

Viewpoint

FROM TRAINING TO EMBEDDED PARTNERSHIPS: PAKISTAN'S EVOLVING DEFENCE OUTREACH IN AFRICA

Pakistan's defence engagement in Africa is evolving from limited, transactional cooperation towards more embedded and institutionalised security partnerships. Traditionally centred on military training, United Nations peacekeeping, and modest defence exports, Islamabad's outreach is increasingly integrating professional military education with defence-industrial cooperation, technical support, and sustained military-to-military engagement. This shift reflects Pakistan's broader effort to expand its strategic footprint in Africa through defence diplomacy under the *Engage Africa* framework, particularly in conflict-affected and strategically significant regions. This paper argues that Pakistan is emerging as a flexible mid-tier security provider by leveraging cost-effective defence platforms, operational experience, and long-term institutional partnerships. Drawing on evidence from key African engagements, it examines how Pakistan is moving beyond episodic defence cooperation towards an ecosystem-based approach that links training, equipment, maintenance, and strategic dialogue. At the same time, the paper assesses the structural constraints that shape this outreach, including Pakistan's limited financial and industrial capacity, competition from established and emerging defence suppliers such as China, India, and Türkiye, and the political and security volatility of several African partner states.

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Introduction

In the recent years, Pakistan's efforts to reassert its geostrategic relevance have increasingly centred on expanding defence diplomacy. Historically focused on immediate regional security imperatives, Islamabad has gradually broadened its military outreach to diversify strategic partnerships, expand defence markets, and reinforce its role within the Global South.¹ Within

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this strategic recalibration, Africa has emerged as a crucial theatre. The region's security challenges, characterised by persistent terrorism, insurgencies, maritime insecurity, and demand for affordable defence capabilities, have created opportunities for emerging suppliers like Pakistan alongside actors such as India, China, and Türkiye.²

This outreach was formally guided by the 'Look Africa' Policy Initiative in 2017 and the 'Engage Africa' framework in 2019, which explicitly linked military diplomacy with economic statecraft.³ Annual bilateral trade between Pakistan and Africa in 2022-23 merely stood at USD 4.4 billion, anchored by markets like Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, and Egypt.⁴ Its major exports to Africa include low-margin commodities such as rice, textiles, and pharmaceuticals, while imports include tea, coal, and energy products. Against this backdrop, defense exports serve not only to generate foreign currency but also to deepen institutional security ties with African states.⁵ Despite Pakistan's chronic foreign exchange shortfalls and trade deficits⁶, Islamabad is increasingly seeking to leverage its military-industrial base as a higher-margin export engine.

The core of this defense push is the export of cost-effective military platforms. In 2021, Nigeria inducted three co-developed JF-17 Thunder fighter jets in a landmark USD 184 million contract⁷, establishing Pakistan as a viable alternative to high-cost Western or politically conditional suppliers. This was complemented by sales of MFI-17 Super Mushshak trainers across Nigeria, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, embedding Pakistani technical crews within African air forces.⁸ Additionally, state-owned enterprises such as Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) and Global Industrial and Defence Solutions (GIDS) actively export munitions, armored vehicles, and Shahpar-II drones for regional counterinsurgency operations.⁹ By pairing platform sales with professional military education and maintenance support, Pakistan is converting defense manufacturing into durable strategic influence across the continent.

The Evolution of Pakistan's Defence Outreach in Africa

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cooperation. The bedrock of this engagement was established through United Nations Peacekeeping Operations (UNPKOs) from the 1960s onward, during which Islamabad deployed over 200,000 personnel across major African conflict theatres, including Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia.¹⁰ While operating under UN mandates, these deployments established foundational goodwill, operational familiarity with African security dynamics, and critical elite military networks.

By the 2000s, this multilateral footprint transitioned toward direct bilateral cooperation. Through the Pakistan Technical Assistance Programme (PTAP), Islamabad has offered

subsidised Professional Military Education (PME) at premier academies such as the National Defence University and the Command and Staff College. Drawing in its own counterinsurgency experience, the Pakistani military provided specialised training in counter-terrorism and counter-IED tactics to African officers, cultivating an influential cadre of commanders receptive to Pakistani doctrine. Furthermore, this institutional foundation facilitated a qualitative shift post-2010, formalised under the *Look Africa* and *Engage Africa* policy initiatives. It was driven by fiscal imperatives to commercialise state-owned enterprises such as the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC), Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF), and Global Industrial & Defence Solutions (GIDS). Hence, Islamabad has moved beyond ad-hoc arms sales toward an embedded security partnership with Africa.

Pakistan's Emerging Defence Footprint in Africa

Pakistan's transition toward an embedded security provider is best understood through its tailored operational engagements across West, East, and North Africa. In West Africa, Nigeria represents the most mature operationalisation of Islamabad's defence ecosystem. Beyond the acquisition of MFI-17 Super Mushshak basic trainers, the Nigerian Air Force (NAF) inducted three JF-17 Thunder Block II multirole fighters in 2021 to support counter-insurgency operations against Boko Haram.¹¹ Crucially, Nigeria is also supported by joint training, intelligence integration, and advanced surveillance systems, laying the groundwork for expanded procurement and technical cooperation.¹²

In East Africa, Islamabad's outreach leverages military capacity building and strategic maritime positioning along the Western Indian Ocean Region (WIOR). In Zimbabwe, Pakistan has expanded its defence cooperation through pilot training programmes centred on the Super Mushshak aircraft. To modernise its ageing training fleet, Zimbabwe procured 12 Super Mushshak trainer aircraft from PAC, strengthening its basic flight training capabilities.¹³ Meanwhile, in Somalia, Pakistan has actively supported the reconstruction of national security institutions. Following years of high-level defence dialogue and military training cooperation, Islamabad and Mogadishu formalised their security partnership by agreeing to strengthen bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation.¹⁴

In North Africa, Islamabad is expanding its footprint by engaging established regional military powers like Egypt and Libya. High-level bilateral defence meetings in Cairo established a joint Defence Cooperation Committee, focusing on counter-terrorism doctrine, urban warfare, and potential co-production partnerships between POF, Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT), and Egyptian defence enterprises.¹⁵ On 22 December 2025, Pakistan signed a \$4 billion defense deal with the Libyan National Army (LNA) to supply air, land, and naval military hardware, headlined by 16 JF-17 Thunder fighter jets and 12 Super Mushshak trainers¹⁶, scheduled for phased delivery over 2.5 years through mid-2028.¹⁷ Therefore, although these initiatives remain at a nascent stage, they still demonstrate that Pakistan's defence outreach is no longer confined to military education or equipment sales but increasingly incorporates industrial partnerships that can support longer-term strategic engagement.

Major Pakistani Defence Exports and Strategic Engagement in Africa

Country	Contract Signed Year	Equipment(s)	Estimated Value (in USD)	Status
Nigeria	2016	10 Super Mushshak trainer aircraft	\$9 million	Delivered (2017–18)
Nigeria	2018	3 JF-17 Thunder Block II fighters	\$25 million	Delivered (May 2021)
Zimbabwe	2024	12 MFI-17 Super Mushshak trainer aircraft	\$15 million	On order (delivery not confirmed)
Libya	2025	16 JF-17 Block III fighters, 12 Super Mushshak trainers, land and naval equipment	\$ 4.6 billion	Signed; phased delivery reportedly scheduled for 2026–2028
Sudan	2025	K-8 trainer aircraft, UAVs, air defence systems and other military equipment	\$1.5 billion	Suspended (As of April 2026)

Source: Compiled by author based on open-source data

Africa's defence procurement landscape has undergone a significant transformation,... arms supply networks.

importers, including Algeria and Egypt, reduced acquisitions amid budgetary pressures. Concurrently, sanctions, export controls, and geopolitical developments, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war, have disrupted Western and Russian supply chains, prompting African

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Opportunities and Challenges

In recent years, Africa's defence procurement landscape has undergone a significant transformation, driven by fiscal constraints, evolving security requirements, and disruptions in traditional arms supply networks. African arms imports have declined since 2020 as major states to diversify their sources of military procurement. The changing defence landscape has opened space for Pakistan to position themselves as alternative suppliers of combat aircraft, unmanned systems, and military training platforms. Although United Nations arms embargoes continue to constrain defence transactions in countries such as Sudan and Libya, procurement decisions have increasingly

prioritised operational requirements, delivery timelines, and value, expanding opportunities for Pakistan's defence engagement across the continent.

Pakistan's growing appeal in the African defence market lies in its ability to combine competitively priced military platforms with integrated defence cooperation. Systems such as the JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft and Super Mushshak trainer aircraft offer a lower-cost alternative to many Western platforms, while exports are typically accompanied by training, maintenance, technical assistance, and advisory support. This integrated model distinguishes Pakistan from many emerging defence exporters by combining equipment transfers with institutional capacity building and professional military education. Moreover, Pakistan's expanding defence-industrial collaboration with China has strengthened the competitiveness of its defence products through access to mature technologies, resilient production networks, and shorter delivery timelines. Therefore, these factors have enhanced Pakistan's attractiveness as a defence partner for African states seeking to modernise their armed forces while avoiding the political conditionalities often associated with Western suppliers.¹⁸

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For Pakistan, defence exports have also become an important component of its broader economic statecraft. Islamabad increasingly views defence exports as instruments for generating foreign exchange, strengthening the domestic defence-industrial base, and enhancing its strategic influence abroad. High-value defence agreements and ongoing negotiations with countries such as Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia reflect this broader objective of transforming defence manufacturing into a significant export sector. The convergence of expanding industrial capacity, sustained government support, and favourable external demand has reinforced Pakistan's strategy of employing defence exports not merely as instruments of military diplomacy but as tools of industrial development, economic resilience, and strategic influence. Africa has consequently emerged as an increasingly important destination where Pakistan seeks to consolidate long-term defence partnerships alongside its expanding political and economic engagement.

Despite the growing momentum in Pakistan's defence engagement with Africa, several structural constraints raise questions about the long-term sustainability of this strategy. The first challenge is the limited scale of Pakistan's defence-industrial base. PAC currently produces only 20–25 JF-17 Thunder aircraft annually.¹⁹ Although production capacity is expected to expand, a sharp increase in overseas demand could create delivery delays and strain maintenance and after-sales support. Pakistan also has limited experience in providing long-term lifecycle support, including upgrades, spare parts, and technical assistance. These capabilities are essential for sustaining enduring defence partnerships.²⁰

Domestic security and economic pressures further constrain Pakistan's defence diplomacy. Counterterrorism operations against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and insurgent violence in Balochistan continue to absorb military resources and policy attention, while potentially undermining Pakistan's international image. At the same time, persistent balance-of-payments crises, rising external debt²¹, and repeated reliance on IMF assistance have reduced fiscal space. These constraints limit Islamabad's ability to finance exports, provide export credit, or absorb the commercial risks associated with large defence contracts. As a result, domestic priorities may restrict Pakistan's ability to sustain long-term defence partnerships abroad.

External factors also limit Pakistan's strategic flexibility. Many of Pakistan's advanced platforms, including the JF-17 Thunder, have been co-developed with China. Exports of these platforms remain subject to Chinese technology-transfer arrangements and export approvals. Pakistan also lacks dedicated export financing mechanisms comparable to those of China or Türkiye. The reported suspension of the US\$1.5 billion Sudan defence package in 2026²², following the withdrawal of Saudi financial backing, illustrates this dependence on external financing. Similarly, proposed defence deals in politically sensitive states such as Libya remain vulnerable to international sanctions, United Nations embargoes, and shifting regional politics.

Moreover, competition presents another significant challenge in the African defence market. China accounted for more than 18 percent of African arms imports during 2020–24²³, supported by extensive defence financing, technology transfer, and industrial cooperation. Türkiye has rapidly expanded its presence through exports of armed drones, armoured vehicles, and local production partnerships. India has strengthened its defence partnerships through military training, capacity-building programmes, joint exercises, and defence-industrial cooperation. By comparison, Pakistan's defence portfolio remains concentrated in light combat aircraft, trainer aircraft, unmanned systems, and maintenance support. This niche offers opportunities in selected markets but limits Islamabad's ability to compete across the broader spectrum of African defence procurement. Its long-term success will therefore depend on expanding industrial capacity, strengthening lifecycle support, and reducing dependence on external technology and financing.

Conclusion

Pakistan's defence outreach in Africa reflects a broader shift in its foreign policy, where defence diplomacy has become an instrument of strategic influence, economic statecraft, and long-term security cooperation. The transition from military training to defence-industrial partnerships demonstrates Islamabad's effort to establish a more enduring presence on the continent. The success of this strategy, however, will depend on Pakistan's ability to sustain the momentum it has created. It must strengthen its defence-industrial capacity, expand lifecycle support for exported platforms, reduce dependence on external financing and technology partners, and remain responsive to Africa's evolving security requirements. Equally important, defence cooperation must continue to complement Pakistan's wider

political and economic engagement with the continent. Only then can Islamabad consolidate its position as a credible mid-tier security partner and translate defence diplomacy into lasting strategic influence.

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