

The Chinese PLAAF in 1962



An assessment by the CIA

The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had made an assessment of Chinese air capability and its effectiveness in operations against India during the frontier war in the high Himalayas in October-November 1962. This has been de-classified 50 years after and is re-produced for Vayu readers.

From a humble beginning in 1949 the Communist Chinese Air Force has developed rapidly into a significant force; indeed, in combat strength it is now the third largest Air Force in the world. Initially, and for a number of years, its expansion was made possible by the technical advisers, instructors, and aircraft by the USSR. An impetus to development was given by the Korean War. An aircraft industry was built up with extensive aid from the Soviet Union and the manufacture of relatively modern Soviet types, such as MiG-17 fighters was started in the late fifties.

Economic and Political Considerations

The development of the aircraft industry was part of a wide programme of forced industrial development, designed to transform China into a powerful self-sufficient industrialised nation in the shortest possible time. Initial progress was impressive but in 1958 the regime ordered the adoption of radical programmes which attempted to accelerate greatly the pace of production and development. At the same time they introduced communes in the countryside. It is now clear that those policies failed and aggravated by bad weather conditions in the past three years, they have resulted in poor harvests and a severe setback to the economy as a whole. A serious food shortage caused a pronounced deterioration in the health, strength and morale of a significant part of the populace. A drastic reorganisation of economic priorities in 1961 has now resulted in heavy industry being placed after agriculture and light industry. A slight improvement in the food situation has been experienced in 1962.

The abrupt withdrawal in 1960 of most of the Soviet engineers, technicians and economic advisers, plus the sharp reduction in imports of Soviet equipment, have seriously reduced production in industries of defence importance. Unless this situation is remedied, China will be unable to build such equipment as modern aircraft (e.g., the MiG-21 and Tu-16) in significant quantities for some years.

We believe that as a result of the discord in Sino-Soviet relations, the Soviet Union has not supplied any modern offensive aircraft to China in the past two years, although she has been willing to make them available to other countries such as Iraq, Indonesia, and the UAR. We consider that as long as the serious rift in relations remains, the Soviet Union will be reluctant to supply modern aircraft to China and China will be faced with growing obsolescence in her Air Forces. Even in the unlikely event of her economic problems and ideological differences being resolved in the near future, it would be several years before China could significantly improve her air capability, unless combat aircraft were directly supplied by the USSR.

Organisation of the Air Force

The Communist Chinese Air Force (CCAF), subordinate to the Ministry of Defence, is organised as a single entity encompassing all phases of air operations and has no operational commands. However, in most other respects it reflects Soviet concepts and principles. CCAF headquarters is located at Peking and consists of operational, logistic and training elements. The Communist Chinese