

The 1965 War that Marked India's Evolution in War Fighting

Introduction

Sixty years ago, the Indian Army had taken battle across its borders for the first time since Maharaja Ranjit Singh's invasion of Afghanistan in 1837. Since 1837 till its independence, India fought under the British Empire, furthering their interests.

Sep 2025, which marks sixty years of the 1965 Indo-Pak War, is, therefore, a significant moment for both remembrance and reflection. While we remember the sacrifices and testaments of courage of those who took part in the fierce battles surmounting all odds, it is also a time to reflect on the broader historical, strategic, and tactical contexts of that period and understand their application in the present as well as examine the evolution of India's war fighting since then.

The 1965 War stands as a defining chapter in India's military history marked by intense tank and infantry battles across the Western front. It also witnessed unprecedented aerial actions, which enabled India to make substantial territorial gains across Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), Punjab, and Rajasthan, along with inflicting significant losses. It was a test of endurance, strategy, and national will.

What Led to Pakistan's Miscalculation

In the two turbulent decades after partition, India had fought two wars—1947-48 conflict in J&K and the 1962 Chinese conflict. In addition, Indian troops had been employed at Junagadh and Hyderabad post partition, and in Goa, and Daman and Diu in 1961.¹

But in 1965, Pakistan felt India was weak as it had suffered a defeat against China in 1962, exposing grave deficiencies in India's defence preparedness, intelligence, and politico-military coordination. Further, in 1963, Pakistan gave Shaksgam Valley to China, cementing its relationship with Beijing, which tested its nuclear capabilities in the following year.²

Further, Pakistan derived strength from being a part of Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), as a key ally of the United States (US), which resulted in its military being better equipped. But Pakistan was being armed against the spread of communism and not India.

Economically, India was still constrained. The war with China had exposed India's economic weakness. Chronic food shortages and price rise persisted.³ Further, President of Pakistan Mohammad Ayub Khub won a rigged election against Fatima Jinnah in Jan 1965, after which his popularity was waning and war was a way of uniting the people and putting the army back at the centre stage. There was also a feeling that Pakistan needed to strike before the Indian Armed Forces were modernised and strengthened, based on the US aid post the 1962 conflict.

In May 1964, the then-Indian Prime Minister Nehru had passed away and Pakistan felt that India had a weak political leadership in the form of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. But as the former US Ambassador Galbraith said, "There is more iron in his soul than appears on the surface".⁴

With this in mind, Operation Desert Hawk was launched in the Rann of Kutch in Feb 1965. This tested the waters regarding the US response to Pakistan using weapons supplied by them against India. New Delhi responded by ordering a mobilisation called Operation Ablaze. It was during this period that India captured a strategic height of Point 13620 in Kargil. This height dominated Srinagar to Leh axis.

Finally, the Kutch Agreement was signed on 01 Jul, brokered by Prime Minister Harold Wilson of the United Kingdom. It forced India to vacate the areas captured in Kargil.⁵

On 05 Aug, Pakistan launched Operation Gibraltar, which was a disaster aimed to push the Kashmir question at the centre stage. It was based on a series of misjudgements, including that the Kashmiris were ready to rise against New Delhi. Western Command under Lieutenant General Harbaksh Singh, undoubtedly one of the finest military Commanders, launched operations in response to capture strategic areas in Kargil, Tithwal, and Haji Pir, and block the routes of infiltration. The enduring image of the Indian Flag being raised at Haji Pir by troops of 1 PARA led by Major (later Lieutenant General) Ranjit Singh Dayal remains firmly etched in India's military history.

The Contours of Conflict

Pakistan next decided to launch Operation Grand Slam with an aim to cross into India and capture Chhamb. In this battle, the Patton tanks outgunned the AMX 13

tanks of 20 Lancers but Major Bhaskar Roy in a copy book fashion deployed his armour to delay and degrade the offensive. Inexplicably, Pakistan paused replacing its Division Commander Major General Akthar Hussain Malik, who was an Ahmadiyya, with President Ayub's favourite—Major General Yahya Khan, who became infamous in 1971 as Pakistan's President.

In response, India opened a front across the International Border (IB). Operation Riddle by 11 Corps under Lieutenant General JS Dhillon saw an offensive launched towards Lahore by 15 Infantry Division on the Amritsar axis with 7 Infantry Division and 4 Mountain Division on the Burki axis. Dograi was occupied on 06 Sep by 3 JAT led by Lieutenant Colonel Desmond Hayde, along with a troop of Scinde Horse tanks. However, as there were no replenishments or reinforcements, they were pulled back. Days later in a show of unmatched determination and grit, Dograi was recaptured and the Ichhogil Canal was crossed once again.⁶

Pakistan, however, launched an offensive to cut off the Amritsar Sector by advancing through Khem Karan. India's defence stymied the offences and an imaginatively deployed 2 (Independent) Armoured Brigade was instrumental in creating a graveyard of Pakistani tanks. The battle of Assal Uttar was where Company Quartermaster Havildar Abdul Hamid of 4 Grenadiers was awarded the Param Vir Chakra and 3 CAVALRY earned the title of 'Patton Wreckers'.⁷

Operation Nepal, launched by the newly raised 1 Corps under Lieutenant General PO Dunn, aimed to divert Pakistani attention from the Akhnoor-Jammu Sector and draw its strategic reserves into the Shakargarh salient. 1 Corps thrust comprised of 1 Armoured Division under Major General Rajinder Singh Sparrow, 6 Mountain Division, 14 Infantry Division, and 26 Infantry Division.⁸

The Corps was opposed by Pakistan's 1 Corps commanded by Lieutenant General Bakhtiar Rana. Fierce battles were fought in general area Bhagowal–Badiana–Pasrur–Zafarwal.

By the end of war, 1 Armoured Division spearheaded by Hodsons Horse and Poona Horse had advanced approximately 40 kms into the enemy territory against heavy opposition. It decimated the might of the Pattons by destroying over 100 tanks in the epic battles at Phillora and Chawinda. For this, Lieutenant Colonel Adi Tarapore was awarded the Param Vir Chakra. Meanwhile, the Sherman's of 18

Cavalry of 26 Infantry Division were just short of Sialkot, and in Barmer Sector, 11 Infantry Division seized substantial territory.⁹

While the role of the armed forces is well documented, the National Cadet Corps put in their bit too. Their role varied, including passive air defence, rescue work, first aid and evacuation of casualties, firefighting, and maintenance of essential services.¹⁰

The Punjab Police, too, played a major role. Apart from the Punjab Armed Police guarding the border from Jammu to Abohar, as the Border Security Force was only set up after the conflict, they also thwarted an audacious para-commando attack by Pakistan with the intention of crippling three Indian Air Force's airbases in Punjab.

Important Lessons

Major General Gurcharn Singh Sandhu, a respected military historian, once stated, "In spite of the war fought in J&K after independence, Indian politicians persisted with the belief that any army was an anachronism and an unnecessary luxury which, if it could not be dispensed with, altogether must be downgraded".

Hence, the Indian Army suffered a humiliating defeat in 1962. Though the focus thereafter was on transformation and building capabilities, the orientation was towards the mountains, particularly the front with China. As a result, in 1965, Pakistan held an edge as far as equipment went.

There were many lessons learnt, particularly regarding jointness. 60 years later, some of these echoes still remain audible as far as India's security environment is concerned. State-sponsored cross-border terrorism with plausible deniability, twisting of the narrative, the salience of territorial disputes, and the role of external powers have persisted in different forms.

War, too, has transformed. In 1947-48 and 1962, it was the Indian Army that fought with the air force, restricting its role to air transportation operations, whereas in 1965, the role of the navy was limited and it was not allowed to cross the latitude of Porbander. 1971 saw a shift with all three services being employed, but the focus was on the Eastern Front, with the Western Front being seen as more of a holding action as far as India was concerned. 1999 bore a striking resemblance

to 1965 with regards to covert infiltration, but the fighting was restricted to a particular Sector with a term of reference of not crossing the Line of Control.

Recent responses to terrorist attacks, including Uri, Balakot, and Operation Sindoor, illustrate the continuity of challenges being faced by the country. The Galwan standoff, which was barbaric in conduct, once again highlighted the importance of India's unresolved borders. Today, with New Delhi's periphery in chaos, the increasing China-Pakistan collusivity cannot be ignored.

Hence, there is a need to examine the efficacy of Indian systems to deliver the wherewithal and technology to the armed forces. Further, war can no longer be segregated, it is multi domain and is being fought across land, sea, air, cyberspace, space and in the cognitive domain, shaping opinions. Everything is being weaponised from trade to technology, critical minerals, energy, natural resources, and digital space. This calls for an all-of-nation approach to security, which is imperative and must be India's unifying purpose.

Conclusion

The 1965 War was more than a military engagement. It represents a moment of national resolve where, despite shortcomings of military war waging material, the Indian troops fought admirably, displaying courage and determination backed by the will of the people and caused immense destruction of Pakistan's military capability.

In hindsight, the significance of the war lies not only in its immediate military outcomes but in its enduring lessons regarding India's defence and strategic posture. While the conflict brought to the fore the inadequate preparedness and jointness in the armed forces, it also led to restructuring and reforms in the military, as both India and Pakistan were sanctioned by the US. India took the Soviet route for equipping its armed forces, while Pakistan took the Chinese road.

The conflict also highlighted the necessity of building indigenous capabilities, which has been given a major boost by *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance) in recent years. But an important lesson post 1965 is that self-reliance cannot be viewed in isolation; it has to be coupled with defence cooperation, strategic alliances, and acquisition of advanced technologies and critical materials.

Six years after 1965, Indian Armed Forces achieved a spectacular victory in 1971. 60 years later, Operation Sindoor has once again demonstrated how India's response to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism has evolved using new technologies, resulting in more expansive effects.

But as artificial intelligence, unmanned systems, precision strike capabilities, and networked operations are redefining and shaping the geometry of conflict and the country is confronted by both traditional and non-traditional security challenges; adaptability and preparedness are indispensable.

Pakistan is once again drawing confidence from its external relations; it has an enduring military and economic relationship with China, has recently signed a mutual defence agreement with Saudi Arabia, and General Asim Munir has had a lunch with US President Donald Trump. All these activities may give it the confidence for escalating tensions in the region

The fact remains that the strength of Indian Armed Forces lies not only in its rich and enviable history but in the foresight undertaken with regard to structures, doctrines, induction of advanced technologies, war waging capacity, and capabilities, in the form of weapon platforms, military preparedness, and training.

Endnotes

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² Manjari Chatterjee Miller, "How China, Pakistan Forged Close Ties", *Hindustan Times*, 02 Oct 2022, accessed 12 Sep 2026, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/how-china-pakistan-forged-close-ties-101664721640366.html>

³ Team Livemint, "A Short History of Indian Economy 1947-2019: Tryst with Destiny & Other Stories", *Livemint*, 14 Aug 2019, accessed 12 Sep 2026, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/a-short-history-of-indian-economy-1947-2019-tryst-with-destiny-other-stories-1565801528109.html>

⁴ Internet Archive, "The Indo Pakistani Conflict : Russell Brines", *Archive*, 2015, accessed 13 Sep 2026, <https://archive.org/details/TheIndoPakistaniConflict>

⁵ SN Prasad and U P Thapaliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965*, (New Delhi: Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, Government of India), 2011.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Amarinder Singh and Tajindar Shergill, *The Monsoon War : Young Officers Reminisce : 1965 India-Pakistan War*, (New Delhi, India: Lustre Press), Roli Books, 2015.

⁹ Prasad and Thapaliyal, *The India-Pakistan War*

¹⁰ Team ET, "The Role of the NCC in 1965 Indo-Pak War", *Economic Times*, 30 Aug 2015, accessed 14 Sep 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/the-role-of-the-ncc-in-1965-indo-pak-war/articleshow/48732635.cms>

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