



RCAS Report

Do Plans Help in a World Where Disorder is the New Norm? Interpreting China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030)

Saeed Shafqat

Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong
Shafqat Institute for Pakistan and Emerging Geopolitics (SIPEG), Pakistan

November 30, 2025

About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

Welcome to visit our website: <http://www.rcas.top>.

Address: 1507B, EASTCORE1, No.398, Kwun Tong, Kooloon, Hong Kong
Ph: 00852 2397 7886|Email: hkrcas@163.com|Web: www.rcas.top

Do Plans Help in a World Where Disorder is the New Norm?

Interpreting China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030)

October 2025 has been a month of intense great-power activity. Under President Trump's second administration, the United States finds itself paradoxically divided at home and assertive abroad. Domestically, the federal government has been shut down for over a month; internationally, Washington continues to project military power in the Caribbean Sea and the Middle East, while Trump's recent visit to ASEAN countries seeks to project a peacebuilder's image. This duality, instability within, activism abroad, has not gone unnoticed. Western media and scholars have begun to contrast this paradoxical American moment with China's apparent stability and strategic clarity. It is within this context that China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) assume particular significance.

The Western Gaze and the “China Question”

Recent Western analyses, prominently featured in *The Economist* and U.S. policy circles, focus obsessively on China's slowing economic growth, shrinking population, rising youth unemployment, and the increasing concentration of authority under President Xi Jinping. These analyses tend to converge on a familiar conclusion: that China's political system is brittle, dissent is suppressed, and that social discontent may one day rupture the CPC's hold on power.

This narrative of impending instability is deeply ingrained in Western strategic thought. It presumes that political centralization and societal control must eventually lead to collapse, as if the Chinese system is merely an autocracy waiting to fail. Yet this perspective often underestimates the CPC's institutional adaptability and the Chinese state's capacity for course correction.

There is, however, a more nuanced counter-perspective emerging among seasoned China-watchers. Jonathan Czin, a former CIA analyst, articulates this in his insightful article “China Against China” (*Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2025). Czin warns that much of Washington's confusion about Beijing stems from a profound misreading of how the Chinese system actually functions. “The painful irony,” he writes, “is that under Xi, China's opaque polity... has proved adept at frankly acknowledging many of its weaknesses and taking steps to remedy them, arguably even more adept than the supposedly supple and adaptive American system.”

Jonathan Czin's “China Against China” is similar to Wang Huning's “America Against America.” Wang wrote his book during his academic visit to the US in 1988,

predicting that the decline of the US will be because of “individualism, hedonism and democracy” that would create domestic unrest and internal strife. Wang’s book became popular again after the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, as people felt his warnings about America’s internal troubles had come true.

The comparison shows that both Wang Huning and Jonathan Czin use an analogous way of thinking, they focus on the other countries’ problems, stating that the greatest threats for a country are not external competitors but the internal divisions, values, and systems that weaken it from the inside. Wang argued that America’s decline came from its own social and moral weaknesses. In the same way, Czin suggests that China’s biggest risks come from its internal tensions and rigid system, not from Western pressure.

Czin’s observation captures another central paradox: China’s political opacity coexists with a technocratic pragmatism that enables mid-course corrections in ways that often elude Western democracies. Similarly, another renowned American China scholar Elizabeth Economy in a recent interview with Ravi Aggarwal of Foreign Policy Magazine, echoes the same concern, she says, ‘the steps Trump is taking at home can weaken the United States when it comes to dealing with China.’ (FP, November 2025). The latest Five-Year Plan illustrates this dynamic vividly.

The 15th Five-Year Plan: Blueprint for Adaptation and Continuity

The Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee, held in October 2025, unveiled the broad contours of China’s 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030). The session’s Communiqué offers not just a policy framework but a strategic vision linking short-, medium-, and long-term national goals. The 205 full members and 167 alternate members of the Central Committee, the CPC’s highest authority, crafted a document that continues the Party’s tradition of long-term planning amid global uncertainty. In my view, the Plan’s logic can be grouped into three broad components.

Integrated Planning and Policy Synergy

The Communiqué sets out an eight-point agenda to harmonize domestic priorities with international imperatives. It emphasizes:

- Balancing internal development and external engagement;
 - Ensuring both economic growth and national security;
 - Deepening structural reforms;
 - Promoting high-quality, innovation-driven growth;
 - Advancing social welfare and environmental protection;
 - Strengthening democracy, rule of law, and Party discipline;
 - Enhancing public communication and cultural work; and
- Modernizing national defense and ensuring political loyalty within the armed forces.

Unlike the electoral term driven policymaking common in Western democracies, this integrated planning process reflects a systems approach, linking governance, economy, society, and defense under a unified strategic vision. The Plan marks China's effort to structure domestic governance around strategic continuity and adaptive resilience. While it remains a top-down model, its operational success depends on coordination with provincial and local governments, suggesting that the CPC's command structure is less monolithic than usually portrayed.

Science, Technology, and Human Capital as Drivers of Growth

A defining feature of the new Plan is its emphasis on technological sovereignty and human resource development. The Communiqué calls for strengthening education, science, and technology “in a well-coordinated manner,” promoting breakthroughs in core technologies, and achieving leadership in key industrial sectors.

China is rapidly emerging as a global technology powerhouse, leading or competing at the top across nearly every major advanced field. For example, on the Critical and Emerging Technologies Index by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, China ranks second globally, nearly matching the United States in biotechnology and quantum technologies.

There are similar results by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) Critical Technology Tracker, which finds that China now leads in 37 of 44 critical and emerging technology fields, such as defense, space, robotics, energy, and advanced materials. In quantum technology alone, China holds 60% of global patents as of 2024, showing its strength in next-generation technologies. These are strategic investments. The total R&D expenditure exceeded US \$500 billion in 2024, up 8.3% year-on-year, and the input accounted for 2.68% of China's GDP.

Bloomberg reports that China already leads in or is globally competitive across 12 of 13 advanced technologies, from renewable energy to artificial intelligence and quantum computing. The Plan's emphasis on “original innovation” and “integration of technological and industrial innovation” underscores Beijing's recognition that future economic competitiveness and national resilience, depends on innovation ecosystems rather than export-led manufacturing alone. The Digital China Initiative, integrated within the Plan, seeks to consolidate data infrastructure, enhance digital governance, and leverage AI for public administration. It is targeting breakthroughs in critical sectors—semiconductors, AI, biotechnology, advanced materials, digital economy, aerospace, deep-sea technology. “Investing in people” is specifically emphasized: access to childcare, education, employment, medical care, elderly care, housing, support for the vulnerable. The Plan calls for stabilizing employment (especially among youth and rural migrant groups), increasing household income, and thereby stimulating effective consumption. The ambition is not merely economic

modernization but societal renewal: a digital, educated, and technologically confident China.

Xi Jinping's speech during the 15th FYP drafting emphasizes that China must "boost full integration between technological and industrial innovation" and "deliver substantial progress in original innovation and core technologies in key fields". Beijing's urgency is shaped by external constraints since U.S. President Donald Trump has assumed office. On several occasions, the U. S administrations have frequently justified export controls. For example, in a session at the U. S House of Representative one hundred eighteenth Congress held in December 2023 where the US senior officials clearly state that their "export controls are meaningful in slowing China's advanced technology acquisition. And as we stay on top and proactive about how we institute our controls to match our national security and foreign policy interests, we will keep them behind and we will not allow them to outpace U.S. performance". Washington has tightened restrictions on semiconductors, quantum computing, and AI chips ever since.

The Communiqué therefore calls for expanding domestic demand and "opening China wider... and pursuing high-quality Belt and Road cooperation," signaling a twin strategy of self-reliance and global outreach. Its recommendation to "accelerate agricultural and rural modernization," "narrow the rural-urban gap," and promote cultural and economic integration reflects the Party's view that modernization must be nationally cohesive. Regionally, the Plan's support for BRI aligns domestic upgrading with multilateral connectivity, trade, education, and cultural exchange.

Defense Modernization and Civil-Military Integration

The third major pillar of the Plan concerns national defense and military modernization. The CPC reaffirms its principle of absolute Party control over the military, ensuring that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) remains the armed wing of the state under Party control. The communique has been emphatic in upholding the centrality, unity of the party and supremacy of the Xi Jinping thought. Thus theoretically, ideologically and in practice adherence to party line and subordination to the CPC's Central Committee and Xi Jinping Thought is critical. It is interesting to note that the communique is emphatic in conveying continuity of thought, planning and policy by underscoring: "stay committed to Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the Theory of Three Represents, and the Scientific Outlook on Development, and fully implement Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

The Communiqué outlines a three-step modernization strategy: enhancing political loyalty, reforming command structures, and advancing the military through technological innovation and legal regulation. The focus on "mechanization, informatization, and intelligentization" marks a decisive shift toward smart warfare

capabilities. In effect, China seeks to synchronize its economic and military modernization, ensuring that technological advances translate into national security strength.

It is worth noting from the graph “Military Spending of Major Powers” (all figures taken from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)) that China’s defense spending has more than doubled over the past decade, rising from about US \$225 billion in 2015 to around US \$350 billion in 2023. This steady increase shows Beijing’s commitment to modernizing its military alongside its economic and technological rise.

While China still spends far less than the United States, whose defense budget is around US \$850 billion, the gap is gradually narrowing in terms of capability and efficiency. Compared to other powers like Russia, India, and Japan, China’s defense investment is now several times larger, firmly placing it as the second-largest military spender in the world.

Reading Between the Lines: The Logic of Chinese Planning

Three insights emerge from a close reading of the recommendations of the 15th Five-Year Plan’s communique.

Institutional Continuity with Adaptive Capacity. The CPC’s approach to planning demonstrates a deliberate linkage between policymaking and implementation. While the system appears hierarchical, it relies heavily on feedback from local administrations, allowing pragmatic adjustments. This embedded flexibility explains why China’s long-term plans have achieved measurable outcomes across decades, unlike the often politically volatile policymaking cycles in the Western democracies.

Human Capital and Innovation as the Core of National Strategy. The Plan recognizes that sustained power in the 21st century depends not merely on GDP growth but on the quality of human capital and technological competence. By prioritizing education, research, and skill formation, China aims to cultivate what Xi Jinping has called “new quality productive forces.” This strategic pivot from low-cost manufacturing to innovation-led growth marks a structural evolution in China’s development model.

Security as Development, Development as Security. The Chinese framework views economic vitality and citizen welfare as integral to national security. The modernization of the PLA is inseparable from social stability and prosperity. In this sense, the Chinese model fuses security and development, whereas Western paradigms often treat them as separate domains. This demonstrates how long-term strategy can coexist with adaptive governance, even under a centralized system.

The CPC's approach, grounded in iterative learning from previous plans, as the Brookings Institution report (Brookings Brief, October 18, 2025) incisively notes, the 15th Plan, showed continuity and consistency with the 13th & 14th Five-Year Plans. The 13th Plan (2016-2020) launched 'Made in China' with a primary focus on R&D spending on AI, robotics, high speed rail and semiconductors. Through 'Made in China', it identified AI as 'core technology', 'indispensable for future intelligent manufacturing and China's economic plans. While 14th Plan focused on innovation but also introduced the idea of 'dual circulation', whereby emphasizing domestic consumption along with high quality exports. Countering the U.S policy of Containment and restriction of technological exports, China has responded by devising policies of 'self-reliance'—by developing emerging technologies, AI, Green energy and semi-conductors. During 2025 on more than one occasions President Xi has reiterated, science, technology and innovation as the drivers of new productive forces and talent integration.

Reflections: What can Pakistan Learn?

As Western analysts and policymakers debate the implications of China's new planning cycle, it would be prudent for other countries, including Pakistan, to engage with it not as simply CPC's agenda tool but as a case study in planning, policy making, governance and resilience.

Artificial intelligence emerges as a major point of convergence between China's 15th Five-Year Plan and Pakistan's evolving digital strategy. Pakistan's National AI Policy 2025, released in July 2025, positions the country as an early adopter of frontier technologies among developing states. In an article for The Nation in August, the Chinese Consul General emphasized this alignment, noting: "I'm happy to note that our ironclad friend Pakistan has recently unveiled its National AI Policy 2025, which demonstrates remarkable consistency with China's Action Plan both in philosophy and practice, reflecting not only global trends in AI development but also the shared aspirations of developing countries in the digital age."

This convergence is significant because the 15th FYP calls for advancing the Digital China Initiative, as mentioned in this article earlier as well, strengthening data governance, and accelerating breakthroughs in semiconductors, AI, biotechnology, and advanced materials. Pakistan's policy framework, prioritizing AI governance, public-sector digitization, indigenous R&D, and skills development, mirrors China's emphasis on innovation ecosystems rather than hardware-driven growth alone. As CPEC enters its second phase, cooperation (here the two countries can put Joint Cooperation Committee to effective use) on AI can expand into agriculture, health diagnostics, smart cities, and vocational training, providing Pakistan with access to Chinese research networks and digital infrastructure. For Beijing, Pakistan serves as a model partner showcasing how AI-driven development can be diffused across the Global South through BRI and China's Digital Silk Road.

From my perspective, the takeaway is clear: planning isn't just for economics, it is for strategic positioning. Building internal capacity, investing in innovation, balancing development and security, and monitoring global shifts must be part of national policy. The 15th Five-Year Plan offers a case study, not to copy wholesale, but to adapt key lessons to local realities. Institutions such as Pakistan's Planning Commission, the Council of Common Interests (CCI), political parties, academia, and the media could draw valuable lessons from how China integrates planning, execution, and accountability. Under conditions, when the domestic and global order is in turbulence, having a structured plan allows alignment of government, industry, contending interest groups and society is imperative and in Pakistani case demands priority. China emphasizes "investing in people"—education, health, employment—alongside infrastructure.

For Pakistan, balancing hard and soft investment may boost consumption and resilience. In a world where technological competition and supply-chain shifts are rapidly reshaping advantage, investment in R&D, innovation ecosystems, and industry-academia linkages is key. Trade tariffs, protectionist policies and coercive economic deals reveal that reliance on external markets is risky; therefore, building strong domestic markets, consumption, rural-urban integration can stabilize growth. As global imperatives around climate increase, development plans must incorporate environmental, regional and social equity goals. As noted above, the Plan knits a symbiotic relationship between development and security. Stability, governance, institutional capability, defense, technology, these are interlinked. A planning system that neglects one faces risk of failure. The success of planning depends on coordination mechanisms, local, provincial and federal linkages, monitoring and course correction. Pakistan's experience indicates bottlenecks in execution are often the limiting factor.

In a world increasingly defined by disorder, economic volatility, geopolitical fragmentation, and technological disruption, China's persistence with long-term planning challenges the assumption that planning is obsolete. On the contrary, it reveals that structured foresight, when coupled with institutional flexibility, remains an indispensable tool for navigating uncertainty.

About Author



Prof. Saeed Shafqat is an Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, and Director of Shafqat Institute for Pakistan and Emerging Geopolitics (SIPEG), and Professor Emeritus at the Forman Christian College University, Pakistan. A leading South Asian voice on China's regional and global strategy, he has taught at international universities, including Columbia University and The College of Wooster, and has advised national and international policy institutions for over four decades. He is the recipient of France's Chevalier des Palmes Académiques and Pakistan's Tamgha-e-Imtiaz for his contributions to education. He has delivered keynote addresses at major international conferences on China's rise, most recently in Beijing, Shanghai, and Doha.

Currently, his research focus is on China's Rise and its implications and recent publications are: “*China's Rise: How Is It Impacting the Gulf, Iran, Pakistan and Beyond?*” Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies March 2017) and Saeed Shafqat & Saba Shahid, *China, Pakistan Economic Corridor: Demands, Dividends and Directions* (Lahore: Centre for Public Policy and Governance, 2018), and *How Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are Reshaping China's Soft Power?* (Co-authored with Ayesha Siddique) Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Vol. 44, No. 3, Spring 2021. ‘The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: *Building National Consensus, Curbing Terrorism, and Managing Regional Rivalries in Balochistan*’ Chapter published in Mojtaba Mahdavi and Tugrul Keskin (Ed) *Rethinking China, the Middle East and Asia in a ‘Multiplex World’* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2022) ‘*CPEC and changing dynamics of China–India relations*’, chapter published in *China and South Asia Changing Regional Dynamics, Development and Power Play* (Ed) Rajiv Ranjan and Guo Chenggang (London/New York: Routledge, 2022). Email: saeedshafqat@fccollege.edu.pk.