

IAF role in the China aggression

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India's air force was just a third the size of rival China in 1962

The IAF role in the 1962 war with China seems to have become controversial. The cause of all the trouble was the statement of our Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal N.A.K. Browne, who has said that the outcome of the 1962 war would have been different had the IAF been allowed an offensive role. The IAF chief said that it was not allowed an offensive role, that it was confined only to providing transportation to the Army. He was supported on this by the former Air Vice Marshal A.K. Tewary, who was even more categorical and took the view that India could have defeated China in the 1962 war had its Air Force been used.

Tewary said the “costly and catastrophic omission” of not using the IAF was a result of several factors that “impinged on the decision-making process at the highest level,” including the counsel of then U.S. Ambassador John K Galbraith who “over-estimated the capability of the Chinese Air Force in the absence of proper air defense infrastructure in India.”

Writing in the Indian Defense Review, he claimed that the then political-bureaucratic combine sought the U.S. Air Force's help and did not even consult the IAF leadership. “In the final analysis, the use of combat air power would have turned the tables on the Chinese and the 1962 war could well have been a debacle for China.”

The Communist Party-run Global Times, a tabloid published by the People's Daily, rebutted the IAF chief's statement in its Chinese-language editions this week. It claimed that at that time the IAF “could not be comparable” with the Chinese Air force as it had “mainly second-hand” British aircraft such as Vampires and advanced Hunter and Canberra bombers, it claimed, were not put into service until the end of 1962.

The Congress Party had another view expressed by Congress leader Praveen Davar, a former army officer. He wrote in “Supreme Saviour”: “The political leadership made a wise decision of not using the air power against the enemy who may have had a better capability, and, therefore, the risk was not worth it”.

None of these were eyewitnesses to the decision-making on this matter. Galbraith helped to make that and other decisions for India. He had this to say in his "Ambassador's Journal – A personal Account of the Kennedy Years" published in 1969:

(November 17th) "The Indians want us to supply them with transport aircraft (to move troops from the Punjab on the Pakistan border to the threatened area. I had previously, though very quietly, suggested doing this). In further modification of the non-aligned policy, the Indians also wish pilots and crew to fly the aircraft. However, old habits die hard. When we went back at seven o'clock to work out the details and get information on the need to support the request, all of the senior air marshals were unavailable. It was Saturday evening" (p.481). Playing golf?

(November 21st) "Yesterday was the day of ultimate panic in Delhi, the first time I have ever witnessed disintegration of public morale, and for the first time I began to wonder what power so much resistance might be... The three (measures) of importance, all designed for their morale-stabilizing effect, were to suspend the detailed military calculations on which we are engaged and get in American-piloted air transport right away. Somewhere near in the neighborhood of a wing, i.e., 12, of C-130s are needed and we decided they had better start arriving. I also proposed that we ask that elements of the Seventh Fleet be sent into the Bay of Bengal, although this violated my rule that we do nothing the Indian did not request.

"In view of the loss of material by Indians, I also asked for cranking up the airlift again on a regular schedule. Meanwhile, on the other side, I affirmed my intention to keep the Indians from using their Air Force with the associated expectation of our support. Their air arm is not highly effective. The cities of the Ganges Plain are accessible from airfields in Tibet. There is no chance that India could retaliate to China and there is nothing in Tibet.

"And there is no technical chance we could accord them immediately the protection Nehru had asked. The Indian purpose of putting in the Air Force was the hope that this would stem the Chinese advance. But the Chinese walk through the woods and at night. We learned in Korea that even with complete control of the air, we could not keep them from supplying their forces or advancing. These considerations are new to the Indians (p.487-488)".

(December 6) "...I had stopped the Indians from employing their air power because it would either have committed us to back up their defenses or forced us to refuse to do so and that either decision would have been equally unfortunate (p.501).

(February 18) "The Prime Minister detached himself from the (air

defense) proposals; the idea of an 'air umbrella' was an invention of the press. An air defense team was here, he said, at his invitation to consider how to strengthen the defenses of India. All this has caused endless harm in the United States or could. By this morning, I had assembled a chronology of the various requests from the Indian Government, all of which were quite categorical, and this afternoon I took them over to the MEA.

They agreed that the team was there at the invitation of the Indian Government but hedged on the idea of American and Commonwealth squadrons having been asked to come in.It was agreed that the Prime Minister would clarify things in the Lok Sabha the next day or so.”
(p.548)

(February 20) “The air defense business is to be back on the rails. The Prime Minister said it wasn't an 'air umbrella' but an armada that would come to the defense of India.”.... I said we are not offering the Indian Government anything, which they have not asked for. This was particularly true of air defense (p.548-549)

(February 22nd) “Nehru issued a clarification of the whole idea to the Parliament yesterday, which was a masterpiece of accommodation.

He assured the Left that there would be no foreign bases (none were ever intended). He denied that there was any project for an 'air umbrella' (This was quite safe. No one has ever said what an air umbrella was). He promised new planes for the Indian Air Force but said that strips would be prepared so that in any emergency friendly countries could help India” (pp.550-551).

The point of all this controversy is simply that we were not prepared for war on the northern frontiers and panicked when attacked by the Chinese. The instinctive urge of Nehru was to abandon Non-Alignment (much to the amusement of the British and American leadership) and plead for help from the Western powers. The strong US reaction which resulted in a massive airlift of arms and air support to India as well as sending a US aircraft carrier force into the Bay of Bengal helped sober the Chinese.

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