

PATTERNS, MOTIVATORS, AND STRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES OF PAKISTAN'S DIGITAL DEPENDENCY ON CHINA (2020–2025)

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Abstract

The rapid digitalization of global politics has transformed technology into a critical determinant of national power, economic competitiveness, and strategic influence. Within this evolving environment, Pakistan has increasingly relied on China as its principal digital partner, particularly between 2020 and 2025. This study investigates the patterns, motivators, and strategic consequences of Pakistan's growing digital dependency on China by examining developments in telecommunications infrastructure, surveillance technologies, artificial intelligence, digital governance, and space cooperation under the broader framework of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Digital Silk Road Initiative. Employing Dependency Theory, Digital Sovereignty Theory, and Defensive Realism as analytical lenses, the research adopts a qualitative methodology based on peer-reviewed literature, policy reports, and case-study analysis. The findings reveal that Chinese firms, particularly Huawei and ZTE, have become deeply embedded within Pakistan's digital ecosystem, facilitating rapid technological modernization, improved connectivity, and enhanced governance capabilities. However, this dependency simultaneously generates significant concerns regarding cybersecurity vulnerabilities, data governance, technological lock-in, and diminishing digital sovereignty. The study further demonstrates that Pakistan's increasing integration into China's digital infrastructure contributes to broader geopolitical realignments, potentially affecting its relations with Western technological ecosystems. While Chinese technological cooperation offers substantial developmental benefits, long-term strategic resilience requires Pakistan to balance digital modernization with technological diversification, indigenous innovation, and stronger regulatory frameworks. The research concludes that sustainable digital development can only be achieved through policies that simultaneously promote technological advancement and strategic autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented transformation in the relationship between technology and international politics. Digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence,

telecommunications networks, cloud computing, and data governance have emerged as strategic assets that shape national power and influence global geopolitical competition. States increasingly

view digital capabilities not merely as economic tools but as instruments of security, governance, and international influence. Consequently, developing countries seeking rapid modernization often rely on technologically advanced partners to build critical digital infrastructure and accelerate economic development. Within this context, China has positioned itself as a leading provider of digital technologies through initiatives such as the Digital Silk Road, enabling it to expand its technological footprint across Asia, Africa, and other developing regions (Hillman, 2021). For Pakistan, digital cooperation with China has become a central component of national development strategy, particularly under the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which extends beyond physical infrastructure into telecommunications, digital governance, and emerging technologies.

Pakistan's pursuit of digital transformation has been driven by multiple structural challenges, including limited domestic technological capacity, insufficient research and development investment, and growing demands for digital public services. To address these challenges, Pakistan has increasingly partnered with Chinese technology companies, particularly Huawei and ZTE, for the development of telecommunications networks, smart city projects, surveillance systems, and digital governance platforms. Chinese investments have significantly contributed to expanding broadband connectivity, strengthening telecommunications infrastructure, and supporting the country's transition toward a digital economy (World Bank, 2022; International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2024). These developments have enhanced opportunities for e-governance, digital commerce, and technological innovation. Nevertheless, the growing dependence on external technological providers has also generated concerns regarding cybersecurity, data protection, and technological autonomy. Scholars increasingly argue that digital dependence can create asymmetrical relationships in which technologically weaker states become vulnerable to external influence and strategic constraints (UNCTAD, 2023).

The strategic significance of Pakistan's digital partnership with China extends beyond economic modernization and enters the realm of geopolitical competition. As global technological rivalry intensifies, particularly between China and Western powers, digital infrastructure choices increasingly carry strategic and diplomatic implications. Pakistan's integration into China's digital ecosystem raises important questions regarding digital sovereignty, cybersecurity resilience, and long-term strategic autonomy. While Chinese technological engagement offers significant developmental benefits, excessive dependence may limit Pakistan's flexibility in navigating an increasingly polarized technological environment. Against this backdrop, this study examines the patterns, causes, and strategic consequences of Pakistan's digital dependency on China between 2020 and 2025. By applying Dependency Theory, Digital Sovereignty Theory, and Defensive Realism, the research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how technological cooperation simultaneously serves as a vehicle for development and a source of emerging strategic vulnerabilities (Greitens, 2020; SIPRI, 2023).

The following research questions are addressed in this article:

1. What trends define Pakistan's reliance on China for its digital needs?
2. What causes this reliance to occur?
3. What are Pakistan's strategic consequences?

Theoretical Framework:

Dependency Theory provides an important analytical foundation for understanding Pakistan's growing reliance on Chinese digital technologies. Originally developed to explain unequal economic relationships between developed and developing countries, dependency theorists argue that peripheral states become structurally dependent upon core states for capital, technology, and expertise, thereby limiting their autonomy and decision-making capacity. In the digital era, this framework extends beyond traditional economic relations to encompass technological

infrastructure, data systems, and innovation ecosystems. Pakistan's extensive reliance on Chinese telecommunications equipment, surveillance technologies, and digital platforms reflects a contemporary form of technological dependency in which critical national infrastructure is increasingly linked to external providers. Such dependence may accelerate development in the short term but can simultaneously constrain policy flexibility and technological self-sufficiency in the long term (Hillman, 2021).

The concept of Digital Sovereignty further strengthens the analysis by focusing on a state's ability to exercise authority over its digital infrastructure, data governance systems, and cyberspace. Digital sovereignty encompasses control over data collection, storage, processing, cybersecurity standards, and technological regulations. As governments become increasingly dependent on foreign technologies, questions emerge regarding their ability to maintain independent oversight of critical digital systems. Pakistan's adoption of Chinese telecommunications networks, cloud systems, surveillance technologies, and digital governance platforms creates both opportunities and challenges for national digital sovereignty. While these technologies contribute to modernization and efficiency, they may also limit domestic control over data flows and regulatory standards, thereby raising concerns regarding privacy, cybersecurity, and national security (UNCTAD, 2023; Shahrukh et al., 2025).

Defensive Realism provides a complementary geopolitical perspective by examining how states seek security and strategic advantage within an anarchic international system. According to defensive realist scholars, states pursue policies that enhance their security while avoiding excessive dependence that could create future vulnerabilities. From this perspective, Pakistan's digital cooperation with China can be understood as a rational strategy aimed at strengthening national capabilities, modernizing infrastructure, and enhancing economic competitiveness. However, excessive reliance on a single external technology provider may generate strategic risks by

creating technological lock-in, increasing exposure to cybersecurity threats, and reducing policy autonomy. Defensive Realism therefore highlights the dual nature of Pakistan's digital partnership with China: while cooperation enhances national capabilities and supports development objectives, it may simultaneously produce long-term strategic dependencies that affect Pakistan's ability to navigate an increasingly competitive global technological environment (Greitens, 2020; SIPRI, 2023).

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the patterns, motivators, and strategic consequences of Pakistan's digital dependency on China between 2020 and 2025. The research relies primarily on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, policy reports, international organization publications, government documents, and contemporary scholarly analyses related to digital governance, cybersecurity, technological dependency, and China-Pakistan relations. A case-study approach is utilized to provide empirical depth through the examination of Huawei's role in Pakistan's telecommunications sector and the implementation of Chinese-supported Safe City surveillance projects. Data are analyzed through thematic content analysis, allowing the identification of recurring patterns of dependency, strategic motivations, and geopolitical implications. The theoretical perspectives of Dependency Theory, Digital Sovereignty, and Defensive Realism guide the interpretation of findings and facilitate a comprehensive assessment of both the developmental benefits and strategic risks associated with Pakistan's increasing reliance on Chinese digital technologies.

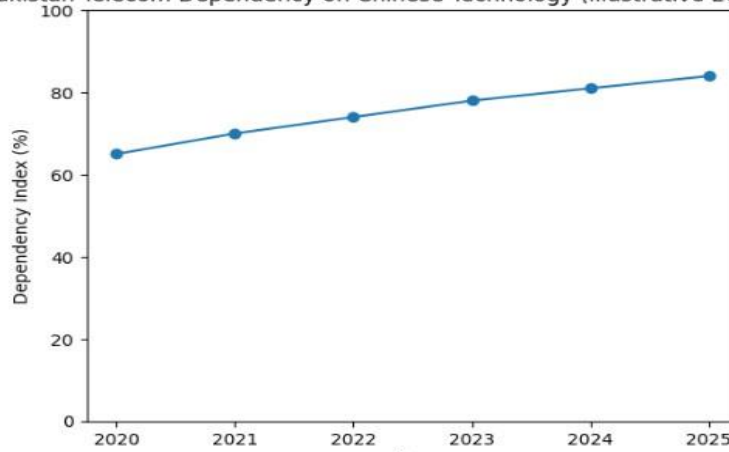
Patterns of Digital Dependency (2020-2025)

1.1 Telecommunication Infrastructure:

Pakistan's telecom sector is heavily dependent on Chinese firms like Huawei and ZTE, which provide vital technology including:

- Fiber-optic backbone networks
- 4G infrastructure
- 5G development trial projects.

Pakistan Telecom Dependency on Chinese Technology (Illustrative 2020-2025)



1.2 Digital Expansion under CPEC:

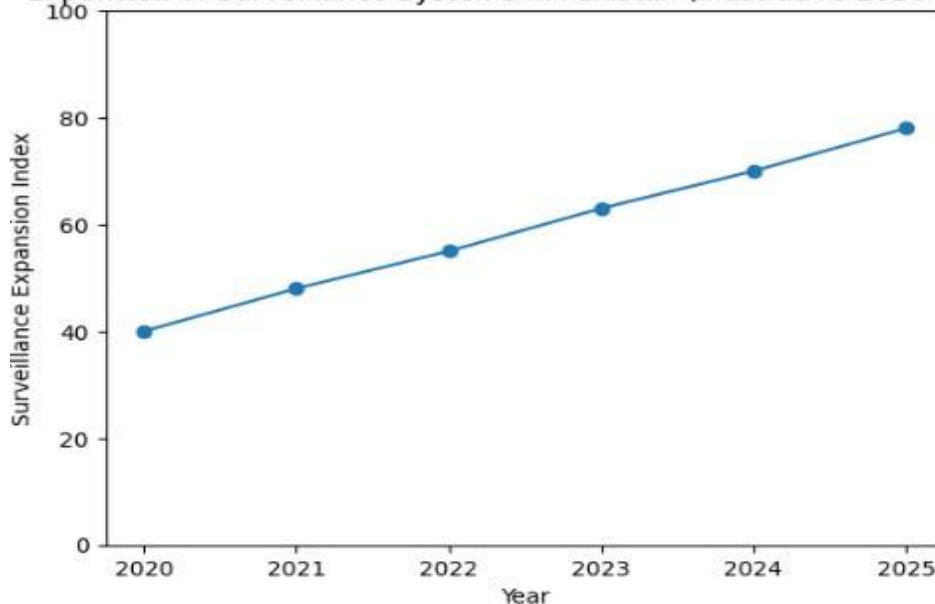
China's larger Digital Silk Road project is reflected in CPEC's digital growth (Hillman, J.E 2021) that includes:

- Cross-Border Fiber Network
- Smart City Development
- E-Governance Platforms

1.3 Surveillance and Governance Technologies:

Pakistan has embraced surveillance technology such as metropolitan command centers, centralized data monitoring, and facial recognition. These advancements show how Chinese technical paradigms have influenced governance strategies.

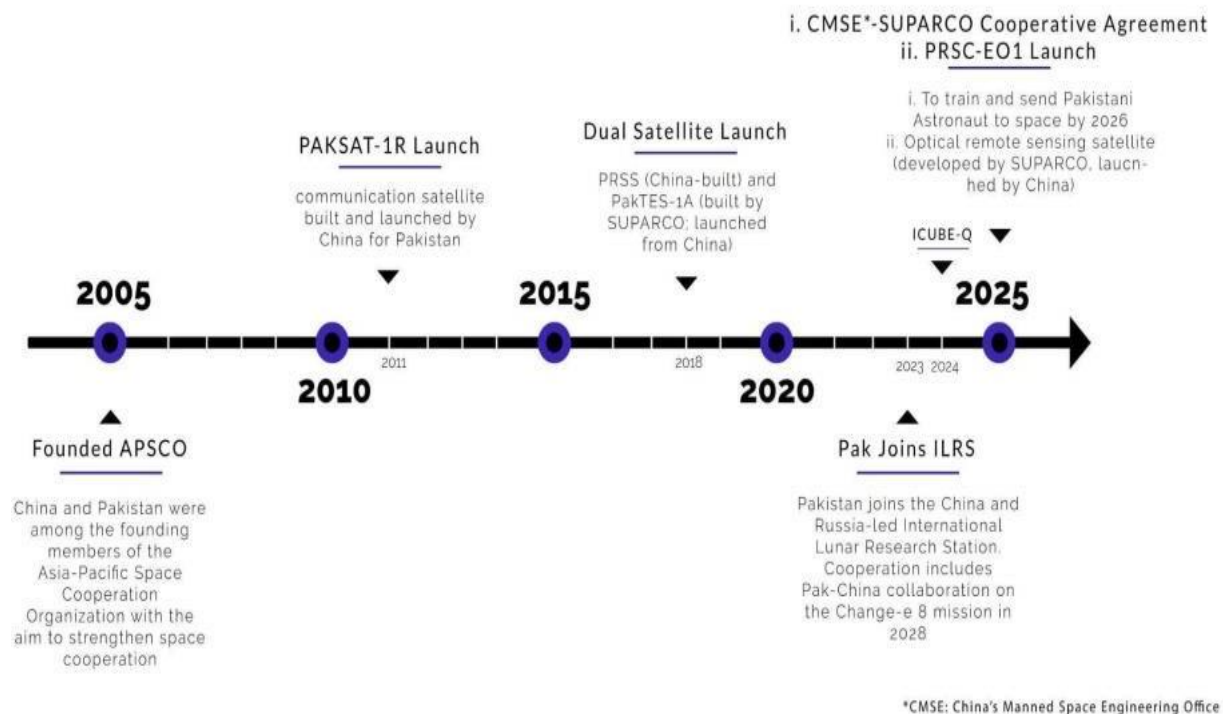
Expansion of Surveillance Systems in Pakistan (Illustrative 2020-2025)



1.4 Space and High-Tech Cooperation: Pakistan and the China National Space Administration (CNSA) have strengthened their relationship in a highly essential area as their cooperation has greatly grown into satellite launches and remote sensing technology. Although this collaboration gives Pakistan access to cutting-edge space capabilities that would be challenging to develop on its own, it also raises questions about growing reliance on China for technology. Pakistan's space infrastructure is

strengthened by the employment of common satellite systems and Earth observation technologies, but it also creates reliance in vital areas like environmental monitoring, communication, and surveillance. In this sense, the collaboration represents a dual reality: it advances Pakistan's technical development while also increasing its dependence on China in delicate strategic domains of national significance.

Timeline: China-Pakistan Cooperation in Outer Space



1.5 Sectorial Dependency:

Sector	Dependency Level (2025)	Key Chinese Partner Role
Telecommunications	84%	Huawei, ZTE infrastructure deployment
Surveillance Systems	78%	AI monitoring, Safe City systems
Artificial Intelligence	65%	Data analytics, smart governance tools
Space Technology	60%	Satellite collaboration with CNSA
Digital Governance	70%	E-governance platforms, cloud systems

.Motivators of Digital Dependency:**1.6 Economic Constraints:**

Pakistan's limited domestic technology base has left it reliant on outside partners for cutting-edge infrastructure and digital solutions. Chinese businesses are crucial in this situation because they provide quick-to-implement, affordable technology that address Pakistan's pressing demands. Because it would take a lot of time, money, and technological know-how to create such capabilities domestically, this dependence is mostly motivated by practical factors. Consequently, collaboration with China turns into a tactical shortcut that helps Pakistan close its technology gaps while continuing to advance in important areas.

1.7 Strategic Alignment:

Deeper cooperation in the field of technology has been made possible by Pakistan and China's decades-long military cooperation and strong political alignment. This long-standing strategic alliance has progressively moved beyond defense connections into fields including new technology, digital infrastructure, and telecommunications. It is simpler for both nations to collaborate on delicate technology initiatives since they already have strong levels of confidence and cooperation in terms of foreign policy and security. Their military and political ties therefore serve as stimulation for ongoing innovation exchange and cooperative development projects.

1.8 Technology Transfer and Skills Development:

By supporting important sectors including infrastructure development, artificial intelligence (AI) integration, and IT workforce training, China significantly contributes to the building of Pakistan's technology ecosystem. The majority of this support is provided through cooperative digital projects, training courses, and joint efforts that support the development of local capability. For instance, Chinese collaborations have helped Pakistani workers become more proficient in cutting-edge technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing, and cybersecurity.

They have also helped to expand digital infrastructure like data centers and communication networks. Furthermore, collaboration on AI-driven initiatives is indicative of an increasing endeavor to incorporate intelligent systems into industry and government. All things considered, this assistance not only quickens Pakistan's digital transition but also increases its dependence on Chinese technological know-how and infrastructure (SIPRI, 2023).

1.9 Digital Development Goals:

Pakistan's reliance on technologically sophisticated foreign partners has greatly risen as a result of its shift to a digital economy, which is being propelled by growing e-governance systems, IT-enabled exports, and expanded digital service delivery. According to recent research, Pakistan's expanding digital transformation agenda is directly related to increases in service exports and ICT adoption, which are now major forces behind economic modernization.

4. Studies:**1.10 Case Study 1: Huawei and Pakistan's Telecom Sector**

Huawei has emerged as a key player in the development of Pakistan's telecom infrastructure, contributing significantly to the growth and modernization of the nation's digital ecosystem. The business has made significant contributions to the development of fiber-optic backbone systems, the early testing and planning of 5G technologies, and the statewide rollout of 4G networks during the last 10 years. In Pakistan's urban and semi-urban areas, these efforts have greatly increased broadband penetration, network dependability, and general connectedness. Huawei's involvement has produced significant advantages in terms of development. Increased involvement in e-commerce, e-governance, and IT-enabled services has been made possible by improved digital connection, which has also helped Pakistan's digital economy flourish. By encouraging innovation, increasing market access, and bringing previously marginalized groups into the digital sphere, improved telecommunications infrastructure has also boosted economic growth.

According to recent research, emerging countries, especially those in South Asia, must construct this kind of infrastructure in order to meet their targets for digital transformation (World Bank, 2022; International Telecommunication Union, 2024). Despite these benefits, there are significant security and strategic issues with the growing reliance on Huawei. One major concern is the possibility of vendor lock-in, in which reliance on a single dominating provider hinders diversity because of high switching costs and technological incompatibilities. Pakistan may be less able to make flexible infrastructure decisions in the future as a result. Furthermore, discussions about cybersecurity, data governance, and national sovereignty have become more heated as a result of the incorporation of foreign-supplied technologies into vital communication networks. According to new research on 5G deployment in Pakistan, external suppliers have a major impact on infrastructure development routes, technology standards, and regulatory frameworks, which reinforces reliance patterns (Khan et al., 2023). Analytically speaking, this instance illustrates more general patterns seen in current studies on China's Digital Silk Road initiatives. Studies conducted after 2021 assert that although these partnerships speed up partner nations' digital growth, they also involve long-term technical reliance through the transfer of infrastructure, standards, and experience. Huawei's dominating position in Pakistan is an example of this dual dynamic, serving as both a source of structural dependency and a spike for fast technical growth.

1.11 Case Study 2: Safe City Projects in Pakistan

Chinese technology, especially in surveillance and digital monitoring systems, is a crucial component of urban security programs in major cities like Lahore and Islamabad.

Core Features:

- Artificial intelligence applications for facial recognition and automated surveillance
- Monitoring public areas continuously and in real time
- Using centralized command and

control centers to integrate law enforcement departments

Implications:

Pros:

- Enhanced public safety protocols
- Improved mechanisms for detecting and responding to crimes
- Enhanced cooperation between security organizations

Cons:

- Growing issues about data security and personal privacy
- Increased capacity for governmental monitoring
- Possible abuse of gathered information in the absence of strict regulatory monitoring

5.Strategic Consequences:

1.12 Erosion of Digital Sovereignty:

Concerns over Pakistan's progressive loss of digital sovereignty have been raised by the country's increasing reliance on Chinese digital technologies, especially in areas like infrastructure security and data governance. The ability of the state to completely regulate how data is handled, safeguarded, and used is limited when vital technologies such as data storage, processing systems, and network infrastructure are created and run by outside parties. Such restricts flexibility of establishing independent regulatory norms and restricts national sovereignty over sensitive information flows.

Additionally, on "digital colonialism" claims that this kind of reliance may cause the state to lose control over digital ecosystems, posing issues with citizen rights, governance, and sovereignty. States may find it difficult to autonomously control data flows or successfully address cybersecurity concerns when their fundamental infrastructure and data systems are dependent on outside parties.

1.13 Cybersecurity Vulnerabilities:

A state's vulnerability to security flaws is greatly increased when it depends on foreign-developed digital infrastructure, especially when it comes to

cyber-espionage and systemic risks. The state finds it more challenging to exert complete oversight and control when vital systems like data platforms, telecommunications networks, and surveillance technologies are constructed or maintained by outside parties. This makes it possible for important governmental, financial, or security-related data to be intercepted or accessed without authorization, which is known as cyber-espionage. However, because interruptions in one area of the infrastructure, whether from technological malfunctions, cyberattacks, or geopolitical tensions can have a domino impact on other sectors, this dependency increases systemic risks.

1.14 Geopolitical Realignment

Pakistan's geopolitical standing is changing as a result of its increasing alignment with China's digital ecosystem, especially in light of the escalating global struggle over technology. Pakistan's strategic orientation increasingly mirrors Beijing's technology area of influence as it adopts Chinese-built platforms, infrastructure, and standards. Pakistan's interactions with Western nations may become more difficult as a result of this change, particularly those that see China's digital growth through projects like the Digital Silk Road as a strategic risk.

From a perspective of analysis, nations compete not just for trade but also for regulations, data governance, and digital influence in technology, which has emerged as a key field of geopolitical conflict. Pakistan may gain from quick technical advancement and investment by joining China's digital networks, but it also runs the danger of less interoperability with Western systems and possible restrictions on access to alternative technologies or collaborations. According to recent study, nations that are members of rival digital ecosystems frequently have to make strategic trade-offs since aligning with one technology bloc might affect diplomatic ties, economic collaboration, and security alliances with other nations.

In this aspect, Pakistan's digital trajectory is reflective of a larger trend of geopolitical realignment, in which technical decisions are more linked to global power struggle and strategic alignment rather than being solely economic.

1.15 Economic Trade-offs:

Pakistan's digital and economic growth can be enhanced by relying on outside technology partners, but there are significant trade-offs. While international cooperation offers rapid access to cutting-edge infrastructure, knowledge, and capital, it might also suppress local innovation and decrease the nation's capacity to build its own technical skills. There are less chances and incentives to invest in domestic R&D and innovation ecosystems when local industries rely significantly on imported technologies.

3Discussion:

Pakistan's digital dependency on China reflects a broader transformation in the global political economy in which technology has become a central source of national power and international influence. Unlike traditional forms of economic dependence that focused primarily on trade and investment, digital dependency involves reliance on critical infrastructure, data systems, telecommunications networks, and governance technologies. The findings indicate that Chinese firms have successfully positioned themselves at the center of Pakistan's digital ecosystem, enabling rapid modernization while simultaneously creating structural linkages that extend beyond economic cooperation. This pattern closely aligns with the propositions of Dependency Theory, which suggests that technologically advanced states can shape the developmental trajectories of less technologically developed partners through the provision of essential infrastructure and expertise (Hillman, 2021).

The study further demonstrates that economic constraints remain one of the primary drivers of Pakistan's technological dependence. Limited domestic technological capabilities, insufficient investment in research and development, and urgent development needs have encouraged policymakers to prioritize affordable and readily available technological solutions. Chinese firms have been able to meet these requirements by providing cost-effective infrastructure, financing arrangements, and technical support. Consequently, Pakistan has achieved significant progress in broadband expansion, digital

governance, and smart city development. However, these gains have been accompanied by growing concerns regarding vendor lock-in and reduced technological diversification, highlighting the complex trade-offs associated with externally driven digital modernization (World Bank, 2022; ITU, 2024).

From the perspective of Digital Sovereignty, the findings reveal important challenges related to data governance and cybersecurity. As Chinese technologies become deeply embedded in critical sectors such as telecommunications, surveillance, and digital administration, concerns emerge regarding Pakistan's capacity to independently regulate data flows, maintain cybersecurity resilience, and exercise sovereign control over digital infrastructure. The increasing integration of foreign technologies into national governance systems raises important questions about transparency, privacy protection, and long-term strategic autonomy. These concerns are particularly relevant in an era where data has become a critical strategic resource, and control over digital ecosystems increasingly shapes national security outcomes (UNCTAD, 2023; Shahrukh et al., 2025).

Finally, the study highlights the geopolitical implications of Pakistan's integration into China's digital ecosystem. Technological cooperation has strengthened bilateral relations and contributed to Pakistan's developmental objectives, yet it has also positioned Pakistan more closely within China's technological sphere of influence. As competition between China and Western countries intensifies over digital standards, data governance, and emerging technologies, Pakistan may face increasing pressure to navigate competing technological blocs. Defensive Realism suggests that while cooperation with China enhances Pakistan's short-term capabilities, excessive dependence may reduce strategic flexibility in the future. Therefore, Pakistan's digital trajectory illustrates the broader challenge facing many developing countries: how to leverage external technological partnerships for development without compromising long-term strategic autonomy and national resilience (Greitens, 2020; SIPRI, 2023).

Policy Recommendations:

1. Diversify Technology Partnerships

Pakistan should actively pursue technological cooperation with a broader range of international partners, including countries in Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, and North America. Diversification would reduce dependence on a single provider, increase technological competition, and strengthen strategic flexibility. A multi-partner approach would also improve resilience against supply chain disruptions and geopolitical tensions.

2. Invest in Indigenous Innovation and Research Capacity

The government should significantly increase investment in domestic research and development, innovation hubs, university-industry collaboration, and technology startups. Building local technological capabilities is essential for reducing long-term dependency and creating sustainable digital growth. Incentives for domestic software development, semiconductor research, and artificial intelligence innovation should be prioritized.

3. Strengthen National Cybersecurity Frameworks

Pakistan must develop comprehensive cybersecurity strategies that include regular security audits, risk assessment mechanisms, incident response systems, and critical infrastructure protection measures. Independent cybersecurity oversight institutions should be established to monitor vulnerabilities associated with foreign-supplied technologies.

4. Develop Robust Data Protection and Privacy Laws

A comprehensive legal framework governing data protection, privacy rights, cross-border data transfers, and digital governance should be enacted and effectively enforced. Such legislation would strengthen public trust, enhance digital sovereignty, and ensure accountability among technology providers operating within Pakistan.

5. Promote Technology Transfer Requirements

Future technology agreements should include clear provisions for technology transfer, local manufacturing, skills development, and workforce training. These measures would enable Pakistan to gradually develop indigenous expertise while benefiting from international partnerships.

6. Adopt a Balanced Digital Diplomacy Strategy

Pakistan should maintain constructive relations with China while simultaneously engaging other technological powers and international organizations. A balanced digital diplomacy strategy would allow Pakistan to benefit from diverse sources of innovation, investment, and expertise while avoiding excessive alignment with any single technological bloc.

Conclusion:

Pakistan's growing digital dependency on China between 2020 and 2025 represents one of the most significant developments in the country's technological and strategic landscape. Chinese investments and technological cooperation have played a crucial role in expanding telecommunications infrastructure, supporting digital governance initiatives, enhancing surveillance capabilities, and accelerating the country's broader digital transformation agenda. These developments have generated tangible economic and developmental benefits, including improved connectivity, increased digital service delivery, and enhanced technological capacity. The findings demonstrate that cooperation with China has enabled Pakistan to overcome important structural limitations and pursue ambitious digital modernization objectives.

At the same time, the study highlights the strategic challenges associated with excessive technological dependence. Concerns regarding cybersecurity vulnerabilities, digital sovereignty, technological lock-in, and geopolitical realignment underscore the complex nature of contemporary digital partnerships. While Chinese support has facilitated rapid modernization, long-term national resilience requires Pakistan to balance developmental objectives with strategic autonomy. Achieving this balance will depend upon

diversifying technology partnerships, strengthening indigenous innovation, enhancing cybersecurity governance, and establishing robust data protection frameworks. Ultimately, Pakistan's experience illustrates the broader challenge confronting many developing states in the digital age: harnessing the benefits of external technological cooperation while preserving national sovereignty, policy independence, and long-term strategic flexibility.

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