
China's Air Power: Implications for India

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*“Implementing the military strategy of active defence, the PLA ensures that it is well prepared for military struggle, with **winning local wars under conditions of informationisation** and enhancing national sovereignty, security, and interests of development as its objective. It will upgrade and develop the strategic concept of people’s war, and work for close coordination between military struggle and political, economic, diplomatic, cultural and legal endeavours, uses strategies and tactics in a comprehensive way, and takes the initiative to prevent and defuse crises and deter conflicts and wars. - - - - Taking joint operations as the basic form, the PLA aims to bring the operational strengths of different services and arms into full play. **The Army** aims at moving from regional defence to trans–regional mobility, improving its capabilities in air-ground integrated operations, long distance manoeuvres, rapid assaults and special operations. **The Navy** aims at gradual extension of strategic depth for offshore defensive operations, and enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counterattacks. **The Air Force** aims at speeding up its transition from territorial air defence to both offensive and defensive operations, and increasing its capabilities in the areas of air strike, air and missile defence, early warning and reconnaissance, and strategic projection. **The Second Artillery Force** aims at progressively improving its force structure for having both nuclear and conventional missiles, and raising its capabilities in strategic deterrence and conventional strike under conditions of informationisation.”*

— China’s National Defence Policy

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India is the next largest and most densely populated country in Asia after China, and is often perceived as the latter's only possible continental rival, but lying in a fairly distant second place. The ghosts of the Sino-Indian Border War of 1962 and the disasters at Sela and elsewhere still register a subconscious presence in the India's national psyche and extend into the strategic matrix of Sino-Pak relations symbolised by the long standing entente ("the all weather friendship") between the two countries, with Bangladesh possibly an additional factor, if it reverts at any time into the political fold of the anti-Indian Bangladesh National Party (BNP). The implications to India of China's military modernisation are significant particularly in air power and now in aerospace.

China cannot be regarded as just another nation-state. It is an entire civilisation, predominantly Han, singularly imbued with a sense of manifest destiny and inherently xenophobic. Its present Communist incarnation is perceived as a mere transitory phase in the 5,000-year history of the Han people, and the Middle Kingdom of the known world, on whose leadership—imperial, republican, or Communist – the mantle of the Celestial Throne is destined to rest. Indeed, China's Middle Kingdom and the America's neo-con American Century are remarkably similar in their world views. The post-Mao "Great Leap of Liberalisation " launched by Deng Xiaoping after the departure of the Great Helmsman, has transformed China into a near superpower and propelled the country beyond the confines of Asia and into the world as a player approaching the summit of the international economic Everest. At home, Deng's "Four Modernisations" have now progressed to their fourth phase – modernisation of the military comprising the People's Liberation Army (PLA), People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF). Even within the military, *inter se* priorities for modernisation have been laid down for each Service, with the PLAN and the PLAAF higher up the ladder than the PLA which has historically been the dominant branch. These measures are transmitting a strong sub-textual message of their own, of a very strong nuclear capable military power. China has launched a politico-economic charm offensive to dispel these notions, but uneasy neighbours still tend to tread softly around its massive "peaceful rise." Against this background, in the eyes of international and local communities, India remains the sole Asian rival.

India's engagement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) commenced in a predominantly military context in 1950, when the Chinese 18th Army under Commissars Wang Qi Mei, and Zhang Guo, entered Tibet, to assert Chinese claims on the region. For India, Tibet had always carried a Curzonian significance as a

strategic buffer, but post-1947 Nehruvian India chose not to contest the issue. Independent India could not maintain its British imperial heritage against the resurgent presence of China which denounced the preferential facilities obtained under the old 1914 Treaty of Shimla as imperialist and terminated them summarily soon after it had established its presence. India, distracted by simultaneously overlapping internal problems of the partition, as also in Kashmir and Hyderabad, could not manage anything other than a few genteel diplomatic protests at this summary disposal of its historic interests. In striking contrast to the line of action followed by China, the Government of India felt that under the circumstances it did not possess adequate military resources for an armed intervention in Tibet, and did not seek to open what could have culminated in an additional front in Tibet as well. In hindsight, however, the nagging doubt remains – did the Indian government of the time try hard enough to maintain the strategic advantages bequeathed by the British? Sino-Indian relations, thus, commenced on a definitely prickly note, spiralling progressively downwards notwithstanding the contrived honeymoon of the “*Bhai-Bhai*” years, and culminated in the disastrous Sino-Indian Border War in 1962. China maintained its geo-political upswing thereafter with a Treaty of Friendship in 1963 with its “enemy’s enemy” Pakistan, and its first nuclear explosion at Lop Nor in 1964. Thus, within the short three-year period, 1962-64, China established itself as the dominant power in Asia, with its only potential rival, India, sharply downsized through a series of strategic reverses – a sharp military defeat, a two-front military threat, and a situation of nuclear asymmetry. Around 1983/84, China took a further decision of extreme recklessness bordering on insanity to ensure India remained strategically enslaved—it clandestinely transferred nuclear weapons and missile technology to Pakistan, with total disregard of possible consequences. The psychological “shock and awe” of these strategic hammer blows still lingers amongst the Indian establishment, evident to this date in the excessive almost cringing deference towards China, demonstrated over a series of encounters, most recently in China’s assertiveness in a series of incidents along the Sino-Indian border, Chinese visas stapled onto Indian passports in respect of the residents of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), and overshadowing them all, Tawang and the declaration of Arunachal Pradesh as China’s “Southern Tibet”. India has, of course, long been under composite threats from the Pakistan-China axis, manifest in the provocative *jihadi* terrorism under a nuclear shield of Chinese provenance. But now the consequences of Beijing’s earlier recklessness are coming home to roost in both countries – the *jihad* has acquired an independent

Frankenstein identity of its own, with autonomous base areas established in the badlands of the Pak-Afghan frontier, sending out ripples impacting China through the Islamic East Turkestan Movement amongst the Uighurs of Xinjiang. Nuclear terrorism is the new nightmare, and *jihadi* suicide bombers will be its most facile exponents. It can be speculated that perhaps even the Chinese may have now started visualising the true dimensions of the nuclear Frankenstein they have helped unleash, which may become apparent only after contraband nuclear or radiation weapons are actually accessed by terrorists through the rogue nuclear establishment which seems to have developed a functional nexus in Pakistan. These are stray thoughts in these early years of the 21st century, but it is nevertheless strange to recollect that around independence, of India in 1947 and the People's Republic in 1949, it was India that was ahead on almost all scores.

China's Military Modernisation

The implications of China's military modernisation on India are multi-dimensional, but in the current context, the focus of deliberations will be kept primarily on aspects connected with air power. Here, the first aspect that must be noted is that in comparison with the Indian Air Force (IAF), the PLAAF of China has relatively limited war-time experience. The former has fought several full-fledged air campaigns against Pakistan in three Indo-Pak Wars, as also participated in limited air operations in Goa in 1961, and also on heavily combatised United Nations operations in the Congo, besides restricted employment in Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka. The PLAAF in contrast has had experience of very limited participation in the Korean War in 1950 in its very earliest days and none thereafter (though there have been unconfirmed reports of Chinese "volunteers" participating in sporadic air combat against American Air Forces during the Vietnam War).

The Sino-Indian Border War of 1962 was the first direct clash of arms between India and China and may, therefore, provide a good point in time at which to commence, because the past often provides many indicators to the future and history is an unforgiving teacher whose lessons are ignored only at one's own peril. The Korean War, 1950, too may also be taken into account in this context, for the glimpses it provides of the effects of American air power against the Chinese Communist ground forces. To return to the Sino-Indian Border War of 1962, neither the IAF nor the PLAAF of that time participated fully in the war, except for transport and helicopter support on the Indian side. On the Indian

side, the decision not to field the air force was a political one, an almost personal decision taken at the very highest level, without any consultation with the air force command structure. The decision is being increasingly challenged as a historical blunder, an abysmal lapse ascribable to an incoherent political leadership, shell-shocked by the turn of events on land. The reason was ostensibly the threat of air attack by the PLAAF on Indian cities, particularly those in the east, like Calcutta or Guwahati. But was the Indian Air Force in 1962 itself trained and oriented for operations in Himalayan conditions? In this respect, some self-critiques (not too many perhaps) seem to have been made within the Indian Air Force, perhaps as individual efforts. One such view is depicted in "1962 War – Close Air Support In 1962" by Group Captain AG Bewoor, VM (Retd) which can be accessed at www.bharat-rakshak/IAF/History/1962war/bewoor/html. It makes for interesting as well as disturbing reading. But on the "the other side of the hill", the PLAAF too was not launched into the conflict. What could be the reasons for the People's Republic not to field the PLAAF?

Surely not lack of political resolve – after all, the war had been launched on the express desire "to teach India a lesson". Amongst the answers could be: paucity of aircraft, as also of air bases and supporting infrastructure on the Tibetan Plateau, reduced lift capacity for payloads from high altitude airfields, lack of trained pilots, unfamiliar terrain and weather conditions, many of which could be echoed on the Indian side as well. On dispassionate comparison of all the relevant factors, actual and derived, had both air forces taken to the skies, the Indian Air Force of 1962 would have been capable of taking on the PLAAF in the air, but its effects on ground operations in support of the Indian Army would probably have been a different story. The Korean War provided graphic confirmation that even with absolutely total air supremacy, and the capability for full scope air warfare, unrestricted except by weather, United States air power could not stop the Chinese mass-scale light infantry forces, moving by night cross-country in mountainous terrain, who forced the Americans back to the 38th Parallel all along the front, inflicting very heavy casualties, while also suffering enormous casualties from American air power themselves. Also of note was the sanctuary status of the Manchurian region of China, where Chinese forces could build up before commitment into the Korean Peninsula (something that would be repeated in respect of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, nearly two decades later). The biggest disaster was that of the American X Corps, an amphibious formation with a large complement of the vaunted US Marines, that landed on the east coast

of Korea at Hungnam, and advanced up to the Chosin Reservoir through heavily forested mountains near the Manchurian border, before being driven precipitately back by the very large Chinese forces which pounced on them from across the Yalu River.

Supremacy of Air Power

So, extrapolating the experiences of air power in the Korean War onto a hypothetical case study of Indian air power in 1962, given the apparent training and orientation of the Indian Air Force of that time, it would perhaps be fair to assume that its overall effects on the Chinese ground offensive would perhaps not have been significant overall, more effective in Ladakh, less so in Arunachal. Strategic targets inside Tibet would have probably been off limits for Indian air power, on a parallel with Chinese targets across the Yalu River in Korea, as also India's own experiences in the Kashmir 1947-48 and Kargil 1999 conflicts against targets within Pakistan and in the latter case, across the Line of Control as well.

My own views of the Indian Air Force in 1962 are, of course, tremendously positive – six AMX-13 tanks of my regiment, 20 Lancers, were airlifted in An-12 aircraft from Chandigarh, landing at Chusul airstrip in Ladakh, and were in action within a short while of deplaning. The lead An-12 was piloted by one of our ex-divisional officers and later squadron commander at the National Defence Academy (NDA) – Group Captain, later Air Marshal Chandan Singh, MVC VrC. It was a tremendous feat, with few parallels in the world. I would also take this opportunity to mention another matter which my regiment is very proud of – the airborne induction and subsequent action at Chushul makes us the holders of a world record for the greatest height at which tanks have operated – 14,230 ft above sea level, which remains unequalled so far. (Not so as regards 1965 I am afraid! My own regiment in Chhamb was bombed by our Vampires, losing tanks as well as men.)

That was 1962. Moving on to 2008 and China's Fourth Modernisation. The extract above from China's White Paper on National Defence Policy (December 30, 2006) gives the strategic orientation as well operational perspectives of China's armed forces, collectively known as the People's Liberation Army (PLA). It carries significant implications for India and in the specific context of aerospace, China's weaponised space capabilities, cyber-warfare capability, precision guided munition (PGM) capabilities of the Second Army Artillery, and the rapidly developing indigenous aerospace industry claim special attention. Amongst these, China's indigenous aerospace industry is

of particular interest, not only because of its development to apparent world class standards, but also its direct and long standing linkages with China's strategic surrogate, Pakistan.

Pakistan's earlier attempts in 1988/89 to acquire an additional 71 F-16 aircraft from the United States had been blocked under the Pressler Amendment. The issue was of interest to India, and had attracted high profile attention in public opinion and media in the country, which had, in turn, diverted attention and obscured another equally important but relatively low profile development – the acquisitions by Pakistan of combat aircraft from the Chinese aerospace industry, where the Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation has indigenously developed and manufactured two significant fighter aircraft whose performance is attracting strong attention in the international aerospace community. These are the Joint Fighter-17 (JF-17) Thunder (also known as the Fighter China-1 or FC-1 Fierce Dragon), and the Jian 10 or J-10 Vigorous Dragon. In Indian terms, the JF-17 coming into squadron service would be the equivalent of the Indian light combat aircraft (LCA) Tejas, still under development, while the J-10 would be that of the proposed Indian multi-role combat aircraft (MRCA), sometimes mentioned in conversation, but in actuality not even on the drawing board. The JF-17 is reliably reported to be under serial production at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex for an initial batch of 250-300 in number, as the basic fighter aircraft for the Pakistan Air Force, which also plans to acquire 30-35 of the J-10 MRCA, scheduled for production in China in a serial run of about 300 numbers.

While comparative evaluations of the aircraft are issues of discussions and to some extent individual predilections, the larger point to note is the close involvement of Russian aircraft design bureaus and production facilities in the development of the Chinese aerospace industry and combat aircraft, indicative of the larger geo-politics of the Sino-Soviet entente aimed at containing the United States. India's political establishment will undoubtedly have to factor in this aspect when finalising the selection of the 126 MRCA for the Indian Air Force, where American and Russian participants have established a major presence. Indeed, the bidding for the "126 Contract" can in many ways become an extension of the new geo-political Cold War between the United States and its emerging adversaries, the Sino-Soviet combine, with India on the tightrope in awarding, as in earlier times. In any case, the end result of the "126 Contract," however it turns out, will carry long-term international effects. The 126 Contract is also likely to influence the evolution of the future Indian fifth generation fighter,

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for which an agreement has already been arrived at with Russia. Will rejection of the Russian bid jeopardise this understanding? Another aspect the Indian government will have to consider carefully is: how will India's future relationships with major "strategic partners" like the United States or Russia be affected in the event their entries fail to make the grade for securing the Indian Air Force contract?

In the midst of all this, some thought must be devoted to India's own indigenous aeronautical industry. Here the comparative positions of the Chengdu Aircraft Industries and Hindustan Aeronautics in their respective countries invite serious introspection. Driven by necessity, China on its side has developed and produced a series of indigenous combat aircraft, often by reverse engineering and of admittedly inferior performance but in large numbers and at low costs, securing large portions of the second and third level international markets, besides equipping its own air forces. But now, with aircraft like the JF-17 and J-10 coming out of Chinese design bureaus and production lines, yet still maintaining lower costs, the Chinese aeronautical industry seems to be taking on the world on its own terms. In comparison, in India, after the less than successful episode of the HF-24 Marut, development of indigenous combat aircraft came to a halt. Hindustan Aeronautics, India's sole aircraft production facility, is still attempting to stabilise its design and production baselines with the LCA Tejas, a project which has generated immense scepticism and acquired little support even from its prospective user, the Indian Air Force, no doubt due to its troubled history, though this appears to be changing now. The progress of the LCA Tejas can be linked in many ways with the other macro Indian defence project, the main battle tank Arjun, recently again in adverse publicity in the media. The progress of both has been star-crossed – yet the national capabilities to create both are essential, if India has to compete on any kind of terms with China, its greatest potential adversary.