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Beyond Alliance:
The Strategic Fusion of China and Pakistan



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How a Decades-Long Friendship Has Transformed Into an Operational Military Doctrine

A year ago, one of the most important defence demonstrations in South Asia’s history took place over Gilgit-Baltistan skies. In May 2025, pilots of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) climbed into the cockpits of J-35A “Gyr Falcon” stealth fighters – Chinese fifth-generation aircraft with Pakistani livery – and flew joint sorties with their Chinese counterparts over the Karakoram ranges.



Defense analysts in New Delhi, Washington and Brussels watched in stunned attention. A year later and what was a landmark event has become routine. The sorties go on. Integration is deepening. And the language used to describe this relationship must finally be updated.

“All-weather friendship” is no longer the term for the relationship between Beijing and Islamabad. What has emerged is something far more profound, a doctrinal fusion in which technology, command intent and strategic culture are becoming indistinguishable across two sovereign militaries.

From Ally to Operational Partner”

The May 2025 joint flights were not a ceremony. These were high-end integration exercises with real-time radar suppression, satellite-guided targeting, live airborne early warning coordination and simulated intercepts against low observable adversary platforms. Virtual enemy aircraft – modelled on India’s Rafale fighters fitted with long-range Meteor missiles – were engaged in complex beyond-visual-range scenarios to stress-test the combined system.

Those exercises have become regularized joint training cycles as of May 2026. Pakistani



pilots are no more passengers looking at Chinese technology from the outside. They are active architects of employment tactics, helping refine the employment of fifth-generation stealth assets in combat scenarios.

This is an unusual level of operational intimacy Historically. Russia has not extended the same level of access to flight protocols or sensor fusion architecture to any other partner as it has to its Su-35



suppliers or its partners on next-generation designs. The U.S. limits access to the F-35 to NATO members and a small group of close partners under tight controls. China has done something different with Pakistan.

The astonishment that reverberated through Western intelligence communities was expressed by a senior European defense attaché based in Islamabad who witnessed the 2025 flights and spoke on background: “We expected that the J-35 would eventually enter the export market. But what no one predicted was Pakistani pilots in the cockpit even before the platform had reached its full operational deployment within the People's Liberation Army Air Force itself. This is not collaboration. “This is fusion all in one.”

What the J-35A Offers to South Asia

The J-35A is a multirole stealth fighter often compared to the F-35 Lightning II. It features a low-observable airframe, state-of-the-art active electronically scanned array radar, integrated sensor fusion, and the capacity to employ the PL-15E long-range air-to-air missile. Its entry into PAF service directly undermines the air superiority calculus that India has been building around its Rafale purchases and their Meteor missile payload. “If you have Chinese and Pakistani pilots flying with J-35As in combat configurations over the Karakoram, it really redraws the map,” was the frank admission from one ex-Indian Air Marshal, speaking on condition of anonymity to a British defense journal soon after

the flights in 2025. The technological edge we thought we had with the Rafale-Meteor combo is now seriously in question. “Stealth has made it to our northern borders.” Operational geography makes it more important. The high-altitude terrain in Gilgit-Baltistan is similar to the kind of conditions that may be expected in conflict zones along the Line of Actual Control. The J-35A is not a stand-alone weapons system, but operates in this environment and networked with Beidou satellite navigation, Chinese AWACS uplinks and ground-based electronic warfare architecture. It's a node in a unified 'battle cloud' that links stealth aircraft, airborne early warning assets and ground stations under a common command -- tested and refined during twelve months of joint operations.

CPEC Militarized: Infrastructure as Strategy

The J-35A story is not a separate story from the larger story of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Initially seen mainly as an infrastructure and connectivity project,

CPEC has now become a comprehensive strategic vision. The forward operating bases and logistics infrastructure that has been set up in Gilgit-Baltistan is now being used for commercial and defence purposes. Chinese stealth aircraft operating from these high points can quickly affect the Siachen-Galwan axis, making Indian military planning in the high-altitude domain more complex.



Crucially, it's not just the flying that fuses. The Pakistani technical teams are said to be deeply embedded in the sustainment cycles and getting hands-on experience with avionics systems, stealth coatings and software maintenance protocols. A retired PAF Air Commodore familiar with the program described the shift in stark terms: “This is not about receiving jets. It is about inside the OS. “We’re not just flying Chinese airplanes, we’re

flying with China, in China’s future warfighting concepts.” That statement implies a doctrinal convergence far exceeding a conventional arms transfer.

India’s Response and Regional Recalibration

The Indian Air Force has to revisit its doctrine in its entirety with the emergence of a China-integrated adversary with stealth capabilities operating over the Karakoram. The assumption of beyond-visual-range superiority via the Meteor missiles is increasingly being offset by the J-35A’s reduced radar cross-section and the PL-15E’s comparable range. Indigenous Indian programmes – especially the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft – are being fast-tracked but the time scales are still long.

India’s overt responses include increased high-altitude air defense deployments, expanded unmanned aerial vehicle programs, and deepened defense partnerships with the United States, France and Israel. Quad exercises have multiplied in number and operational complexity. But the geographical and technological realities have changed in fundamental ways: the Himalayan frontier now has an integrated Sino-Pakistani air posture that the region has never seen before.

The Global Precedent: What Beijing Has Showed

The pace and scope of Sino-Pakistani military integration has forced a broader reassessment in Western defense establishments. It was long believed that the spread of high-tech weapons was a slow process and only occurred to carefully vetted allies under tight controls. China has now shown that it is prepared to give away fifth-generation capabilities to its most trusted partner at a rate that belies that assumption.





The implications are far wider than just South Asia. Middle East, African and Southeast Asian countries, seeing how deeply Pakistan is enmeshed in China's aerial combat ecosystem, may draw new conclusions about their own defence procurement choices. If Beijing is willing to share this level of capability and doctrine with Islamabad, similar arrangements could be witnessed elsewhere as China's global strategic footprint expands. The cyber and electronic warfare dimensions add further layers of complexity. Both states have serious capabilities in information operations and senior Pakistani officers have advanced credentials in cybersecurity and information security, so the doctrinal fusion almost certainly extends to non-kinetic domains. This is not just an air force but the embryonic structure for a full joint warfighting framework.

Codifying the Built Environment

As of May 2026, Pakistan is on a clear path to standing up multiple J-35A squadrons. The scope of joint command exercise has also expanded to include surface-to-air missile integration and cross-domain coordination with naval assets in Arabian Sea. Training syllabi are being aligned at the doctrinal level and publications from both militaries reportedly show a convergence of strategic thinking.

This is not about erasing national identities or deleting distinctive strategic priorities. Both China and Pakistan have independent foreign policy interests and sovereign command and control. But the interoperability they have now achieved is such that in a future crisis, their air forces could fight with the sort of coordination normally found in formal alliances – the kind of institutional glue that NATO took decades to build. That Pakistan and China have reached a comparable level of integration through partnership instead of treaty is, in and of itself, a strategic innovation.

Conclusion: A New Paradigm for the Karakoram

The friendship has ended. Not because the warmth is gone (it isn't) but because friendship is no longer a good name for what is. What China and Pakistan have built is a strategic



fusion: measured in shared cockpit hours, aligned command doctrine, integrated data links and a convergence of long-term security interests that transcend the transactional. The J-35A partnership is a historic leap in the conventional deterrence of Pakistan—a leap from an air force that has relied on legacy platforms to one that operates at the leading edge of fifth generation warfare. For China, Pakistan is a model of a strategic partnership based on real operational depth, not receipts of arms sales. The J-35A “Gyrfalcon” patrols over Gilgit-Baltistan in 2026, and it’s got more than just advanced avionics and weapons systems. With it comes a declaration that over the high Himalayas a new axis of air power has taken wing, an axis defined not by contracts, communiqués or summits, but by common sensors, common skies and a common view of how future conflicts may be decided. Never again will the strategic map of the region look the same. Those who fail to see what has changed run the risk of being dangerously unprepared for what comes next.