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# OPERATIONAL APPROACH AND PSYCHE OF PAKISTAN AIR FORCE

DIPTENDU CHOUDHURY

*The Pakistan Fiza'Ya (Pakistan Air Force) plays a role in the psyche of its nation unmatched by any Air Force in the world except that by the Israeli Air Force. The PAF's motto, loosely translated from Persian is 'Lord of All I Survey'. It calls itself 'The Pride of the Nation', and is exactly that.*

– Pushpinder Singh<sup>1</sup>

The Pakistan Air Force (PAF), the “pride possession of Pakistan”,<sup>2</sup> has since its birth been inexorably entwined with the Indian Air Force (IAF). Twenty days after the imperial legacy of the decision on partition of the subcontinent, the Armed Forces Reconstitution Committee (AFRC) was set up under the chair of AVM Perry Keene, for the PAF “to be created as such on the 15th August 1947.”<sup>3</sup> The distribution of the eight fighter and two transport squadrons of the IAF between the two dominions, became a contentious

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Air Marshal **Diptendu Choudhury** AVSM VM VSM (Retd) was the former Commandant of the National Defence College, New Delhi.

1. Pushpinder Singh, Ravi Rikhye and Peter Steinmann, *Fiza'Ya: Psyche of the Pakistan Air Force* (New Delhi: The Society of Aerospace Studies, 1991).
2. Syed Shabbir Hussain and Sqn Ldr M Tariq Qureshi, *History of Pakistan Air Force, 1947-1982* (Karachi: PAF Press Masroor, 1982), p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

issue. The Indian side insisted on the 80:20 ratio, eight squadrons to India and two squadrons to Pakistan, based on the manpower composition of the basis of partition. The AFRC Chairman, on the other hand, opined, that in view of the operational requirements of 'watch and ward' duties in the tribal areas of the North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan should be allotted five squadrons. With both sides entrenched on their stands, Lord Mountbatten intervened asking the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the IAF to look into the feasibility of raising an additional fighter squadrons from the reserves. On his confirmation of the feasibility, the final distribution agreed was of seven fighter and one transport squadrons to India, and two fighter and one transport squadrons to Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> The overarching vision of the Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah was to serve as a beacon light for the PAF, when in his address at the Flying Training School at Risalpur, he said, "There is no doubt that any country without a strong Air Force is at the mercy of any aggressor. Pakistan must build up her Air Force as quickly as possible. It must be an efficient Air Force, second to none and must take its place with the Army and the Navy in securing Pakistan's defence."<sup>5</sup>

### LIVING IN THE ARMY'S SHADOW

Despite his words, the British leadership came in the way of a three Services concept which was "opted and enforced with variable results. Thus, were sown the seeds for lack of joint inter-Service planning from almost the start."<sup>6</sup> The division of the armed forces, set the stage for the selection of six heads of the Services. Both Prime Ministers (PMs) were happy to let Lord Mountbatten select them, except for the choice of Air Mshl Sir Thomas Elmhirst, who was the only exception having been specially chosen by Pandit Nehru—a choice which was to be fortuitous for the IAF as Air Mshl Elmhirst's first mandate with the PM was that "*the Indian Air Force would be an independent fighting service.*"<sup>7</sup> The IAF which was from its birth an independent Service due to the enactment of Clause 4 of the Annual

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4. Air Mshl Bharat Kumar, *An Incredible War* (Second Edition) (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2014), pp. 15-21.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Army and Air Force Bill<sup>8</sup> in 1932, was, therefore, able to continue as an independent service. The PAF was not so lucky, and due to the relatively low seniority profile of its original officers, was destined to remain under the shadow of the Pakistan Army.

The first PAF C-in-C was AVM Perry Keene, and the seniormost Pakistani officer was Wg Cdr MK Janjua, who had been a part of the AFRC, and went on to become the senior officer-in-charge administration as a Group Captain on August 15, 1947. The fifth PAF Chief and the first Pakistani officer to assume the mantle, Air Mshl Muhammad Asghar Khan, was a Wing Commander when the PAF was formed. The less seniority of the PAF's original officers defined its relations with the Pakistan Army, which till today plays a dominant role, continuing to keep the PAF out of the loop in planning and decision-making on matters of national security. In Pakistan, the military has the final say in all matters of national security, and all security related decisions for all services rest with the Chief of the Army Staff (COAS).<sup>9</sup> Even today, PAF policy decisions are also determined by the COAS, with inputs from the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS). Therefore, the final decision-maker for air power policy is not the CAS, but the COAS.<sup>10</sup>

Post-Independence and after the first round of war in Kashmir, Pakistan sought to strengthen its military and especially its Air Force. Underpinned by the Cold War, the US geopolitics was driven by prevention of the perceived Communist expansionism in the region from the USSR and China. In May 1954, Pakistan signed a Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement with the US which provided significant economic and military aid, in return for the use of PAF bases for launching reconnaissance flights into the Soviet Union. Based on the Communist threat, the PAF's expansion plan was prepared by Gp Capt Asghar Khan, Gp Capt Nur Khan and Wg Cdr A. Qadir in March 1954. The plan called for a 768 aircraft and 44 squadron

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8. "CLAUSE 4. - (Relations between Royal Air Force and Indian Air Force, and attachment of personnel.)," April 3, 1933, at <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1933/apr/03/clause-4-relations-between-royal-air>. Accessed on May 17, 2021.

9. Jonah Blank, Richard S. Girven, Arzan Tarapore, Julia A. Thompson, Arthur Chan, and Vector Check, *Prospects of US and Pakistan Air Power Engagement* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2018), p. 6.

10. Shuja Nawaz, *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

strong Air Force, comprising ten day-fighter squadrons, five night-fighter squadrons, six bomber squadron and one reconnaissance squadron, twelve fighter-bomber squadrons, six tactical light bomber squadrons, two twin-engine and one four-engine transport squadron and two maritime squadrons, over ten years from 1954-1964.<sup>11</sup>

By mid-1957, the US agreed to provide six fighter-bomber squadrons, one day-interceptor squadron, one light bomber squadron, one transport squadron, one jet conversion school, one air rescue flight and one recce flight, one flying training academy, radars and navigational aids, and various other maintenance, logistics and administrative aid.<sup>12</sup> In Pakistan's 'aid-era' between 1954 and 1965, the US provided military assistance worth \$619 million, and cash or commercial basis purchases worth \$55 million.<sup>13</sup> Air power expansion began in earnest almost immediately, with the first lot of the 120 F-86F Sabre fighters, followed by 26 B-57B Canberra bombers in 1959, and 12 F-104A in 1962. Though technologically these were the best aircraft available, their size always remained an area of serious concern to the PAF. This not only shaped its operational philosophy, but also became the overarching reason for it to 'preserve' its strength in its wars.

### **PAF ROLE: PERCEPTIONS AND DIFFERENCES**

The consequences of being in the Army's shadow impacted the PAF's operational role. The second PAF C-in-C AVM Atcherley, was of the firm opinion that the PAF should first take on the enemy Air Force, then try to isolate the battlefield, and after that give direct support to the ground forces.<sup>14</sup> The seeds of discord were sown when Gen Sir Douglas Gracey, the C-in-C of the Pakistan Army, in a paper on "First Lessons From Korea", wrote: "The small Pakistan Air Force should be trained primarily for tactical support of the Pakistan Army and Navy, and be equipped to carry out this task with suitable aircraft."<sup>15</sup> Atcherley, wrote back: "I am not inferring that you don't know your job, I'm saying that you don't know mine. Air must be left

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11. Hussain and Qureshi, n. 2, pp. 95-96.

12. Ibid., p. 100.

13. Gp Capt Khalid Iqbal, Pakistan Air Force, "The United States-Pakistan Security Relationship," Research Report No. AU-AWC-86-115, Air War College, March 1986, at <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a177769.pdf>. Accessed on May 17, 2021.

14. Ibid., p. 120.

15. Ibid., pp. 115-116.

to the airman; even Monty preaches that." And with regard to joint planning, he continued: "I feel we are only paying lip-service to Joint Service Planning, when you issue a paper on air strategy without even a formal reference to your colleagues."<sup>16</sup> This Army dominant approach continued through the 1965 war under President Ayub Khan, who according to Air Mshl Asghar Khan, "understood little of air operations" and "preferred to see the Air Force as an arm of the Army, an airborne form of artillery whose role should be to clear the way for the infantry and armour."<sup>17</sup>

Asghar Khan, groomed by the independent minded initial Royal Pakistan Air Force (RPAF) British C-in-C, was very clear on the role of the PAF. He emphasised that its main role was the air battle from which it could not be diverted, and till achievement of its primary aim, could only provide limited close support at any time, "*which should be treated by the Army as bonus*". Gen Muhammad Musa Khan, the Pakistan Army C-in-C countered that consequently in the training and operational planning of the Army, it was assumed that air support might not be forthcoming, to the extent that "the Army's main counter-offensive was planned without air support."<sup>18</sup> He also goes on to state that after Air Mshl Nur Khan took over, he "altered Asghar's concept, and rightly decided that ground support was also an important function which the PAF could and should take on besides its main commitment."<sup>19</sup>

The differences in the perception of the role of the PAF and its divide with the Army showed itself in the 1965 War. Musa is scathingly critical of Asghar Khan, who he claims shocked the Army by contacting his IAF counterpart, in trying to keep the PAF out of the conflict in the Rann of Kutch. He writes that even the Supreme Commander was unaware of Asghar's actions while the Defence Secretary was,<sup>20</sup> indicating the divide in the senior leadership. Sajjad Haider, in defence of the action by Asghar Khan, writes: "Had the Indians committed their Air Force in support

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16. Ibid., p. 117.

17. Air Mshl M Asghar Khan (Retd), *The First Round: Indo-Pakistan War 1965* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1979), pp. 4-5.

18. Gen Muhammad Musa (Retd), *My Version: India Pakistan War 1965* (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House, 1983), pp. 74-78.

19. Ibid., p. 79.

20. Musa, n. 18, pp. 74-79.

of their Army, our troops would have been attacked from the air and destroyed with impunity, bringing our land operation to a halt. The PAF would have been relatively ineffective as the battle area was too far from Mauripur, the only PAF base in the south.”<sup>21</sup> In Operation Gibraltar, the second phase of the war involving infiltration in Kashmir, Asghar Khan was kept out of the loop by the General Headquarters (GHQ).<sup>22</sup> The PAF history also brings out that its government wanted to keep it out of war operations, and that in spite of desperate calls for air support in Poonch, it was not used.<sup>23</sup> When the third phase of the war finally kicked in with Operation Grand Slam, from the PAF’s perspective, it was to have started with Asghar Khan’s *coup de grace*—preemptive strikes.

Three facts emerge clearly: the *fait accompli* acceptance of the air battle as the main role of the PAF; the inter-service divide in the senior military leadership; and the absence of joint operational planning. It illustrates that gaining air superiority was considered fundamental by the PAF, and that close support to the Pakistan Army would be low key. The leaderships of the PAF and Pakistan Army were divided, taking decisions and acting independently of each other. And, finally, the absence of joint planning is underscored by the fact that the Pakistan Army plans neither included PAF participation, nor was any role assigned to it. This trend was to continue even in Kargil, in 1999, where, according to Nasim Zehra, the civilian leadership, and the air and naval chiefs were briefed on Operation Koh Paima for the first time on May 16, 1999,<sup>24</sup> after the operation, planned secretly by the clique of four generals, had already begun. It was only after the plan had started to unravel with the IAF getting engaged offensively, that the involvement of the PAF was sought, which the CAS opposed.<sup>25</sup>

## GEOGRAPHY DECIDES EVERYTHING

Pakistan’s security approach and military thinking which have led to four wars with India, are not easy to understand, but as Robert

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21. S Sajjad Haider, *Flight of the Falcon* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2009).

22. Khan, n. 17, p. viii.

23. Hussain and Qureshi, n. 2, p. 141.

24. Nasim Zehra, *From Kargil to the Coup: Events that Shook Pakistan* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2018), p. 151.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

Kaplan explains, “Geography offers a way to make at least some sense of it all.”<sup>26</sup> Pakistan’s mountainous northern areas lie across the much-coveted Kashmir, and is a region through which the Indus flows into the country. The capital city Islamabad which lies on the Pothar plateau, is on the West of the Pir Panjal range that separates it from India’s Kashmir Valley. Below it the five rivers —Indus, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi and Sutlej—flow into the fertile Punjab, the heartland and power centre of Pakistan. Lahore, a historical and cultural epicentre is the capital of Punjab and lies just 50 km across Amritsar. On the West, Pakistan is bounded by the Suleiman and Kirthar ranges which border Afghanistan by the unsettled Durand Line. Between the mountains in the West and the Indian border on the East, in a Northeast to Southwest orientation, the Pakistan plains are neatly bisected by the mighty Indus. The plains are about 200 km across in the Punjab region in the north and Sindh region in the South, and in the middle, the Jaisalmer salient of the Indian Thar desert juts into Pakistan, squeezing it to less than 100 km. The Sindh region lies on the East of the Baluchistan region and is divided by the Kirthar range. At its base and on the Eastern tip of Pakistan’s East-West coastline lies Karachi, its major port, the largest city and the capital of Sindh.

The turbulent Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in the Northwest, the volatile Baluchistan in its Southwest and the relatively narrow plains, drive Pakistan’s desire for strategic depth. The major road and railway lines of Pakistan, and, therefore, all its major communication and logistics networks, are also aligned with the river Indus, running in a Northeast-Southwest direction. The major PAF air bases in 1971 of Peshawar, Murid, Mianwali, Sargodha, Risalewala, and Rafiqy were located in the Punjab region in the North, Jacobabad in the Central Sector, with Talhar and Mauripur in the South. Given the PAF’s smaller size and orientation towards self-preservation, despite having a front tier of airfields, it chose to operate from its depth bases in an effort to keep its aircraft away from the easy reach of IAF bases. Pakistan’s geography and the deployment pattern of the PAF defined its operational strategy and psyche.

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26. Robert D. Kaplan, *Revenge of Geography* (New York: Random House Inc., 2013), p. xxii.



## OPERATIONAL APPROACH: MYTHS AND REALITIES OF 1965

The 1965 War is important to assess the PAF's operational approach as it provides the necessary context of its mindset, and serves as a lead-in to the subsequent 1971 War. Both wars have, over the years, been built into a myth of Indian misadventures, defeated by the numerically inferior but professionally superior and aggressive PAF. The myth was perpetuated by the absence of official war records in the public domain and the partisan writings of John Fricker in his book *Battle for Pakistan*. It thrived due to the pro-PAF narratives built up amongst the Western strategic community, air power practitioners, academia and media in a Cold War milieu, where Pakistan was a member of the US driven Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), and India was not. Interestingly, the story goes that Fricker had offered to write for India initially and was turned down, which is a pity as it would have then won the war from the beginning! Thankfully, over the years, balanced and mature narratives have emerged from India and some from Pakistan, allowing for more objective assessments. So, what was the most likely PAF operational approach in 1965?

### *PAF Strategy and Execution*

Pakistan planned to start the operations with preemptive dusk counter-air strikes against the major Indian air bases and key radars, with the aim of reducing the IAF's numerical superiority. Subsequently, night counter-air would continue with the bombers to keep the IAF under pressure, and inhibiting its air operations. The focus thereafter would be air superiority over Pakistani territory, while providing support to the ground battle. Haider avers that the PAF's preemptive was originally planned in the last week of June 1965, where Asghar Khan stressed that India's preponderance in numbers was cardinal in determining the PAF's tactically offensive strategy. It comprised the attacks on IAF bases to reduce its numerical superiority and create a more equitable balance of air power; prevent an enemy surprise attack as it could render the PAF ineffective and enable air superiority, leaving the Pakistan Army vulnerable. Preemption was, therefore, an imperative, and not a contingency. Six enemy forward airfields and three radars were to be struck 15

minutes before dusk.<sup>27</sup> Nur Khan, who took over the PAF just prior to the 1965 War, it appears, was initially more circumspect about the plan, but came around subsequently.<sup>28</sup>

In the final outcome, the PAF commenced with Combat Air Patrol (CAP) missions well before the air war actually commenced in the last light on September 1, when the IAF committed its Vampires and Mysteres in Chhamb. The PAF counter-air strikes, no longer preemptive, finally commenced five days later in the evening of September 6. It, however, capitalised on the opportunity provided by the absence of any Indian counter-air effort by carrying out the original plan, with mixed success. Asghar Khan writes:

We were puzzled as to why the Indians, having started what amounted to a general war, had limited the offensive to the West only and why, having decided to start an offensive against West Pakistan alone, they had not used their Air Force against our vital installations, such as airfields and radar. By not doing so, they had given us a chance which we had never counted on—the chance to deliver the first aerial attack.<sup>29</sup>

The IAF paid dearly for its inadequacy of passive air defence measures, especially at Pathankot and Kalakunda. But the failed strikes against Adampur, Halwara and Jamnagar were not launched as per the original plan, and Haider is critical of the leadership at Sargodha and Mauripur for the failure to do so. He writes: “The failure of the preemptive strategic offensive on 6th September was no less than a debacle, especially considering that the PAF operational readiness was at the optimum with missions fully rehearsed.”<sup>30</sup> The PAF also carried out around 481 sorties of essentially pre-planned Close Air Support (CAS),<sup>31</sup> and given the limited expectations of the Pakistan Army, was considered effective. Its Canberras played an unsung and significant role in bombing operations, and “their performance was stunning”.<sup>32</sup>

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27. Haider, n. 21, ch 7.

28. Khan, n. 17, p. 16.

29. Ibid., p. 15.

30. Haider, n. 21, ch 10.

31. AVM AK Tiwary, *Indian Air Force in Wars* (New Delhi: Lancer Publishers and Distributors, 2012), p. 134.

32. Haider, n. 21, ch 10.

### *David and Goliath*

Its smaller size has been used effectively to its advantage in the PAF's history and the accounts of some writers, to build the image of a heroic 'David' fighting against a much larger 'Goliath' and emerging victorious. The PAF's 1965 narrative is bolstered by somewhat over-enthusiastic claims: "The IAF planes came in waves, and with a numerical edge of 5:1, the Indians took a well calculated risk." There is no doubt the IAF was larger in size but 5:1 it was not. While there are minor differences depending upon the source, the reliably estimated figures are that the IAF had 290 aircraft (including 80 Mysteres and 48 Vampires) against the 187 of the PAF in the West.<sup>33</sup> The claim that "*the IAF planes came in waves*" while attempting to highlight its small size, actually indicates the persistence of IAF offensive missions and negates the PAF claims of air superiority. Also, while the phrase "*the Indians took a calculated risk*" is aimed to indicate the PAF's air combat prowess, it actually highlights the courage of the Indian pilots, who flew to the limits of the tactical Radius Of Action (ROA) and combat endurance, in a CAP intensive environment.

According to Hussain and Qureshi, "By the end of the fourth day of the war, the IAF had lost heavily in aircrafts and pilots, and the PAF had achieved the impossible—air supremacy all over Pakistan." Factually, out of its total 59 losses, the IAF lost 35 aircraft on the ground to the air raids.<sup>34</sup> Attrition is always measured in terms of the proportion of the quantum of air effort and the losses. Pakistan lost 43 aircraft in the 2,364 sorties flown, and, therefore, had an attrition rate of 1.82 per cent. India lost 59 aircraft in the 3,937 sorties flown and, therefore, had an attrition rate of 1.50 per cent. In his book, *Defence from the Skies*, Air Cmde Jasjit Singh cites that the PAF rate of loss was nearly three times in air-air engagements, losing 1.78 aircraft every 100 sorties, compared to .66 aircraft lost by the IAF. Therefore, despite the superior, technologically advanced inventory, and the claimed superiority of PAF pilots in training and motivation, the IAF pilots displayed better air combat performance.<sup>35</sup> Notwithstanding the

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33. Ibid., p. 119.

34. BC Chakravorty, D Phil and Chief Editor SN Prasad, D Phil, *History of the 1965 War*, (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992), p. 170.

35. Air Cmde Jasjit Singh, *Defence from the Skies* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2013), pp. 250-260.

same, the courage, commitment, professionalism and performance of the PAF pilots has never been in question from the IAF's perspective.

The issue of PAF air supremacy needs a closer look. According to Philip Mellinger, air superiority is defined as being able to conduct air operations "without prohibitive interference by the opposing force." Air supremacy goes further, wherein the opposing Air Force is incapable of effective interference.<sup>36</sup> As per the unpublished official history of the 1965 War, of a total of 3,937 sorties flown by the IAF, 1,568 were fighter-bomber and bomber sorties towards offensive missions; 1,352 CAP sorties were flown over IAF bases; and the balance 1,017 missions are simply recorded as fighter sorties.<sup>37</sup> These fighter sorties could not have all been CAP missions, and, therefore, if a conservative estimate of 400 sorties (roughly 40 per cent) were flown towards ground attack, the total offensive effort goes up to 1,968 sorties. A majority of these were multiple pass attacks, and in the case of counter-air missions, at the extremes of their Radius of Action (ROA). In both cases, it significantly increased their vulnerability to the 1,303 PAF CAP sorties, which amounts to 55 per cent of its total of 2,368 sorties flown.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the nearly 2,000 IAF offensive missions executed with evident combat persistence, and a total of just 15 air combat losses,<sup>39</sup> would not have been possible if the PAF had actually gained air supremacy, as claimed. This is endorsed by Tony Mason who wrote, "In the war between India and Pakistan, air superiority was never contested."<sup>40</sup>

The *History of the PAF* which claims, "The PAF pilots were in a state of high morale bordering on ecstasy, its aircraft inventory was intact" and "a whimpering and prostrate enemy got a new lease for life",<sup>41</sup> is contrived rhetoric towards the myth of PAF superiority and victory. Haider gives a more sober perspective:

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36. Phillip S. Mellinger, "Supremacy in the Skies", *Air Force Magazine*, February 2019, at <https://www.airforcemag.com/PDF/MagazineArchive/Magazine%20Documents/2016/February%202016/0216supremacy.pdf>. Accessed on May 23, 2021.

37. Chakravorty and Prasad, n. 34, p. 269.

38. Sobia Nissar, "PAF and Three Wars" *Defence Journal*, September 2001, at <http://www.defencejournal.com/2001/september/wars.htm>. Accessed on May 22, 2021.

39. PVS Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra, *The India-Pakistan Air War of 1965* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2009), Appendix B.

40. AVM Tony Mason, *Air Power: A Centennial Appraisal* (London: Brassey's, 1994), p. 64.

41. Hussain and Qureshi, n. 2, pp. 171-172.

In spite of the fact that more than four decades have elapsed since the 1965 war, the real truth is not common knowledge and hence the truth must remain the biggest casualty in the tragedy of errors played out by the leaders of that period. Like most wars, the 1965 war was an avoidable catastrophe. It was horrendously senseless and falsely contrived to appear as a victory. Only those martyred and their neglected, ravaged kin had to pay the terrible price for this farce. The legacy of the 1965 tragedy perpetrated 'a bigger watershed' in 1971.<sup>42</sup>

## 1971: 'A BIGGER WATERSHED'

### *Drivers and Strategies*

The Pakistan military high command held the belief that East Pakistan could not be threatened, as long as India was convinced that there would be major reverses on its Western border if its military were split up to engage both wings simultaneously.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the strategy of defence of East Pakistan lay in a reciprocal counter-attack by West Pakistan. Since Pakistan could not afford separate defence forces for the two wings and could not force its choice of time and place of war, the PAF was constrained to mould its plans accordingly.<sup>44</sup> The PAF examined all its war-fighting options, from launching an offensive on IAF bases, providing intensive ground support to the Pakistan Army, to a defensive battle to sort out the IAF over its own skies. It assessed that it could not go on the offensive due to its force levels, as counter-air meant higher attrition rates given the high-performance IAF Air Defence (AD) aircraft, SA-2 Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) and AD guns, and radars. Intensive ground support was ruled out due to the need for air superiority. Therefore, the only viable option was to destroy the IAF in air battles over Pakistani skies a la 'Battle of Britain', and then, the situation permitting, launch an offensive.

The key drivers which governed the PAF's planning<sup>45</sup> were:

- Except for limited Mirage IIIs, it did not have aircraft capable of deep penetration.

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42. Haider, n. 21, ch 10.

43. Ibid., ch 13.

44. Hussain and Qureshi, n. 2, p. 178.

45. Ibid., pp. 179-180.

- The removal of the Bengalis from the PAF led to some shortages in aircrew and ground crew.
- The MiG-19 were assigned for the AD and CAS roles. But not all were modified for air-to-air missiles, limiting their air combat capability. Also, the limited ROA restricted their employment in CAS.
- The concept of CAS had not received sufficient attention in the joint Air Force-Army planning level. The *History of the PAF* records it as “only a vague option open to the PAF.”
- The PAF had established satellite bases but did not have assets for their AD. The limited presence would dissipate their meagre resources.
- Their limited inventory obviated commitment to any major role without knowing the designs of the enemy, because once committed, losses were natural; this was considered too high a risk against an enemy with a big fleet.
- The enemy’s ground moves were not known. Given the Indian Army’s large size, it could open any number of fronts, thus, stretching the Pakistan Army. This made it difficult for the PAF to determine its CAS—offensive roles.
- The Pakistan government’s war policy was not known, and its likely reaction was not communicated to the PAF. The likely duration of the war, its objectives and the extent of commitment not being defined, left PAF very little room to manoeuvre.

It was with these constraints and full knowledge of the IAF’s strengths that the PAF prepared itself for the 1971 War. India’s July 1971 Treaty of Friendship with the USSR played heavily on its mind, being acutely aware that it was taking on a much stronger, better prepared and trained IAF. Therefore, the broad strategy<sup>46</sup> of the PAF can be summarised as:

- It assumed a role of offensive-defence.
- Self-preservation to be a high priority consideration.
- It prepared for an elusive war the dimensions for which were not known.

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46. Ibid., pp. 180-181.

- It adopted a defensive war strategy, with steady offensive probes.
- It adopted a policy of survival against all odds in a hostile air environment.
- The East Pakistan element of the PAF was pretty much left on its own, like in 1965, as it hoped to tilt the tables by the actions in the West.

### *Counter-Air Strategy*

Since all the combat aircraft in IAF airfields would be in concrete pens, and camouflaged targets such as fuel tanks, ammunition dumps and command centres could not be readily identified or accurately attacked, like in 1965, the targeting choice once again was on runways and radars. The bombing of airfields was to deny their availability for certain periods, as this would reduce the availability of IAF assets against the Pakistan Army's campaign. Unlike the past, given the SAMs and AD guns at the airfields, multiple pass attacks would not be possible. The strikes on forward airfields were aimed at provoking retaliatory strikes, so that IAF fighters could be engaged over Pak territory like in the Battle of Britain. Meanwhile strikes to depth IAF airfields would be taken on by PAF bombers at night.

### *Offensive Strategy*

Pakistan's grand strategy was to launch a massive offensive by II Corps under Lt Gen Tikka Khan, to capture large swathes of Indian territory. This would provide the vital leverage for Pakistan to not only save the East, but also put it in control of post war negotiations. The over-riding priority was to give maximum support to this offensive, and every other PAF objective was subordinated to it. The estimated 'cost' of this commitment was gamed by the planning staff at PAF HQ in July 1971, and a loss of 100-120 combat aircraft and pilots over the likely 7-10 days, was assessed. Air Mshl Rahim Khan was aware that this would amount to losing one-third of his Air Force. According to Haider, he had the full support of his senior commanders when he directed them to prepare their units accordingly in August, to ensure the success of the Pakistan Army's offensive.<sup>47</sup>

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47. Haider, n. 21, ch 13.

### *D-Day*

For the first time, the PAF HQ had managed to convince the GHQ that any offensive would be coordinated with the PAF's opening strikes, and the mutually agreed D-Day was December 3, 1971.

### *Air Superiority*

The pervasive primary mission meant air superiority would have to be achieved in the form of a moving umbrella over the Army's deep thrust. Beneath the AD umbrella, some direct offensive support by the PAF would be executed, to soften the Indian Army's resistance. The protective cover would continue until the Pakistani forces could dig in and secure their protection. Control of the air, even in the limited areas of Pakistan's counter-attack, involved not just the prevention of IAF interference, but attacks against its four to five bases around Gen Tikka Khan's offensive.

### *CAS Strategy*

The PAF air staff decided that losing its limited resources and endangering multi-million-dollar aircraft for destroying tanks and other weapons was not acceptable, until the main offensive. Instead, the PAF was to maintain pressure with sustained strikes against some of the forward and rear Indian bases, in order to inhibit the IAF's offensive air support, interdiction and counter-air efforts. During this same period, the PAF was also to provide whatever air support was needed for the Pakistan Army's 'holding' actions along the entire 3,700-km border from Kashmir to Kutch. These relatively shallow-penetrating actions were meant to tie down as many of the enemy's resources as possible and to try to achieve a favourable tactical posture in the process. As the war progressed, the PAF was also to provide whatever air support it could to the Pakistan Navy within the limits of its maritime support capability which, in real terms, was near zero.<sup>48</sup>

### *The Final Outcome*

The breakdown of the total PAF air effort of 3,027 sorties was: 1,748 AD sorties, 951 CAS sorties, 290 counter-air (day/night) sorties,

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48. Ibid.



and 38 other missions. The daily average was 201 sorties.<sup>49</sup> The unpublished official Indian Ministry of Defence (MOD) history estimates 44 confirmed and six probable PAF losses in the West and 19 Sabres and three T-33s in the East (10 Sabre losses in combat, and balance 9 Sabres and 3 T-33s written off by the PAF to prevent capture).<sup>50</sup> Tufail claims that only 27 aircraft were lost (22 in the West and 5 in the East),<sup>51</sup> which definitely does not add up. In the absence of reliable assessment, this remains a grey area. According to the PAF, the outcome of the war in the East is referred to as a “heroic struggle” for a single squadron in a “no-win” situation,<sup>52</sup> which it definitely was. On the West, its history states that the IAF counter-air had no operational effect as it lost a large number of aircraft to the “hot reception” by the PAF CAP. It stuck to its aim: defence and preservation of its fighting capability.

In view of the large area of surface operations, the PAF could not be there all the time, and it was impossible for it to commit itself completely to ground support; it had to keep its guard up. Its history covers up the IAF strategic strikes on the oil and power facilities as bombardments on civilian areas of Lahore and Karachi. It, however, admits that the IAF attacks in support of the Indian Army and the Pakistan’s lines of communication were well performed. It also says, “The Indian attack strategy was based on strong support from the air as a part of their concept of joint Army-Air operation.”<sup>53</sup> As per Haider:

Unlike the realistic planning and execution by the PAF, planning at the highest tiers of the national and Army leadership, including the President and the GHQ, was intrinsically flawed, to say the least. Not launching the punch of the Army, the No. 1 Armoured Corps, and the senseless assault by an unprepared force without air cover

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49. Nissar, n. 38.

50. SN Prasad, “Chapter X: IAF in the West,” and “Chapter XIV; IAF in the Eastern Theatre” in S. N. Prasad et al. eds., *History of the 1971 India Pakistan War*, (New Delhi: History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 1992), pp. 455, 614.

51. The Print Team, “An Indian Admiral & Pakistani Air Commodore Debate the Finer Points of the 1971 War,” *The Print*, February 23, 2018, at <https://theprint.in/opinion/kaiser-tufail-arun-prakash/37662/>. Accessed on May 25, 2021.

52. Hussain and Qureshi, n. 2, pp. 188-189.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 190-193.

against Ramgarh in the south (hoping to capture Jaisalmer in a blitzkrieg) was an amazing blunder which caused incalculable loss of precious lives and equipment.<sup>54</sup>

### THE PSYCHE OF THE PAF PILOT

Since it is the man behind the machine who drives the ultimate outcome in war, the mindset and psyche of the PAF pilot need a mention. In a country where the military is held in high esteem and is considered a prestigious career, the PAF fighter pilot is perhaps the most privileged person—well paid, highly regarded and the subject of national adoration.<sup>55</sup> Kaiser Tufail writes that PAF pilots have flown in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey, UAE, UK, and Zimbabwe. Its pilots gained extensive experience on a wide range of fighters including the Gnat, Hunter, MiG-21FL/M, and Su-7. According to him, “First-hand knowledge about adversary aircraft, as well as well-honed flying skills of PAF’s pilots were key factors in their remarkable performance during various conflicts.”<sup>56</sup>

The PAF maintains skill-based posting to fighter types and younger age profile Squadron Commanders.<sup>57</sup> In the words of Asghar Khan, who had been the C-in-C for eight years:

After Station Commanders, or perhaps even more important than them, is the selection of Squadron Commanders. They are the people who command the combat units of the Air Force. Their number in a small Air Force is necessarily small and their importance, therefore, all the greater. It is my belief that these few commanders must be above the average in their own spheres. I was prepared to overlook some human failings so long as they commanded respect in the air. They must be professionally sound and superior to those they are required to lead. No other quality, however great, can compensate for these essential requirements in the eyes of subordinates.<sup>58</sup>

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54. Haider, n. 21, ch. 14.

55. Singh, et al., n. 1, p. 185.

56. Kaiser Tufail, “IAF’s Balakot Disaster Two Years On,” *Aeronaut*, February 26, 2021, at <http://kaiser-aeronaut.blogspot.com/>. Accessed on May 25, 2021.

57. Singh, et al., n. 1, p. 185.

58. Khan, n. 17, p. 69.

The squadron commanders mandatorily undergo the Flight Leaders School which was instituted by Asghar Khan in 1958. This continues even today under its new avatar of Combat Commanders School, which is geared primarily towards the mid-career advanced air combat training of PAF fighter squadron commanders, air defence controllers, and instructors and for the development of advanced fighter weapons tactics.<sup>59</sup> In the PAF, the seniormost Air Marshal does not necessarily get to be the Chief. On the contrary, the exception has been the rule.<sup>60</sup>

A fairly clear picture of the pilot's psyche emerges when in addition to the above, the martial race stereotype and ascendancy as a superior combat pilot comprises a part of their regular grooming. Pushpinder Singh wrote in the concluding paragraph of his book:

There is little doubt as to which of the prime air arms of the Indian subcontinent is more conscious of the importance of image building and intelligent public relations. The PAF has many friends and admirers amongst the world's aerospace media, not the least because of its sustained effort to 'put its best wing forward'. The PAF has had innumerable articles, features and books written about it, covered by international writers, journalists and photographers. This boosts morale.<sup>61</sup>

Essentially, most of the PAF narrative of victory has been built around its few successes in counter-air and air-air victories. This is probably because of the preponderance towards AD in its orientation. Its force composition, ethos and training are fundamentally focussed towards the air battle—air combat and fighting the enemy Air Force. It has a history of reticence towards support of the Army operations, which is reciprocated by the inadequate understanding of air power of its generals! It tends to dissociate itself from the legacy of the military

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59. Bilal Khan, "Pakistan Air Force: Combat Commanders School (CCS)," *QUWA*, October 16, 2016, at <https://quwa.org/2016/10/16/pakistan-air-force-combat-commanders-school-ccs/>. Accessed on May 25, 2021.

60. Singh, et al., n. 1, p. 184.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

defeats which it attributes to the Army, and has tried to perpetuate the myth that it won all the air wars and, thus, saved Pakistan. But since a military victory is not a bean count of inventory losses, but one of outcomes and achievement of national objectives, it is time to put some myths to rest. In the final outcome, the adversary is not ten feet tall, but a worthy foe.