

THE INDIAN AIR FORCE ON THE WESTERN FRONT IN THE 1971 WAR

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ABSTRACT

The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 is predominantly associated with the Eastern Front and the creation of Bangladesh; however, the Indian Air Force's (IAF) operations on the Western Front were equally consequential in determining the war's outcome. This study critically examines the strategic intent, operational execution, and tactical innovations employed by the IAF in the western theatre. Drawing upon doctrinal evolution since 1965, the IAF executed a multidimensional campaign comprising base defense, counter-air operations, and close air support, while adapting effectively to diverse terrains. Through precision strikes particularly night missions and strategic targeting of Pakistan's airbases and infrastructure, the IAF curtailed the Pakistan Air Force's (PAF) operational capacity and safeguarded key Indian cities and installations. Detailed case analyses of engagements at Longewala, Chamb, and Shakargarh highlight the IAF's integrated approach with ground forces and its ability to secure localized air dominance despite logistical and operational constraints. The article also addresses critical limitations, including aircraft availability, maintenance infrastructure, and the fatigue of aircrews, as well as Pakistani counterclaims regarding airspace control. The study concludes that while the IAF fell short of achieving complete air superiority, it established effective air dominance that was instrumental in India's strategic success on the Western Front.

KEYWORDS: *Preemptive strikes, Night bombing operations, Air-ground coordination, Strategic and Counter-air operations, Operational fatigue, Close air support (CAS), Strategic targets, Hunter aircraft, MiG-21, Gnat Fighters and Canberra bombers, Logistical constraints, Air dominance and Air superiority limitations, Logistical challenges, Base defense operations, Airfield vulnerability, Adaptability in diverse terrain*

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