

Pakistan's Crucial Role in China's Military Strategy

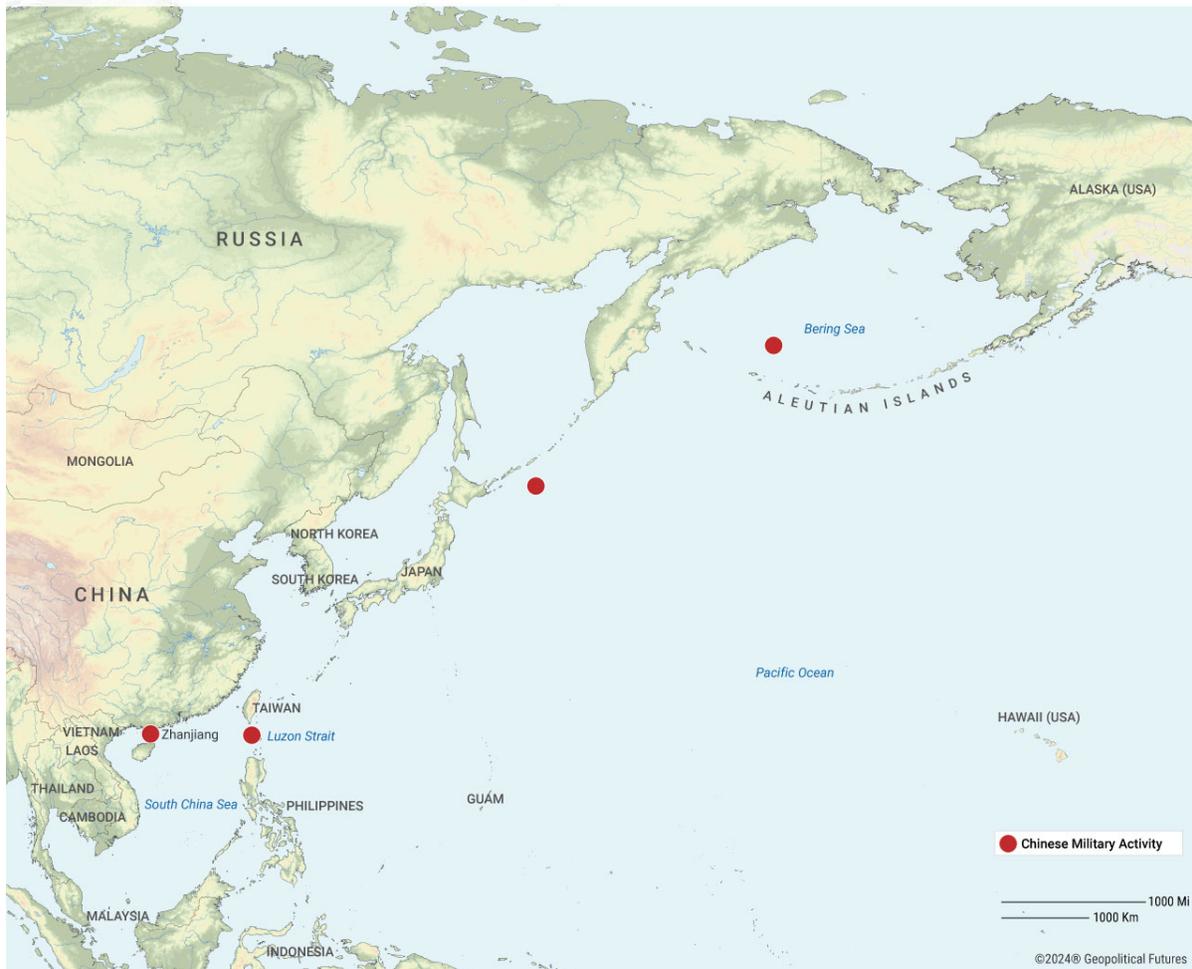
by Kamran Bokhari - May 23, 2025

Had India not conducted **unprecedented airstrikes in Pakistan** on May 7 – retaliation for a terrorist attack in Kashmir two weeks earlier – Chinese-made air systems would have remained untested. The downing of Indian jets by Pakistani forces using Chinese-made warplanes and missiles highlighted the advancement of Beijing’s military technology, though primarily in terms of hardware. The early loss of Indian jets during the 100 hours of fighting revealed more about the human capability – or “humanware” – of Pakistan’s military, which successfully integrated Chinese platforms into its command-and-control structures and processes. This suggests that China, which lacks Pakistan’s combat experience, does not necessarily pose a greater threat than previously thought in the Western Pacific.

Over the past few weeks, prominent Western outlets, including Bloomberg, AFP, BBC and The New York Times, have reported on how the four-day India-Pakistan war showcased the increasing lethality of Chinese jets and missiles against Western aircraft. The downing of three French Rafale fighters – and possibly a Russian MiG-29 and a Sukhoi-30 – by Chinese J-10C aircraft armed with PL-15E long-range air-to-air missiles gave Beijing a rare chance to test its aerospace industry in real combat conditions. The incident demonstrated that after years of research and billions of dollars in investment, China is becoming increasingly competitive in aviation and avionics.

These developments are now reshaping perceptions of China’s military as it projects power across the Pacific. Buoyed by Chinese state-backed information operations, media coverage has begun exploring what the India-Pakistan air battles reveal about China’s ability to take Taiwan. The performance of the Chinese-made jets and missiles coincides with a **rise in Chinese wargames** along the coast since late 2021. In addition to recent **encirclement drills around Taiwan**, the Chinese navy has expanded its exercises as far north as the Aleutian Islands, near Alaska, and as far south as the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand.

Chinese Military Activity in the Pacific, 2024



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This scale of wargaming is a relatively recent development for the People’s Liberation Army. It will take time for Chinese forces to conduct sophisticated exercises and master operational tradecraft. More important, Beijing understands that despite the value of these increasingly complex drills, they cannot substitute for real-world combat. Simulations can mimic battlespace environments, but they cannot replicate the unpredictability of actual kinetic engagements – especially against the United States.

China has also been closely observing Russia’s underwhelming performance in Ukraine. This is despite Russia being the world’s second most powerful military force, with a robust defense industrial base and centuries of experience in projecting power beyond its borders. The Russia-Ukraine war has likely prompted Beijing to reassess its strategic planning. Unlike Russia, China has not deployed

multidivisional forces beyond its borders since the Qing dynasty conquered Taiwan and Mongolia in the late 17th century.

More recently, the People's Republic of China has fought limited wars in Korea (1950-53) and with India (1962), the Soviet Union (1969) and Vietnam (1979), all confined to its land borders. Its focus on economic and technological growth has created a gap between its development of advanced military hardware and its actual combat experience. Moreover, China's weapons remain largely untested because of this absence of real warfare, and few nations operate Chinese weapon systems.

Among those that do, Pakistan is unique. It is China's largest arms buyer, accounting for 63 percent of Chinese weapons exports from 2020 to 2024, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (During the same period, 81 percent of Pakistan's arms imports came from China.) Pakistan is also the most powerful military among major Chinese arms recipients, and unlike others, it has a sophisticated weapons development program of its own.

This makes the Pakistan-China defense partnership especially significant, despite the **many issues that Beijing has with Islamabad**. The Chengdu Aircraft Corp., which makes the J-10C, jointly developed the near-fifth-generation JF-17 with Pakistan Aeronautical Complex. While many JF-17 components are manufactured by PAC, Pakistan's key contribution is the integration of avionics, engines, airframes and weapons. This systems integration capability – combined with decades of experience fighting the much more powerful Indian military and the need for constant innovation – has helped Pakistan develop the human expertise that China lacks.



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Chinese support greatly enhanced Pakistan’s training, tactics and ability to integrate different systems using sophisticated operational protocols. (India also alleges that this collaboration extended beyond hardware to include satellite support.) But other nations using Chinese equipment have reported problems in the past. In 2022, Myanmar grounded its fleet of Chinese fighter jets due to structural and technical issues. In 2024, Bangladesh raised quality concerns about Chinese arms. Even Pakistan’s navy has faced challenges with the F-22P frigates, which it operates below full capacity.

It is also worth noting that the assessment of Chinese systems is based on a single event: Pakistan’s defensive response to Indian airstrikes on May 7. While the shootdowns highlighted the strengths of Chinese missiles and the J-10C, more engagements might have exposed weaknesses. Regardless, China views the Pakistani air force as a crucial partner for testing its weapons and shaping global

perceptions of its military strength. The India-Pakistan conflict serves as a testing ground, letting China achieve strategic objectives without the costs of direct conflict.



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Although China also faces a prolonged **border standoff with India**, using that theater to demonstrate its military capabilities would be far costlier, with repercussions extending into economic areas. Thus, China is likely to continue leveraging Pakistan as a proxy to counter growing U.S.-India alignment. An **India militarily distracted by Pakistan cannot effectively assist the U.S.** in curbing Chinese manufacturing dominance.

Even so, China must manage this proxy strategy carefully to avoid uncontrollable escalation between the two South Asian nuclear powers. Moving forward, Beijing will have to consider how Washington and **New Delhi respond to this evolving dynamic**. Just because the J-10C proved effective for Pakistan does not mean it will perform as well for China in a potential confrontation over Taiwan. Chinese military personnel do not match Pakistan’s experience, and their potential adversary in the

Pacific is not India – it is the United States.

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