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## Demilitarisation of the Siachen Conflict Zone: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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The Indo-Pak rapprochement process has been floundering for over a year and is in serious need of some resuscitation. Though the two foreign secretaries met at Islamabad in March 2007, nothing substantive was achieved. The defence secretaries met at Islamabad on 6 and 7 April, to discuss Siachen and Sir Creek but failed to make any headway. Pakistan insists that there must be some tangible progress on Kashmir for the rapprochement to gather momentum and India continues 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 Foreign Minister, Khurshid Ahmed Kasuri, has been claiming for over six months now that discussions to demilitarise the Siachen conflict zone, as a prelude to a final agreement to extend the Line of Control (LoC) beyond map reference NJ 9842, have been proceeding slowly towards reaching an agreement. However, the Indian side has been reticent and Defence Minister A K Antony, who visited Siachen on 5 May 2007, has gone so far as to say that there is no question of progress on demilitarisation unless Pakistan authenticates the forward positions of Indian troops. The peace process needs a showpiece agreement if it is to be revived and carried forward successfully. Only an agreement to demilitarise the Siachen conflict zone can provide the fillip that is necessary.

### Strategic Importance of Siachen

Since April 1984, Indian troops have been deployed at the Saltoro Ridge to deny the Siachen Glacier to the adversary. The key question that policymakers 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 Without End*, Lt. Gen. V R Raghavan (Retd.), a former 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. 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.

Many Indian analysts have made militarily unsustainable projections about the possibility of a China-Pak pincer movement over the Karakoram Range and the Salto Ridge 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 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. 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.

Even if one were to grant the possibility of a joint China-Pak offensive into Ladakh, however remote the probability is, in the new geopolitical environment, better options are available to both 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

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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, it is more important to defend this axis in the Turtok sector rather than

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fight at Siachen itself.

### **Cost of Conflict: Casualties and Economics**

Although a cease-fire has been in place since 25 November 2003, and there are now no battle casualties, even at the peak of fighting in the 1980s and 1990s, maximum casualties occurred 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 take a heavy psychological toll. While these casualties are now better managed due to improvements in medical science and 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 it from the Salto Range to its west has been estimated to range between Rs 3 crore 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. The frequent turnover of troops adds to the costs as a battalion can only be stationed at the Salto Range for a maximum of six months. Induction and training costs are also fairly high. Though Pakistan has a distinct advantage in terms of costs as it occupies the lower heights on the western spurs of the Salto 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 sides of the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL). In mid-March 2007, for example, five Pakistani soldiers perished in an avalanche.

Both governments must make a dispassionate politico-military assessment about contesting and defending the Siachen Glacier and the costs of the conflict in terms of human lives and material resources. Prof. Stephen Cohen, 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'."

### Overcoming Entrenched Mindsets

Both sides have been finding it difficult to overcome deeply entrenched negotiation mindsets and are unable to look for innovative and creative approaches. India insists that the present forward positions of both armies on the Salto Range along the AGL 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 Salto 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 a year ago that Pakistan is willing to let India annex maps with the demilitarisation agreement showing India's forward posts on the Salto Range 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 AGL 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 AGL must be jointly verified and demarcated before demilitarisation is effected, is balanced and justified military advice. However, Pakistan's capacity to grab vacated Indian positions 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 the NWFP 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. Under these circumstances, Pakistan can ill-afford to break international agreements.

India should insist on building a clause into the demilitarisation agreement that in case of a violation, both sides reserve the right to take whatever action they deem fit, including 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 be stationed in Ladakh and should be acclimatised for launching operations at high altitude. The Indian Air Force must equip itself with suitable surveillance and ground attack means to detect and attack Pakistani intrusions.

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### Monitoring and Verification

As soon as 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 their respective foreign and defence ministries, can together chair a Joint Working Group 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 time frame for 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 sides and the staging camps on the Indian side will be the last to be demilitarised. 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 will 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 unilateral initially and 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.

### **Conclusion**

The Siachen Glacier and the mountain ranges surrounding it have very little strategic significance. Therefore, the continued military occupation of the area is counter-productive. 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 is successfully completed, the Siachen DMZ can be declared a 'science park.' Environmental cleanup 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. It is a low-risk option to test

Pakistan's long-term intentions for peace and 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 this 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.



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