



Resolving Siachen Perspectives from India

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The Indo-Pak rapprochement process has been floundering for over one year and is in serious need of some resuscitation. Though the two prime ministers met at Sharm el-Sheikh in mid-July 2009 and a joint statement was issued, the pressures of domestic politics forced the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to once again reiterate that the only negotiations that were possible with Pakistan were about bringing to justice the perpetrators of the Mumbai terror attacks. Quite obviously, the two countries have come a long way from the time about two years ago when it was being whispered in the corridors of power in Delhi that India and Pakistan were about to conclude an agreement on the "final" settlement of the Kashmir dispute. This agreement was said to have been negotiated on the back channels by the prime minister's special envoy Mr. Satinder Lambah with Mr. Tariq Aziz, his Pakistani counterpart,

Members of the foreign policy and defence establishments as well as the strategic community in both the countries realise that it is in the best interests of both to resolve all outstanding disputes as early as possible and live in peace and harmony with each other so that emphasis can be given to much needed socio-economic development. Hence, there is a need to once again kick start the stalled rapprochement process and institute confidence building measures at the diplomatic

and military levels. Perhaps the two issues that are the easiest to tackle are the demilitarization of the Siachen Glacier conflict zone and the Sir Creek maritime boundary dispute.

The defence secretaries of India and Pakistan had met at Islamabad on April 6 and 7, 2007, to discuss Siachen and Sir Creek but had failed to make further headway. While Pakistan insisted that there must be some tangible progress on Kashmir for the rapprochement to gather momentum, India continued to reiterate that it is necessary to first build confidence by resolving relatively less intractable problems.

While offering a treaty of "peace, friendship and security" to Pakistan in March 2006, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had hinted that issues like the dispute over the Siachen glacier region and the boundary dispute in Sir Creek could be resolved soon. Pakistan's then Foreign Minister, Khurshid Ahmed Kasuri, had claimed that discussions to demilitarize the Siachen conflict zone, as a prelude to a final agreement to extend the Line of Control (LoC) beyond map reference NJ 9842, had made substantial progress towards reaching an agreement. However, the Indian side had been reticent and Defence Minister A K Antony, who visited Siachen on May 5, 2007, had gone so far as to say that there is no question of progress on demilitarisation unless Pakistan agreed to authenticate the forward positions of Indian troops. The Indo-Pak peace process needs a showpiece agreement if it is to be revived and carried forward successfully. Only an agreement to demilitarize the Siachen conflict zone could provide the fillip that is necessary.

II SIACHEN: STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

Since April 1984, Indian troops have been deployed at the Saltoro Ridge to deny the Siachen Glacier to the adversary. The initial deployment was undertaken to thwart an impending Pakistan army move to occupy the Saltoro Ridge that summer. The key question that policy makers on both the sides must ask is whether Siachen has major strategic significance that justifies prolonged occupation, or are the two nations fighting over an icy wasteland merely for jingoistic and chauvinistic reasons? In his book *Siachen: Conflict*



Indo-Pak dialogue on Conflict Resolution and Peace Building is an ongoing project of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi.

As a part of this project, the Institute is publishing a series of background papers on various Indo-Pak bilateral issues. Besides, the Institute is also organizing track-II dialogue between the two countries in October 2009. For more information about this project, kindly visit IPCS website.

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Without End, Lt Gen V. R. Raghavan (Retd.), a former Indian DGMO, has written: "The (Siachen) theatre of conflict, as is now widely accepted, did not offer strategic advantages... It is clear that neither India nor Pakistan wished the Siachen conflict to assume its lasting and expensive dimensions."

To justify a prolonged conflict, a piece of land must provide significant military advantage and open up options for seeking major military gains through war. It should either deny the adversary an avenue to launch strategic-level offensive operations to capture sensitive territory or resources, or offer the home side a launch pad for such a purpose.

Alternatively, for a land mass to be considered strategically significant, it must be politically or economically important. The neighbouring cities of Amritsar and Lahore are politically important for India and Pakistan, respectively. The provinces of Alsace and Lorraine were economically important to France and Germany due to the huge iron ore reserves that these provinces had and several wars were fought to gain control over them. Siachen does not qualify as an area of strategic importance on any of these grounds though it has now become a politically sensitive issue.

Some Indian analysts believe that the Siachen tract provides contiguity between the Gilgit-Baltistan areas of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and the areas occupied by China across the Karakoram Pass on the Karakoram Range and that hence it is of strategic significance to Pakistan. While this is true, the value of this argument is tempered by the fact that China and Pakistan have already built the strategic Karakoram Highway through the Khunjerab Pass north of the Siachen tract through the Shaksgam Valley which was illegally ceded by Pakistan to China under an agreement of March 1963 and additional contiguity through some of the most difficult terrain in the world will not confer major strategic advantage.

Many Indian analysts have made militarily unsustainable projections about the possibility of a China-Pak pincer movement over the Karakoram Range and the Saltoro Ridgeline into northern Ladakh with a view to capturing Leh. Such exaggerated apprehensions are truly amazing as these fail to take into account the lack of a road axis

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to mount and sustain a major offensive logistically. Thousands of tons of ammunition, fuel, oil and lubricants, and other supplies, including rations, clothing items for the extreme climatic conditions prevailing at Siachen and spares and batteries for radio sets and other telecom equipment, would need to be dumped over two to three summer seasons before a worthwhile military offensive could be launched through this difficult terrain.

Since a major road cannot be built over a moving sheet of ice in what is perhaps the most treacherous mountainous terrain in the world, all logistics preparations by the adversaries would have to be undertaken by employing large transport helicopters. These slow-moving monsters would be sitting ducks for the fighter jets of the Indian Air Force and for Special Forces equipped with shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles.

Even if one were to grant the possibility of a joint China-Pak offensive into Ladakh, however remote the probability may be in the prevailing geo-political environment, better options are available to both the countries to plan and execute their offensives such that the Indian army is unbalanced at the operational level. China could develop its operations using the Demchok road along the Indus River as well as along the Chushul axis and Pakistan could plan to advance along the relatively less difficult Chalunka-Thoise approach from Skardu while simultaneously attacking into the Kargil sector to cut off Ladakh. If operations along this approach to Thoise, astride the Shyok River, could be successfully conducted by Pakistan, the Siachen area would be automatically cut off. Hence, militarily, it is more important for India to defend this axis in the Turtok sector rather than fight at Siachen itself.

II COST OF CONFLICT IN SIACHEN: CASUALTIES AND ECONOMICS

Although a cease-fire has been in place since November 25, 2003, and there are now no battle casualties, even at the peak of fighting in the 1980s and 1990s, maximum casualties on both the sides were because of medical reasons due to the harsh terrain and climatic conditions. The lack of oxygen at heights between 18,000 and 20,000 feet and prolonged periods of isolation are a lethal combination and result in pulmonary oedema, frostbite and other serious complications. Besides, they take a heavy psychological toll. While these casualties are now better managed due to early evacuation, improvements in medical science and the establishment of forward medical facilities, they can never be completely eliminated.

The economic cost of maintaining an infantry brigade group at Siachen to guard the desolate super-high altitude mountain passes and approaches leading to them from the western slopes of the Saltoro Ridge has been estimated to range between Rs 3.0 to 3.5 crore per day – Rs 1,000 to 1,200 crore annually. The costs are high because the

logistics tail is long, the only road ends at the Base Camp close to the snout of Nubra river where the almost 80-km glacier ends and a large number of infantry posts can be maintained only by light helicopters that air-drop supplies with attendant losses, as recoveries are often less than 50 per cent. There have been occasions when a Cheetah helicopter has been able to carry a single Jerri can of kerosene in each sortie.

The frequent turnover of troops adds to the costs as a battalion can be stationed at the Saltoro Ridge for a maximum of six months. Induction and training costs are also fairly high. Though the Pakistanis are relatively better off due to the lower heights on the western spurs of the Saltoro on which their troops are holding defensive positions and their shorter lines of communication to Dansam and Skardu, the weather Gods are equally unkind on both the sides of the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL). In mid-March 2007, five Pakistani soldiers had perished in an avalanche.

Both the governments must make a dispassionate politico-military assessment of the costs of contesting and defending the Siachen Glacier and the costs of the conflict in terms of human lives and material resources.

Dr. Stephen Cohen, a well-known and respected Washington-based South Asia analyst, has described the Siachen conflict as a fight between two bald men over a comb. In his view, "Siachen... is not militarily important... They (Indian and Pakistani armies) are there for purely psychological reasons, testing each other's 'will'." This test of the will has gone on for a long time and both the sides have proved their resilience – though at great cost. It was a mistake for both the sides to have occupied the Saltoro Ridge – if the Pakistan army had not responded to the Indian attempts to occupy the passes on the Saltoro, in all likelihood, the Indians would have withdrawn at the end of the summer. It is time now to rectify that error.

III OVERCOMING ENTRENCHED MINDSETS ON BOTH SIDES: RECOMMENDATIONS

Both sides have been finding it difficult to overcome deeply entrenched mindsets and are unable to look for innovative and creative approaches. India insists that the present forward positions of both the armies on the Saltoro Range along the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) should be demarcated so that there is a reference point in case a dispute arises in future.

Pakistan's position is that by suddenly occupying the Saltoro Range west of the Siachen Glacier, India violated the 1972 Shimla Agreement and must, therefore, undo its "aggression" without insisting on legitimising its illegal occupation through the demarcation of present positions.

A glimmer of hope was provided by news reports two years ago that Pakistan is willing to let India annex maps with the demilitarisation agreement

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showing India's forward posts on the Saltoro Ridge without prejudice to Pakistan's stated position but that Pakistan will not authenticate the marked maps. However, official sources have denied that Pakistan had made any such commitment. It should be possible to persuade Pakistan of the wisdom of acquiescing to the attachment of Indian maps showing the AGPL as annexures to the agreement without prejudice to Pakistan's stated position on the course of the LoC beyond NJ 9842.

After Pakistan's treachery in Kargil in 1999, the Indian army's advice to the government that the AGPL must be jointly verified and demarcated before demilitarisation is given effect, is balanced, pragmatic and completely justified military advice. However, Pakistan's military capacity to grab and hold on to vacated Indian positions after the demilitarisation agreement comes into effect needs to be carefully evaluated. In case Pakistan occupies any of the posts vacated by India, it will be a breach of an international agreement that will push Pakistan into a corner as an international pariah. Pakistan is passing through turbulent times. Its polity has been torn asunder by an uprising in NWFP, FATA and Balochistan and a Jihadi siege within. Externally, Pakistan faces strident international criticism for not doing enough in the US-led war on terror in Afghanistan. Dr. A Q Khan's revelations and the credible information that his proliferation activities were carried out at the behest of the Pakistan army have further damaged Pakistan's standing in the international community. Under these circumstances, Pakistan can ill-afford to break international agreements like an agreement to demilitarize the Siachen conflict zone.

India should insist on building a clause into the demilitarisation agreement that in case of a clear military violation of the agreement, both sides reserve the right to take whatever action they deem fit, including offensive military measures. Simultaneously with the withdrawal of its troops from the glacial heights, India should create and maintain suitably structured reserves for counter-action across the LoC at a point of its choosing. These quick reaction teams should have air assault capability with sufficient assets for air maintenance. They should be stationed in Ladakh, acclimatised for launching operations in high altitude and should be maintained at a high state of readiness. The Indian Air Force must equip itself with suitable surveillance and ground attack means to detect and attack Pakistani intrusions. These reserves would also be handy for intervention on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) on

the border with China should it ever become necessary.

Monitoring, Verification and Establishment of a Science Park

Soon after a political agreement to demilitarise the Siachen conflict zone is reached, the disengagement process can begin with the Indian and Pakistani armies negotiating its basic framework. The two DGMOs, assisted by civilian representatives from the MEA and the MoD, can together chair a Joint Working Group (JWG) to finalise the modalities of the disengagement and monitoring process. This JWG should decide the extent of the area to be included in the demilitarised zone and the stages of demilitarisation. The JWG should also work out the stages and the time frame for each stage of the process of disengagement to be completed. It should be possible for the two sides to agree to demilitarise the area over a period of two summers.

The demilitarised zone north of NJ 9842 should be free of all military and para-military personnel. The demilitarisation process can begin from the northern sub-sectors that have the highest posts and proceed systematically to the south. Infantry personnel and artillery observation post parties should destroy their bunkers and other weapons emplacements after vacating them. The gun and mortar positions can be vacated simultaneously. Where it is not possible to take the guns back, these will need to be destroyed in situ. The base camps and the forward logistics camps on both the sides and the staging camps on the Indian side will have to be the last to be demilitarised due to the difficulty of the terrain in these areas. Some of the camps that have good fiberglass huts can be left intact for subsequent use by mountaineering expeditions and by the teams of international scientists who may be given access when the Glacier and its surrounding areas are declared a 'science park'.

Monitoring of the disengagement process to ensure compliance with the demilitarisation agreement can be done to mutual satisfaction by using national technical means such as aerial and satellite imagery. Today, aerial reconnaissance through manned fixed wing and helicopter sorties, side-looking airborne radars and UAVs flying well within each country's airspace, provide viable means to monitor disengagement and detect intrusions. Certain ground-based sensors that are suitable for the terrain and climatic conditions obtaining in the area can also be used. The monitoring process could be initially unilateral and could slowly graduate to joint and cooperative monitoring with a jointly manned monitoring centre established at the LoC between Chalunka and Siari on the south bank of the Shyok River.

On the final completion of the demilitarisation process, an international "Science Park" could be established at Siachen Glacier to promote the study of Himalayan glaciers and to take regular measurements for monitoring climate change. Dr. Saleem Ali of the University of Vermont, USA, the

originator of the ideas of the Karakoram Peace Park Initiative, has done some seminal work in this regard and both the governments could benefit from his writing and activism. The Siachen Glacier zone could also be opened up for international mountaineering expeditions in a step by step manner as both the militaries gain in confidence in monitoring and verification. International help would be necessary to clean up the environmental damage caused over almost three decades of conflict and the dumping and disposal of warlike stores in the area.

The Siachen Glacier and the mountain ranges surrounding it have very little strategic significance. Therefore, the continued military occupation of the area by both India and Pakistan is counter-productive and is a retrograde step for pursuing a genuine rapprochement process. It would be more appropriate to demilitarise the area as a prelude to negotiations on the extension of the LoC beyond NJ 9842. After demilitarisation has been successfully completed, the Siachen DMZ can be declared a 'science park'. Environmental cleaning will need to be undertaken as a high priority task so that the mess left by 25 years of military occupation can be cleared up.

The demilitarisation of the Siachen conflict zone will act as a confidence building measure of immense importance. For India, it is a low-risk option to test Pakistan's long-term intentions for peace. It is, therefore, an idea whose time has come. Indian and Pakistani leaders need to find the political will necessary to accept ground realities. Trust begets trust and it will be well worth taking a political and military risk to give peace a chance. It is time the Indian government began the process of building a national consensus around this important bilateral measure. The actual negotiations for the demilitarisation of the Siachen conflict zone would be best conducted by the two militaries, which have a history of standing by mutually concluded agreements.