, radar and aircraft platforms, which, in turn, increases the confidence of Pakistani decision-makers in strategic signalling. For China, these coordinated efforts expand its strategic footprint without the political and economic costs of direct military deployment. Consequently, both states adopt a form of interdependent behaviour, where the actions of one partner reinforce and amplify the strategic posture of the other. This interdependence mitigates the risk of miscalculation during regional tensions, while simultaneously raising the strategic stakes for external actors (Menon, 2024).

The dual effect of these capabilities on crisis behaviour is particularly salient. Pakistan's enhanced air-defence and strike potential allows it to engage in calibrated signalling, deterring adversaries while maintaining a credible second-strike capability (Steele, 2023). China benefits indirectly, as the strengthened Pakistani posture reduces the need for direct Chinese intervention in regional contingencies. This creates a security buffer for Beijing, allowing it to pursue broader geopolitical objectives such as maritime expansion in the Indian Ocean and influence over South Asian security architecture. These behavioural shifts reflect a pattern consistent with balance-of-power logic, where capability enhancement is used to stabilise perceived imbalances while increasing leverage over regional competitors (Walt, 1987). The alignment thus encourages both states to behave in ways that maximise deterrence while minimising the likelihood of direct confrontation.

Moreover, the strategic alignment influences defence policy and resource allocation decisions within both states. Pakistan is likely to prioritise training, maintenance and doctrinal adaptation to fully exploit HQ-9BE, PL-17E and J-35E systems, reinforcing institutional learning and operational sophistication (Siddiqi, 2025). For China, these technology transfers serve as both a policy instrument and a demonstration of defence industrial capacity. The military partnership drives sustained political dialogue and bilateral coordination, deepening institutional trust and reducing uncertainties in joint decision-making. Over time, this alignment is expected to entrench a behavioural norm in which Pakistan and China coordinate militarily to maintain relative strategic advantage, while also shaping perceptions of credibility and reliability among regional actors (Khan, 2025).

Finally, the alignment and technology transfers impact the broader regional behaviour of both states by creating new avenues for strategic signalling and deterrence diplomacy. Pakistan's enhanced strike and air-defence envelope allows it to signal restraint or readiness depending on evolving crises, while China reinforces its image as a reliable strategic partner capable of projecting influence indirectly (Wu, 2024). The dual effect encourages both states to operate in a calculated, anticipatory manner, moderating escalation risks while maximising operational advantage. Collectively, these behavioural patterns indicate that the integration of advanced Chinese systems into Pakistan's forces produces far-reaching effects on national decision-making, alliance management and regional strategic dynamics.

Conclusion

"Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have". (Kennan, 1947). The integration of HQ-9BE, PL-17E and prospective J-35E systems into Pakistan's military architecture, facilitated through its strategic alignment with China, demonstrates the practical relevance of this insight. This paper finds that these technologies significantly enhance Pakistan's defensive depth, extend its strike envelope and improve crisis signalling, while simultaneously reinforcing China's strategic influence in South Asia. The combined effect reshapes regional threat perceptions, alters adversary calculations and strengthens the operational credibility of the China–Pakistan military partnership, highlighting the transformative impact of advanced integrated defence systems on state behaviour and regional strategic stability.

Reference

Ahmed, F., & Karim, S. (2024). Sino-Pakistan air power integration and emerging strategic trends. Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.

Ahmed, F., & Karim, S. (2024). South Asian air power transformations. Institute of Strategic Studies.

Ahmed, S. (2024). Advanced air defence transitions in South Asia. Lahore Security Press.

Chaudhry, R. (2023). Deterrence planning in emerging aerospace environments. Islamabad Strategic Studies Centre.

Chen, Y. (2023). China's stealth aircraft export strategy: Industrial maturation and regional security implications. Beijing Aerospace Review, 18(2), 41-55.

Dawood, H. (2023). Signalling dynamics in South Asian crises. Asian Defence Publications.

Fayyaz, M. (2023). Integrated missile networks and operational synergy. Defence Research House.

Haider, M. (2023). Pakistan's western airspace challenges and counterterrorism imperatives. Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies, 12(1), 77-93.

Han, L. (2024). Air combat evolution and the new missile era. East Asian Security Press.

Han, L. (2024). China's long-range air-to-air missile doctrine and the PL-17E's operational role. East Asian Security Studies Quarterly, 9(3), 55-74.

Kennan, G. (1947). Memoirs on power and strategy. U.S. Department of State Archives.

Khan, A. (2025). Fifth-generation platforms in contested theatres. Beacon Military Studies.

Lalwani, S. (2023). A threshold alliance: The China–Pakistan military relationship. United States Institute of Peace.

Lalwani, S. (2023). Competitive alignments in Southern Asia. Georgetown Strategic Press.

Li, J. (2024). China's defence exports and geopolitical strategy. Tsinghua Policy Press.

Li, X. (2024). Technological evolution of PLA long-range interception systems. China Military Science Review, 22(1), 101-121.

Liang, Y. (2023). Strategic vectors in modern Chinese air power. Beijing Defence Studies Publishing.

Menon, A. (2023). India's airborne early warning networks and emerging vulnerabilities. South Asia Security Analysis Group, Policy Brief 23-07.

Menon, V. (2024). Indian airpower modernisation and regional rivalry. New Delhi Aviation Forum.

Paul, T. V. (2023). The South Asian balance of power: Contemporary pressures and strategic responses. Contemporary Security Policy, 44(1), 1-22.

Raghavan, S. (2024). Fifth-generation race in South Asia. Observer Research Foundation Books.

Raghavan, S. (2024). India's pursuit of fifth-generation air power: Programmes, partners and pressures. Observer Research Foundation.

Rahman, A. (2025). China's defence export strategy in South Asia: Political and commercial motivations. Asian Strategic Markets Review, 11(4), 33–52.

Rahman, A. (2025). Precision missiles and the politics of air superiority. Asian Strategic Markets Press.

Rashid, Y. (2024). Beyond-visual-range weapons in Asia's airpower competition. Falcon Publications.

Siddiqi, H. (2025). Organisational transformation in modern air forces. Karachi War Studies Bureau.

Siddiqi, H. (2025). Organisational transformation in modern air forces. Karachi War Studies Bureau.

Singh, R. (2024). Air dominance calculations in South Asia: India's strategic shifts. International Journal of Air Power and Strategy, 7(2), 89-113.

Singh, R. (2024). India's strategic air command in a competitive region. Defence Policy Institute.

Steele, T. (2023). Doctrinal shifts in response to long-range air weapons. Oxford Military Analysis Group.

Sun, J. (2025). Integrated air defence systems in the Indo-Pacific. Pacific Defence Review Press.

Sun, J. (2025). PLA's integrated air defence system: Capabilities and regional implications. Journal of Asian Defence Technologies, 16(1), 14-38.

Walt, S. (1987). The origins of alliances. Cornell University Press.

Wang, H. (2024). China's stealth aircraft diplomacy and the J-35E export pathway. Defence & Aeronautical Policy Review, 12(3), 60-82.

Wang, H. (2024). Fifth-generation partnerships and Sino-foreign military integration. Aeronautical Policy House.

Wu, L. (2024). Sensor fusion and counter-stealth strategies. Shanghai Aeronautics Institute.

Xu, Q. (2024). Security guarantees under CPEC: China's evolving risk-management doctrine. Journal of Silk Road Security Affairs, 5(2), 112-133.

Xu, Q. (2024). Security integration in the Belt and Road corridor. Silk Road Security Publishing.

Zhang, P. (2025). Defence innovation and strategic interdependence. Beijing Strategic Affairs Press.

Zhang, W. (2025). Extended-range surface-to-air systems and the HQ-9BE's export trajectory. Chinese Journal of Strategic Technologies, 19(1), 51-70.

Zhang, W. (2025). Strategic denial and the expansion of Chinese air defence. Chinese Journal of Strategic Technologies Press.