

'We Over-imagined the Threat from China in 1962'

Interview with Marshal of the Indian Air Force

Fifty years since the 1962 war, reams have been written and multiple perspectives have come to the fore. Yet, the oral history of the time, the leaders and the politics, passed down to us by the generation of officers who saw these events unfold, has never been more valuable. Shruti Pandalai had the privilege of interviewing the highly decorated veteran officer and Marshall of the Indian Air Force (IAF), Arjan Singh, on his recollections of the war.

A lot of us have only read about this war and are curious about the context that led to the 1962 operations. What were the Sino-Indian relations up until 1962? What were the conversations that happened in India, China and across the world during this time?

Let me begin by clarifying that I was not in the direct chain of command during the decision-making process of the Sino-Indian conflict. So, my views are purely personal. What I heard was that due to our lack of strong intelligence-gathering machinery, we were heavily reliant on the Americans. It was their brief that the Chinese had built up a heavy Air Force. This was important because it would impact greatly on the psyche of the Indians who were scarred by the aftershocks of the Japanese bombing over Calcutta during World War II and were afraid of a repeat of such attacks by the Chinese. This weighed heavily on the minds of our decision makers. I felt very sad, since I could not voice my view out of turn since I was on an administrative posting at that time. In my opinion, we over-imagined the danger based on the intelligence input provided by a foreign country. Since we didn't possess, as a country, a strong intelligence network, we relied on the information provided by the Russians and Americans and did not retaliate with all our strength.

Historians have often blamed and dubbed, perhaps incorrectly, as India's 'Forward Policy' that provoked Chinese retaliation. Would you agree?

See, there was a build-up on the Chinese side in Tibet and other areas

and India was watching and monitoring this closely. However, I don't really think there was any decided provocation. The problem lay actually with the Indian policy, especially this paranoia of Indian cities closer to the border, like Kolkata [then Calcutta] being bombed. The leaders were extremely worried about the backlash from the people and perceptions of the Indian state's inability to defend itself and its people in case of such an attack.

What about the war itself—was there a clear-cut strategy? How were the logistics, planning, operational conduct, intelligence, etc., organized and executed in your opinion?

The decisions in this regard were made by those with mandates and it would be incorrect to comment on that. However, I will say one thing with conviction that we took the wrong decision. We should have taken them on in a big way. During that time, we held the advantage since we could have operated from the upper reaches of the Assam Valley, while they (Chinese) would have had to rely on Tibet and then make their way down to fire fight our soldiers. We held the tactical advantage but the intelligence inputs led us down.

Some experts have also argued that the deployment of air warriors would have made all the difference in the outcome of the 1962 war. Do you agree? Why wasn't this option considered then?

[Laughs] If you have an Air Force, what is it meant for? In my view, if you have a force which knows its potential and you are certain about it, why wouldn't you use it? I feel now the priority in wars has changed; Air Force must be used first. In retrospect, it would have made so much of a difference. I didn't have the courage to walk up to my bosses and tell them then. See, ground forces in difficult terrains can fight battles for 15–20 km, whereas the Air Force can go in for 1,000 km and change the complexion of the conflict. It really was a missed opportunity. Hope we never make the same mistakes again.

What would you say is the biggest legacy of the 1962 war? What were the biggest lessons?

In my opinion, our biggest folly was over-assessing the threat from China. It proved that our intelligence-gathering abilities were nowhere on par, even in respect to a country which was in our immediate neighbourhood. We had no idea as to what was going on across the border in China. We were not informed.