

The Dispute Over the Siachin Glacier

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There is talk once again about a resolution to the Siachin Glacier dispute. But the idea of troop withdrawl from the Glacier carries little enthusiasm within the Indian Army. This is, despite the fact, that there is consensus even amongst soldiers who have served there that the conflict over Siachin – the largest glacier outside the polar region – is "the world's most cruel, highest altitude war". In short, capturing and retaining control over those icy heights of the Soltoro Ridge, west of the glacier, has been tough enough, and if these were to be vacated now – as is being advocated by someone – one cannot possibly get it back; because the Indian Army has held on to the Siachin Glacier at great human cost. And the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) that India's troops have held onto at treacherous heights as high as 20,000 feet and in temperatures ranging from minus 35 to minus 70 degree Celsius, is a line that defines a national policy; it is not a stand that Army brass has taken on its own. The subject, therefore, must be understood in three parts.

- (a) The circumstances that led to the Indian offensive in the region.
- (b) The current situation.
- (c) Is there a way forward?

Background to the Dispute

The dispute is essentially about the alignment of the Line of Control north and beyond its terminal point at NJ 9842, which Pakistan insists goes northeastwards – from NJ 9842 to the Karakoram pass – and, therefore, Islamabad says that the glacier lies in Pakistani territory; while India says that the LoC must follow a geographical feature, ie, the Soltoro Ridge, – which Indian troops dominate – and so Siachin Glacier lies within Indian territory.

However, the origins of the dispute lie in a cartographic controversy. In the 1970's and the 80's several international maps had begun to depict the Siachin Glacier as part of Pakistan. This

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included the National Geographic Society's *Atlas of the World*, University of Chicago's *A Historical Atlas of South Asia and The Times Atlas of the World*, published in London. All of these showed the CFL/LoC clearly extending from NJ 9842 in a northeasterly direction right up to the Karakoram Pass and onto the Chinese border. This, until then, not even the Pakistani maps had done! And in 1985, Pakistan published the official *Atlas of Pakistan* – the first such publication in Pakistan – that removed the Gilgit Agency from the status of a disputed territory, as it had been hitherto always shown, and gave it an entirely separate standing. It left only Baltistan's status (on whose eastern edge, Pakistan claims, stands the Siachen Glacier) as a disputed territory, untouched. But some Indian writers cannot be absolved of the responsibility of adding to this confusion, either. Two books by Indian authors – *The Fourth Round: Indo-Pak War in 1984* by Ravi Rikhye (map facing page 68) and Lt Gen KP Candeth's : *The Western Front: Indo-Pakistan War in 1971* – had maps, that only strengthened Pakistan's claim.

The source of this cartographic encroachment is said to be some maps that were initially produced by the US Defence Mapping Agency, which depicted the LoC running from the vicinity of NJ 9842 northeast to the Karakoram Pass, in the 1970's and the 80's. The best explanation for this error by America's map makers, appears to lie in the possible "translation" of Air Defence Information Zone markings, which provides zoning boundaries for air controllers in civil and military aviation, into an extension of the LoC from NJ 9842 to the Karakoram Pass. These have become an article of faith for the Pakistanis. However, there can be several ADIZ's that could pass through one country, and these do not necessarily identify a boundary line. But the publication of such maps by many of the world's leading atlases, further encouraged the Pakistani Army to contest the sanctity of the Line of Control.

And so, General Zia-ul-Haq decided to occupy Siachen Glacier in the 1980's, as a means to alter the status quo of the Line of Control. But being understandably sensitive to the implications of cartographic ambiguity after the 1962 Sino Indian conflict, the Indian Army took pre-emptive action, and in April 1984 occupied the Saltoro Ridge which marks the western wall of Siachen Glacier. As General Chibber, formally a northern army commander and now an author, who initiated the Indian presence on the Glacier has admitted, "the

strategic importance of the area was not a major consideration, nor was our purpose to capture any territory. It was simply to ensure that we were not presented with a fait accompli like that in Aksai Chin in the early fifties".

The Government of India had approved this action in advance on the clear understanding that the definition of the Cease Fire Line (now the Line of Control) from the original Karachi Agreement of 1949 to the Simla Agreement of 1972 places the Siachen Glacier on the Indian side of the alignment from NJ 9842, as the LoC runs "thence north to the glaciers". Further east, the IB gives way to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between India and China in Ladakh. And given its interpretation of the Simla Agreement, it is no surprise that Pakistan subsequently stepped up its efforts to internationalise the Kashmir issue and seek third party intervention, projecting the LoC as a temporary arrangement.

The Current Situation

The current debate centres around India's insistence that Pakistan must acknowledge the gains that Indian troops have made on the Glacier and accept the 110 kilometre long Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) before any troop withdrawal takes place – to prevent Pakistan making any future claim on the glacier in a Kargil like intrusion. But this is a requirement that Pakistan's Generals are unlikely to accept, because the Pakistan Army has led Pakistanis to believe that their army is in a commanding position on the Saltoro Ridge – where the AGPL is and the bulk of the troops are positioned – when in reality it is the Indian Army that dominates the Glacial battlefield. Therefore, any peace agreement would eventually require a Pakistani acknowledgement that their military establishment and their politicians have misled their people about their role at Siachen.

The LoC, which is essentially a political variant of the 1949 UN ceasefire line – that defines the positions of Indian and Pakistani troops in J and K – ends abruptly at NJ 9842, a point on the map, south of the Siachin Glacier. The dispute, however, is based on the interpretations of India and Pakistan on whose territory the Glacier lies. And as the control of the Glacier has strategic implications for each country, the conflict does have a military dimension. So, holding on to each post is now a matter of national pride. But that, however, has been left, in some instances, in the

hands of just a section of ten men, since steep cliffs on the Saltoro Ridge line can only accommodate that many, as India's infantrymen fight on heights ranging from 17,000 to 20,000 feet in icy weather and sub zero temperatures, where few armies in the world would dare to venture. A General once said to me "decorated or not with a gallantry award, every man who has served at Siachen, is a hero". How true. But the infantry-men who have braved isolation and cold, could not do so without the tenacity and professionalism of the helicopter pilots, who in their small Cheetah helicopters have lifted troops to the highest posts, evacuated casualties and most importantly braved it all to provide rations and medicines that keep our soldiers going. But over the past two decades, casualties – which in any case are essentially weather related and not due to enemy fire – amongst Indian troops have been minimised with training and the implementation of stringent preventive measures.

India's initiative, however, at the Glacier has become Pakistan's military nightmare. Several Pakistani commanders – including General Musharraf – have been unable to come to terms with the ability of the Indian soldier to hold out despite their repeated attempts to dislodge Indian troops from the Saltoro Ridge, where most of the troops are deployed. And on being asked to explain by Pakistani journalists, as to how Indians had been able to capture posts from the Pakistani Army in such a difficult terrain, Pakistan's officers had to resort to unconvincing excuses as answers. And their defeat in Kargil, has only strengthened Pakistan's resolve to link to a resolution of Siachen to the Kashmir issue.

Perhaps the reason for Pakistan's adventure in Kargil in 1999 lay in General Musharraf's desire to avenge his own humiliation at Siachin – as a brigade commander in Siachin in 1987 he was unable to push Indian troops out of the Saltoro Ridge – but the Kargil conflict, has ironically for the Pakistanis, given the LoC sanctity. In fact, an eminent Pakistani writer, Altaf Gauhar, has suggested that the contingency plan for a Kargil-type operation was formulated as far back as 1987 during the period of General Zia-ul-Haq. The plan was, however, vetoed by the then Foreign Minister Sahibzada Yakub Khan as being militarily untenable and internationally and politically indefensible.

Options for the Future

What then, ask some people, is the importance of the Siachin

Glacier that started the conflict in 1984? Most importantly, the Glacier holds 100 million acres of fresh water resources, which both India and Pakistan dearly need. It is perhaps the desire to harness this essential resource, that had led the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to indicate that we must make the Glacier a "Peace Park". It was not about the cost of keeping the Army on those icy peaks. That India can afford. At about Rs. 700 crore this takes up a small part of India's defence budget that will soon touch the 1,00,000 crore mark. In fact keeping troops at the heights around Kargil costs double the amount of what the deployments around Siachin Glacier costs. Moreover, hasn't New Delhi subsidised almost everything in Jammu and Kashmir for decades now?

However, if we are eventually going to have a Peace Park in that region, so that we can all utilise the resources there, without disturbing the ecology, then India must ask for the inclusion of the Baltoro Glacier, that is now under Pakistan's control (and lies north west of AGPL), in the northern territories. Pakistan has for instance harnessed two glaciers (though small) north of Sia Kangri, in the Shaksgam Valley, by diverting them to the Indus. This was in an area illegally seceded by Pakistan to China (ie, the Shaksgam valley), but Pakistan's actions have so upset China that Beijing has stopped any further Pakistani expeditions to K2, without Chinese permission.

Of late, however, a number of articles have mushroomed in the media expressing concern over the degradation of the fragile ecology system of the Siachen Glacier region. Most of these articles make out the Indian Army to be the villains of the piece. It is, therefore, time that such fears were allayed and cognisable facts brought to the fore. Global warming has come to stay. The Indian Metrological Department has reported an increase in temperature by 4° Celsius in the Antarctica over the last 15 years. All Himalayan glaciers are known to be receding at the rate of 10 metres to 23 metres per year. Compared to these figures, the recession rate of the Siachen Glacier is steady at 10.5 metres per year only. This low recession figure is paradoxically strongly indicative of the ecological conservation measures being successfully adopted by the Indian Army! The Gangotri Glacier in Himachal Pradesh is receding at the rate of 23.5m a year.

To understand environmental issues relating to the Siachen Glacier, one must first, be familiar with its geography. The glacier flows between the Saltoro Ridge to the West and the Karakoram Range to the East. These mountain ranges are offset from the Siachen Glacier by a considerable distance. Though all talk is based on the occupation of the "Siachen Glacier" by the Army, there are no troops on the Glacier per se. The deployment of the Army is on the Saltoro Ridge not on the Glacier. And the Saltoro Ridge is 15 to 20 kilometres west of the Glacier.

Next we need to factor in the statistics of waste generation on the Saltoro Ridge and not, as is generally presumed, on the Siachen Glacier. Of the total waste generated per day, 90 per cent is biodegradable. This waste is spread over a length of 85 km along the Saltoro Ridge, in small posts occupied by troops. The biodegradable waste is spread off in situ by incineration. The heat generated by this incineration, approximately 5×10^9 Kilo-Joules, is effectively utilised for heating of water and cooking, thereby minimising the heat dispersion into the environment, making the warming effect negligible. As far as human and kitchen waste is concerned, which forms 11 per cent of the biodegradable waste, it is first bio-digested and the residue incinerated. For this, state of the art equipment is being provided by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation, which maintains a permanent presence in the Region. The 10 per cent residual non biodegradable waste is collected at Mother Waste Collection Baskets by means of porters, snow scooters and helicopters and brought out of the Siachen Glacier region and disposed off suitably as per international norms.

Having assimilated these facts, to say that the presence of the Indian Army in the Siachen Glacier is detrimental to the environment does not hold water. We must, on the other hand, salute the valiant soldiers who are discharging their duties of guarding our national frontiers under enormously hostile terrain, climatic and enemy conditions, and laud them for their conscious efforts in preserving the fragile environment and biosphere of the Ladakh region in general and of the Northern Glaciers in particular. Incidentally further south of the Glacier lies the Ladakh plateau, with its enormous, natural mineral resources that are yet to be exploited.

Centuries ago, historians say that, "Herodotus found...gold digging ants in the upper Indus Valley – ants that are smaller than dogs but larger than foxes...that throw up golden sand..." But the Buddhist have however, given that land a religious hue that limits efforts to mine the region. The reality is that the geo-strategic importance of the Siachen Glacier, is essentially non-military one, regardless of what some people might insist.

Some military commanders are of the view that, if a pull out from the Siachen Glacier helps us seal a deal over the 'Line of Control' as a permanent border with Pakistan – after all you have to give something to get something – then let's pull out troops from Siachen. After all, not all of India's border with China is physically manned, so maybe we could go back to the pre-1984 days at Siachen also. But then, the Indian Government must accept that the Indian Army cannot possibly regain those icy heights that define India's reach in that region if withdrawn. The Government must, therefore, publicly assure the Indian Army that it shall not be asked to send its soldiers back on top of the Soltoro Ridge, at a later date. They did so in 1984 when there were no Pakistani troops, to stall their efforts. They cannot do it now, as General Musharraf would himself agree. His failure to dislodge Indian troops in the mid 1980's in the region, led him into initiating the Kargil intrusions and then the conflict in 1999.

But the romance of battle apart, is there a way forward? Efforts to de-militarise the Glacier in 1989 and in 1992 were set-aside after long rounds of Indo-Pak negotiations. It was politicians then – Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto – and not soldiers, who had made the fight over the Glacier region a matter of national honour and prestige and were in no mood to compromise and suffer a loss of face domestically. Today, a military solution to the Siachen dispute can be found if only both sides agree to a formal demarcation of their positions, as it exists today – called the AGPL or the Actual Ground Position Line – as was done with the LoC, with joint patrolling by both sides. This could include first a disengagement and not withdrawal, for a reasonably long period that would take the Siachen dispute away from the public eye. And eventually to either convert the region into a Peace Park or to establish a Siachen Science Centre to be operated by scientists from India and Pakistan so that the conflict can be put to an end.

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