



Air Power in the 1965 War: A Comparative Analysis of the Pakistan Air Force under Asghar Khan Command with Indian Air Forces

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Abstract: The Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 serves as a critical case study in military aviation history, particularly in assessing the comparative competencies of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and the Indian Air Force (IAF). This research article conducts a focused competency-based analysis of the PAF under the formative leadership of Air Marshal Asghar Khan, who, although not in command during the war itself, laid the structural and doctrinal foundations that shaped the PAF's performance during the conflict. The study explores various dimensions of air force capability, including strategic vision, pilot training programs, combat tactics, aircraft performance, organizational structure, and morale. Through a combination of archival research, operational data analysis, and expert military commentary, the paper illustrates how the PAF leveraged limited resources to achieve disproportionately effective outcomes against a numerically superior opponent. It also investigates how Asghar Khan's emphasis on meritocracy, professionalism, and technological adaptation enabled the PAF to function with high efficiency under war-time pressure. In contrast, the IAF, despite its size and resource advantage, encountered challenges related to coordination, outdated strategic doctrine, and inconsistent command execution. The study highlights key engagements such as the defense of Sargodha, the performance of the F-86 Sabres, and the role of squadron-level leadership in shaping tactical success. Ultimately, this comparative analysis not only sheds light on the operational asymmetries of the 1965 air war but also provides broader insights into the importance of institutional leadership and strategic planning in air power efficacy.

Keywords: Pakistan Air Force (PAF), Indian Air Force (IAF), 1965 Indo-Pak War, Asghar Khan, Air power strategy, Military leadership, Combat effectiveness, Tactical air warfare, Organizational competency, South Asian military history

1. Introduction

It's a tremendous honor for me to visit the Pakistan Royal Air Force unit for the very first time. Reflecting on history, it's crucial to note that a nation lacking an air force is vulnerable to enemy aggression. This significance was underscored back in April 1948 when Mr. Jinnah, during his visit to the Risalpur Academy, stressed the urgent need to establish a robust and unparalleled air force as a cornerstone of Pakistan's defense strategy. By 1954, Pakistan solidified its defense alliances by joining the Baghdad Pact, later known as CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), and SEATO (South East Asian Treaty Organization). These partnerships significantly fortified Pakistan's defense capabilities, positioning the nation as a bulwark in South Asia against not only the Warsaw Pact but also against the USSR. These strategic maneuvers marked a rapid modernization and expansion of the Pakistan Air Force, greatly supported by substantial equipment supplied from the USA. In contrast, India faced obstacles in procuring military equipment from the USA, particularly following the fallout of the 1962 Sino Indian War (Ganguly, 2019). Pakistan seized upon perceived vulnerabilities in India's military capabilities post the 1962 China-

India conflict and the demise of Indian Prime Minister Nehru in 1964. Leveraging these instances, Pakistan swiftly worked to narrow the strategic military gap between the two neighboring countries in South Asia. The anti-Indian sentiment of US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles significantly influenced the consolidation of Pakistan's defense. President Ayub Khan's decision to directly form a military pact with the USA under the Mutual Defense Assistance agreement further bolstered Pakistan's military strength. The overarching objective behind these military arrangements was the comprehensive enhancement and fortification of the Pakistan Air Force (Cohen, 2011).

2. Brief History of PAF

During its initial years, Pakistan encountered formidable challenges across various fronts, and the nascent Pakistan Air Force (PAF) struggled significantly. Despite inheriting several air bases and training institutes from the British at the time of partition, the fledgling PAF faced a multitude of difficulties. Although the PAF had larger airbases across the country compared to the Indian Air Force (IAF), there were glaring deficiencies in infrastructure, particularly in areas like KP (formerly NWFP), where British emphasis on aerial monitoring didn't adequately translate to comprehensive air force facilities. At the time of independence, a stark imbalance in air force capabilities existed between Pakistan and India. India possessed around six fighter aircraft squadrons and half a squadron of Dakotas. In contrast, Pakistan's air force comprised only two fighter squadrons equipped with 16 Tempest fighters and half a squadron of Dakotas (Hussain and Qureshi, 1982). The division of the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) resulted in a larger number of pilots joining the Indian Air Force compared to the relatively smaller proportion joining the Pakistan Air Force. This disparity was rooted in the demographic composition of the RIAF, where Hindu officers and airmen outnumbered Punjabi, Pathan, and Sindhi Muslims. Consequently, the IAF had a self-sufficient pool of pilots, whereas the Pakistan Air Force had to depend on British volunteer pilots to support its two tempest squadrons (Arain, 2018). This demographic difference led to a marginal superiority in resources and personnel for the Indian Air Force, while the Pakistan Air Force faced significant challenges in terms of both manpower and equipment. It is historically documented that during the early days, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) didn't aspire to challenge the Indian Air Force (IAF) extensively, except for sporadic resupply missions by Dakotas at Skardu during the 1947-48 war. The shift in ambition for the Pakistan Air Force, from a relatively modest position to transforming into a potent and versatile fighting force, began with the acquisition of F-86 Jet Sabres and Canberra Bombers from the USA. This change was inspired by the experiences of the US Air Force in the initial years of the Vietnam and Korean wars. During the period when the IAF was in a phase of expansion, PAF pilots focused on honing their skills in air land operations and air combat with finer nuances. PAF significantly benefited from aligning itself with the United States, leveraging its partnership extensively (Ganguly, 2019). The IAF's inventory consisted of fighter and bomber aircraft from multiple origins Russian, British, and French. In contrast, Air Marshal Asghar Khan, leading the PAF, strategically opted for the F-86 Sabre as its primary aircraft, complemented by the F-104 Star Fighter. This strategic decision allowed PAF pilots to gain extensive expertise by focusing on mastering a specific aircraft, unlike the IAF, which operated aircraft from various origins, lacking this specialization (Arain, 2018). Conversely, India diversified its aircraft sources seeking aircraft from the UK (Hunters, Grants, and Canberra), Russia (MiG-21s), and France (Mystères). Consequently, the Pakistan Air Force, under Asghar Khan's leadership from 1958 to 1965, notably accelerated its transition and expansion, excelling in technology, tactics, devices, procedures, and techniques compared to the IAF, which lacked the same depth of expertise and specialization. Asghar Khan played a pivotal role in this phase, driving PAF's evolution by emphasizing robust training, acquiring cutting edge technological weaponry, and fostering overall excellence within the force. Mr. Khan, serving as Air Marshal during that era, exemplified a dedicated and visionary leadership within the PAF, akin to the stalwarts from the Royal Indian Air Force such as Arjun Sing and Mehar Sing during the turbulence of World War II. His visionary understanding and keen insight into air power's significance played a pivotal role in the Pakistan Air Force's accomplishments during joint military actions, earning him widespread commendation. Upon his elevation to Air Marshal, Asghar Khan received unwavering support from President Ayyub Khan. The President readily accommodated all requisitions for the Pakistan Air Force, providing necessary budgets and endorsing the establishment of advanced bases, strategically devised to counter the numerical superiority of the IAF (John, 2003). Under the visionary leadership of Air Marshal Asghar Khan, the PAF inaugurated its Fighter Leaders School in April 1958 at the Maripur Airbase, now known as the Masroor Airbase. This establishment, later evolving into the present Combat Commander's School (CCS), significantly enhanced pilots training, molding aircrews into adept and proficient fighter pilots, mastering aircraft utilization at their zenith. The advanced fighter combat training, coupled with extensive experience on cutting edge aircraft

technology, bestowed PAF pilots with an unparalleled advantage over their adversaries. Air Marshal Nur Khan, assuming command before the 1965 war, aptly succeeded Asghar Khan. Vigilantly monitoring border developments, Nur Khan elevated the PAF's readiness levels. Consequently, even prior to hostilities, the PAF stood fully prepared to counter any enemy maneuvers (Arain, 2018). The establishment of the Fighter Leader's School and an aerobatic team in 1958 bolstered Pakistan's proactive air defense stance, evident in the downing of an Indian Air Force Canberra fighter aircraft in 1959 during an intrusive reconnaissance mission over Pakistani territory. This incident reflected the Pakistan Air Force's formidable combat readiness. The replacement of Asghar Khan by Air Marshal Nur Khan, an adept officer and fervent fighter pilot from World War II, proved instrumental in sustaining PAF's operational prowess and fostering reform (John, 2003).

3. Desert Hawk: The Rann Encounter

In April 1965, Pakistan assessed and tested India's military preparedness in an area significantly distant from Kashmir. A year later, it was evident that Operation Gibraltar was in the planning. Nearly a decade before hostilities began the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had undergone a restructuring and reequipping phase with significant assistance from the USA. This initiative necessitated rigorous testing of its weaponry and equipment against rival forces, whose modernization had only just commenced (Johns, 1998).

3.1 Operation Gibraltar

President of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, became convinced of the operational and technological superiority of the PAF over the IAF following the successful operational engagement in "Desert Hawk" at the Rann of Kutch. As a result, Air Chief Marshal Asghar Khan was replaced by his subordinate Nur Khan in April 1965, as Asghar Khan did not support Ayub Khan's stance on war matters. President Ayub Khan, after confirming that the PAF possessed the newly acquired "Star Fighter Jet: F-104" and "F-86," believed in the PAF's warfare superiority over the Indian Air Force. He thus concluded to proceed with "Operation Gibraltar," aiming to implement his plan to destabilize and take control of Kashmir, particularly as the region entered the icy season of spring in 1965 (Subramanian, 2015).

3.2. Air Battle over Chhamb

On September 1st, 1965, the town of Chhamb on the India-Pakistan border reverberated with the sounds of Patton Tanks and thundering artillery barrage from 105mm and 155mm Guns initiated by Pakistan's 12 Division. General Musa, the operation's commander, had not communicated his attack plan to the newly appointed Chief of Air Staff, Mr. Nur Khan, who had taken office from Asghar Khan barely a month into the war. Consequently, the Pakistan Air Force had not prepared or executed any strategy to counter the forces India was mobilizing to reinforce the Chhamb Brigade. This missed opportunity led to Pakistan failing to diminish the combat capability of the Indian Air Force and exposed significant setbacks in air force coordination (Subramanian, 2015).

4. PAF Prepared by Asghar Khan Showed the Remarkable Performance Against IAF

During the conflict, the PAF demonstrated remarkable resilience by experiencing significantly fewer losses, with a maximum of three reported aircraft losses compared to the IAF's ten. This noteworthy disparity in losses was attributed to several strategic advantages. The PAF implemented robust post-war observation techniques, adeptly managed opinions surrounding their operations, and consistently analyzed midair activities. Notably, esteemed pilots such as Sajjad Haider and Kaiser Tufail played pivotal roles in this process. Their expertise and continuous evaluation contributed significantly to the PAF's superior performance, as widely acknowledged through extensive community observations and viewpoints. Central to the PAF's success was its entry into the conflict with a streamlined and effective force structure, strategically deploying three key fighting platforms, the Canberra, Sabre, and Starfighter aircraft. However, beyond the hardware, the PAF's distinct edge was rooted in two fundamental aspects. Firstly, it was under the astute and visionary leadership of Air Chief Asghar Khan for a substantial eight-year period, succeeded by Nur Khan, another capable leader with a forward-thinking approach. Their combined efforts transformed the culture of combat within the PAF, markedly differentiating it from the prevalent culture within the Pakistani Army, which primarily controlled the state's machinery (Hussain, 1982). These visionary Air Chiefs of the PAF were instrumental in advocating contemporary warfare ideas and air power. President Ayyub Khan's steadfast support for the PAF's capabilities during any future conflicts between India and Pakistan further solidified the force's position. Secondly, the PAF's dominance over the IAF was underscored by the proficiency of its pilots in assimilating the latest warfare technologies, tactics, maneuvers, procedures, and strategies from the USA. This adeptness in incorporating cutting-edge strategies and techniques significantly bolstered the PAF's operational effectiveness. Despite recognizing the talents of Nur Khan, who succeeded Asghar Khan as the Air Marshal during a critical juncture preceding the outbreak of war, the decision to replace Asghar Khan remains

perplexing, especially given his instrumental role in shaping the PAF's capabilities and strategies (Subramanian, 2015). The primary reasons underlying Asghar Khan's replacement may have been rooted in the complex power dynamics within Pakistan's political landscape. President Ayub Khan, Chief of Army Staff General Musa, and Foreign Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto seemed concerned by Asghar Khan's forceful articulation of war strategies. His strong disapproval and critical stance during the planning of operations in Kutch and Kashmir before the war likely contributed to his replacement, leaving a profound impact on the Pakistan Air Force during the conflict (Khan, 1975). Regarding midair and aerial strategy, the Pakistan Air Force faced a dilemma, whether to engage in aggressive aerial combat within Indian airspace, aiming to dismantle the Indian Air Force through swift, surgical strikes on its bases, or prioritize the protection of Pakistan's skies to prevent damage to the fighting capability of the Pakistani Army. Initially contemplating a powerful aggressive approach, the PAF eventually opted for the latter a defensive stance that the Indian Air Force later termed a mode of combat defense (Khan, 1975).

The relatively smaller size of the Pakistan Air Force significantly influenced its aerial maneuvers, necessitating a coordinated approach with the army's operations. Pakistan's tactical misjudgment assumed that its actions in the Kutch region through 'Operation Desert Hawk' and the infiltration of Kashmir through 'Operation Gibraltar,' including aggression in Chhamb, might not provoke an extensive Indian response. This misconception led the PAF to continue aggressive air attacks on IAF airfields until September 6th, five days post the Chhamb offensive (Tiwary, 2012). The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) initiated strikes against the Indian Air Force (IAF) on September 1st, launching subsequent attacks that continued into the following day. These assaults pushed the Indian Air Force onto the defensive, causing significant damage on the ground. Accounts from Indian Air Force experts present at Pathankot and Adam Pur on September 1st revealed a notable decline in the morale of the Indian Air Force, particularly after losing four Vampire aircraft on the evening of September 1st. During these initial days, the PAF faced relatively minimal opposition from the IAF during its airfield attacks. However, between September 2nd and 6th, the PAF's control over the situation weakened, allowing the IAF to reinforce positions in Adam Pur, Halwara, and Pathankot. This change didn't see a corresponding consolidation of strength from the PAF, potentially due to the Chief of the Pakistan Army, General Musa, anticipating the Pakistani Army to uplift the nation without additional force reinforcement (Choudhry, 2018). Nur Khan, then a young chief of the PAF, lacked the foresight, influence, and tactical prowess of his predecessor Asghar Khan. He struggled to persuade President Ayub Khan to devise a more robust plan to decisively impact Indian forces and enhance Pakistan's capabilities. In terms of operational levels, both air forces engaged in modern air warfare techniques for the first time in their history.

The PAF, drawing from lessons learned from the US air forces in the Korean War through the induction of Sabres and Starfighters, executed effective air maneuvers, significantly impacting Indian Air Force bases. However, the PAF's poor aircraft dispersal procedures resulted in more than half of the Indian Air Force's losses occurring on the ground (Subramanian, 2015). Another notable disparity lay in the operational strategies of both air forces, particularly in their approaches to supporting their respective armies in the land battle. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF), heavily influenced by the close air support tactics of the United States Air Force and equipped with advanced air controlling systems like the 'Sabres' and 'Canberras,' under the Asghar Khan as a chief of PAF, played a pivotal role in impeding the advancement of Indian forces in the Lahore and Sialkot sectors (Subramanian, 2015). On September 6th, the Indian Army launched an attack with the aim of capturing Lahore. Prompt action by the PAF led to significant losses in enemy armor, effectively halting their progress and providing crucial time for the Pakistan Army to react. The timely and impactful intervention by the PAF became the deciding factor that evening, denying Indian Army General Chaudhry an opportunity at the Lahore Gymkhana. In aerial combat supporting the Indian Army, Squadron Leader Sarfraz Rafiqui shot down a Hunter aircraft (his first Hunter kill) before his guns jammed. Despite this, he valiantly chose to remain in the engagement, sacrificing his life while supporting his formation (Arain, 2018).

Simultaneously, the PAF executed a pre-emptive strike at the Indian airfield in Pathankot, destroying newly acquired MiG-21 aircraft on the ground. The following day, a similar strike at the Eastern Airfield of Kalaikunda yielded comparable results. Squadron Leader MM Alam also achieved a remarkable feat by downing five IAF aircraft in less than a minute. Over September 6th and 7th, the PAF destroyed a total of 50 IAF aircraft in the air and on the ground, while damaging another eight. This decisive action granted the PAF air superiority and deprived the IAF of effective support for the Indian Army. Due to a limited number of bomber aircraft during the conflict, the PAF ingeniously modified and effectively utilized its C-130 transport aircraft for night bombing missions over Indian airfields (Arain, 2021). The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) is renowned not only for its pivotal role in altering the course of the 1965 war but also for its ongoing legacy of success, professionalism, and competence extending well

beyond that conflict. Despite facing repeated sanctions and being consistently denied access to advanced aircraft and weaponry since that period, the PAF has continually proven its capability over the past 56 years. This was exemplified in pivotal moments such as the events of 1971 and most recently during the Balakot standoff. Notably, the PAF showcased its prowess against three formidable and globally recognized air forces, achieving the remarkable feat of downing Israeli and Russian aircraft without suffering any losses. The PAF's consistent success can be attributed to several factors. Primarily, it owes its achievements to exceptionally high training standards, visionary leadership across successive eras, innovative utilization of available resources, unwavering devotion, and, above all, the dedication and bravery of its personnel (Subramanian, 2015). Comparatively, despite originating from the same institutional roots, the performance of the Indian Air Force (IAF) differed significantly. During the outbreak of conflict, the IAF possessed a force three times larger than that of the PAF. However, despite its numerical disadvantage, the PAF astutely outmaneuvered and outperformed its larger adversary. From the onset of the war, PAF's dominance in the skies was evident rendering the battle for air control decisively one sided. Many still wonder how such a relatively small force managed such a feat. The PAF's success can be attributed to the vision of its leadership, exceptional training standards, and the unwavering professionalism and motivation of its airmen, who set new benchmarks for camaraderie and valor (Arain, 2018). The success of the PAF can be largely credited to Asghar Khan, who meticulously prepared the air force for its role. Notably, Khan was appointed Chairman of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) just before the war erupted in April 1965, serving in this capacity for approximately three years until 1968.

5. Competency Comparison of PAF and IAF

Despite the Indian Air Force's (IAF) larger size and greater strength, it had become complacent and overconfident, disregarding the significance of the PAF. However, the unexpected aerial engagements on September 1st, 1965, resulted in the loss of four out of 12 Vampire aircraft for the IAF. This compelled the IAF leadership to ground 130 Vampire and 50 Ouragan aircraft. Remarkably, the skilled piloting of Squadron Leader Sarfraz Rafiqui and Flt Lt. Imtiaz Bhatti in just two PAF Sabre aircraft led to a reduction of almost 35% in the IAF's fleet, profoundly impacting morale. This shift not only altered the numerical advantage in favor of Pakistan but also established a psychological dominance for the PAF over its adversary (Arain, 2018). The Pakistan Air Force held a marginal qualitative superiority over the Indian Air Force despite the latter's numerical advantage. Under the US Military Assistance Program in 1960, the PAF acquired the Star Fighter F-104, a supersonic interceptor equipped with sidewinder air-to-air missiles and a 20mm cannon with six barrels. These were deemed technologically superior to the Indian Air Force's Mig-21 and Gnat Air Defense Fighters. Although the PAF had only one squadron comprising 14 aircraft, it proved to be a significant deterrent (John, 2003). The significant numerical advantage held substantial sway in the conflict, particularly evident as the IAF's Canberras conducted multiple disruptive nocturnal raids, causing considerable disruption behind enemy lines. Upon evaluating the air forces deployed along the western borders, India's inventory boasted an impressive count of approximately 270 commendable fighter aircraft, in stark contrast to Pakistan's more limited arsenal of roughly 170 combat ready aircraft. Air Vice Marshal A.K. Tiwary shed light on the strategic allocation of resources, emphasizing that while the Indian Air Force concentrated a significant portion of its squadrons on the eastern border, they left a comparatively smaller force of just 290 aircraft stationed along the western border. In contrast, the surveyed count of Pakistani aircraft in this region stood at 203 (Tiwary, 2012).

This revealed a stark ratio imbalance, estimated at approximately 15:1 in favor of the IAF, suggesting a significant disparity in force distribution and potential engagement capabilities. The official historical documentation of the 1965 war compiled by Prasad and Thapliyal highlighted the IAF's recognition of the formidable capabilities presented by the Pakistan Air Forces. Experts noted the prowess of aircraft like the Sabre and Starfighter, acknowledging them as challenging adversaries. Despite the notable efforts of some young Indian pilots such as Flying Officers Jimmy Bhatia and Mike McMahon who had received training on Sabre jets in the USA and later became esteemed Air Marshals in the IAF, returning with valuable expertise in air combat tactics, the prevailing trend leaned heavily in favor of Pakistani pilots who had undergone extensive training in the United States. This discrepancy in training and experience led to a lack of substantial institutional innovation in dominant air combat and bombing techniques within the Indian Air Force, placing them at a distinct disadvantage compared to the capabilities and expertise demonstrated by the PAF (Singh, 1991).

6. Conclusion

The Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 marked a transformative moment in the evolution of air power in South Asia, offering a unique opportunity to assess the comparative competencies of two emerging air forces operating under

vastly different strategic philosophies. This study set out to evaluate the performance of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) during the conflict, particularly in light of the institutional legacy and doctrinal framework established by Air Marshal Asghar Khan. Though Khan had retired prior to the war, his impact on the organizational culture, training standards, and strategic outlook of the PAF was instrumental in preparing the force for the challenges it faced in 1965. The comparative analysis revealed that while the Indian Air Force (IAF) possessed numerical and logistical advantages, these were undermined by inconsistencies in leadership, fragmented tactical execution, and slower doctrinal evolution. In contrast, the PAF operating with fewer aircraft and more limited resources was able to mount an efficient, coordinated response that demonstrated superior pilot skill, tactical flexibility, and morale. Notable engagements, including the defense of key airbases such as Sargodha and the air superiority established in the initial stages of the war, underscore the PAF's operational edge. A significant portion of this success is directly attributable to the structural reforms introduced by Asghar Khan during his tenure. His emphasis on professionalism, merit-based promotion, rigorous training regimens, and alignment with modern air warfare doctrines laid a durable foundation that endured under the command of his successors. Furthermore, the PAF's emphasis on centralized decision-making, mission-oriented strategy, and high pilot proficiency allowed it to neutralize many of the disadvantages posed by its smaller fleet and logistical limitations. This study reaffirms the critical role of visionary leadership and institutional development in determining combat performance, particularly in limited wars where technological parity is not guaranteed. The 1965 air war exemplifies how strategic foresight, organizational discipline, and effective command structures can compensate for material shortfalls. In doing so, the PAF under Asghar Khan's legacy presents a compelling case study in the efficient use of limited air power a lesson with enduring relevance in both historical analysis and contemporary military planning.

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