

Role of the Indian Air Force in 1965 War: An Analytical Review

Introduction

The Indo-Pak war of 1965 was a crucial test of India's military resilience after the setback of the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict. Pakistan, under the assumption that India was still recovering from the Himalayan debacle, launched Operation Gibraltar on 05 Aug 1965. The plan, conceived by Major General Akhtar Hussain Malik, aimed to infiltrate guerrillas into Jammu and Kashmir to incite an uprising against Indian control.¹ The operation, however, quickly collapsed due to the lack of local support and swift Indian countermeasures.

India retaliated with a bold move on 28 Aug 1965, capturing the strategically significant Haji Pir Pass, thereby, undermining Pakistan's plan. In response, Pakistan launched Operation Grand Slam in the Chhamb Sector with the objective of capturing Akhnour Bridge. Its success would have severed Indian supply lines to South-Western Kashmir regions, including Rajouri, Poonch, Jhangar, and Naushera. Under heavy Pakistani shelling, Indian artillery support broke down, prompting the 191 Infantry Brigade to request for air support urgently.

It was at this juncture that the role of the Indian Air Force (IAF) came decisively into play. After assessing the gravity of the situation, General J N Chaudhuri, the then-Chief Of The Army Staff, and Air Marshal Arjan Singh, the then-Chief of the Air Staff (CAS), jointly recommended air strikes to prevent the imminent collapse of Indian defences. The then-Defence Minister YB Chavan, recognising the urgency, promptly authorised the use of air power at 1640 hours on 01 Sep 1965.² He further granted the army permission to launch counterattacks across the international border, if necessary.

The IAF went into the war with aircraft like Gnats, Hunters, Mystères, Vampires, Canberras, MiG-21s, and Toofanis. In comparison, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had more modern planes, including F-104 Starfighters, F-86 Sabres armed with Sidewinder missiles, T-37Bs, RT-33s, T-33As, and RB-57, as well as B-57 Canberras.³ This gave Pakistan a technological edge, but the IAF's performance in combat proved to be a key factor in balancing the odds.

Operational Challenges and Assessment

During the Indo-Pak War of 1965, the IAF played a crucial role by providing close air support, conducting fighter sweeps and interceptions, carrying out interdiction missions, and executing counter-air operations. In the initial stages of the conflict, the IAF successfully halted the Pakistani advance in the Chhamb sector and prevented Pakistani armour from breaking through in the Khem Karan sector. The IAF not only inflicted significant damage on Pakistani tanks, guns, equipment, and installations but also dealt a severe blow to their morale. Considering that the IAF operated with outdated aircraft over a vast area, from distant airfields, and without prior warning, its overall performance can be regarded as nearly satisfactory.

Although the IAF's involvement altered the course of the war, its performance revealed structural shortcomings. At the leadership level, the air force appeared unprepared for pre-emptive strikes by the PAF. Air Marshal M Asghar Khan (Retd) later remarked that India, despite escalating the conflict in the West, failed to neutralise Pakistan's key assets such as airfields and radar sites, thereby, allowing the PAF to seize the initiative.⁴

The early days of combat laid bare these vulnerabilities. PAF's Sabres struck Indian ground forces and soon extended their attacks to IAF bases and radars. The raid on Pathankot starkly exposed India's lack of preparedness: aircraft were neither dispersed nor camouflaged, and many were caught vulnerable during refuelling. The attack on Kalaikunda revealed similar flaws, where heavy losses were incurred due to the absence of dispersal facilities.

On paper, the IAF enjoyed numerical superiority with 466 combat aircraft against the PAF's 203. Yet, with 176 aircraft held back in the East against a possible Chinese intervention, only 290 were available in the Western Theatre.⁵ Six Squadron of Vampires and three of Toofanis were outdated and unfit to use against Pakistan. Adding to this, Hunters and Gnats were incapable of carrying missiles.⁶ This diluted India's advantage and reduced the scope of the IAF operations. While Pakistan displayed flexibility by swiftly transferring twelve Sabres and six T-33s from Mauripur to Sargodha for a well-planned pre-emptive posture, India's decision to withhold nearly half its fleet reflected cautious political directives. Chavan's diary dated 07 Sep 1965,

records, “I told CAS to hold his hand in East Pakistan. We do not want any wasteful escalation there”.⁷ For instance, after a few sorties against East Pakistan on 07 Sep, a political embargo halted further IAF action in the Eastern theatre—even though the PAF continued striking Indian positions there on 07 Sep, 10 Sep, and 14 Sep. In the Western theatre as well, air operations required the Defence Minister’s clearance, with the attack on Peshawar sanctioned only on 12 Sep.⁸

The war also highlighted the absence of joint operational planning. Although the Rann of Kutch incident and the subsequent implementation of Operation Gibraltar occurred, Indian defence planners had not prepared any inter-service contingency plan. Air operations were initially confined to the Chhamb Sector (02–05 Sep 1965), and when the army initiated its major offensive across the international border in the Lahore-Kasur sector on 06 Sep, not a single sortie was carried out in its support.⁹ As a result, the benefits of surprise, timing, and initiative were not used properly.

Operational inefficiencies were compounded by intelligence failures. The intelligence was unreliable, and at times, no targets were found even after reaching the assigned area. The IAF repeatedly struck airfields such as Chak Jhumra, Multan, Nawabshah, Kohat, Chota Sargodha, Wegowal, Bhagtenwala, and Lal Munirhat—many of which were either unused or irrelevant to the PAF’s operational posture. Such misdirected targeting underscored the lack of accurate intelligence and effective planning.

By the end of hostilities, the IAF had flown 3,937 sorties, including 1,400 in direct ground support. Yet, as Royal Air Force officer Tony Mason observed, “In the war between India and Pakistan in 1965, air superiority was never contested. Air power was largely limited to ground support, and the air war came to an early halt due to shortages of spares and weapons caused by the international embargo.”¹⁰

The assessment of the IAF’s role remains a subject of contention. Some defence analysts argue that the 1965 war offered only negative lessons, essentially demonstrating what not to do in future conflicts—ranging from lack of joint planning to political overreach in operational matters.¹¹ However, this interpretation risks being overly pessimistic. Official history records that after initial reverses, the IAF field units recovered ground through the initiative, courage, and skill of their officers and men.

The performance of the aircrew often went beyond expectations, reflecting individual gallantry, even when strategic direction was deficient. Pushpinder Singh perhaps captured this duality best in his study of the war, *Fizaya—the Psyche of the PAF*, when he remarked, “Indian pilots were keen in 1965. The strategic planning of the air war, however, sadly deficient.” Taking an overall view of war, it appears that neither the IAF nor the PAF won a decisive victory.¹²

Conclusion

The IAF’s role in 1965 was a mix of valour and vulnerability. Four officers of the IAF were awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, while 43 others received the Vir Chakra for their acts of gallantry during the war.¹³ While individual pilots and squadrons performed admirably, systemic shortcomings in planning, intelligence, and political-military coordination limited the air force’s effectiveness. The war, therefore, was less a story of air superiority and more a lesson in the indispensable need for jointness, strategic foresight, and operational autonomy—principles that continue to guide India’s military doctrine today.

Endnotes

¹ PVS Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra, *The India-Pakistan Air War of 1965* (New Delhi, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2005), p. 64

² SN Prasad and UP Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965 A History* (New Delhi, Natraj Publication, 2011), p. 241

³ Hari Ram Gupta, *India Pakistan War 1965 Vol 1* (Delhi, Hariyana Prakashan, 1967), pp.194-195

⁴ Wing Commander DP Sabharwal, *Cobras-NO3 Squadron IAF* (Chandigarh, 2002), pp. 33-37

⁵ Air Vice Marshal AK Tiwary, VSM, *Indian Air Force in Wars*, (New Delhi, Lancer Publishers & Distributors, 2012), p. 119

⁶ Prasad and Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965*, p. 240

⁷ *Ibid*, p 250

⁸ Simon Watson, *Kalaikunda Air Base-It's History*, (VayuVI/2001), pp. 64-65

⁹ Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra, *The India-Pakistan Air War of 1965*, p. 95

¹⁰ Tiwary, *Indian Air Force in Wars*, p. 116

¹¹ Chakravorty, *History of Indo-Pakistan War 1965* (New Delhi, History Division, Ministry Defence, Government of India, 1992), p. 273

¹² Tiwary, *Indian Air Force in Wars*, p. 155

¹³ SN Prasad & UP Thapliyal, *The India-Pakistan War of 1965 A History* (New Delhi, Natraj Publication, 2011), pp 369-370

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