
Siachin Dilemma: Strategic Importance and the way forward for India and Pakistan

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the significance of the issue entailing military presence of India and Pakistan with a view to offer way forward to avert similar future conflicts between the two nuclear states. Ranked amongst the top five largest glaciers in the Eastern Karakorum Range of Himalayas, Siachin is situated at the average altitude of 18000 feet above the sea level. Spread over more than 700 kms, bed of the glacier is point NJ 9842. Siachin, being the highest battleground of the world, continues to be the bone of contention between Pakistan and India since 1984 which has cost immense loss men and material to the two neighboring states as a result of unfinished partition plan 1947. In the backdrop this paper focuses the history of conflict, the paper endeavors to analyze the environmental challenges and offer recommendations to resolve the long standing military conflict.

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Introduction

"Sia", in the Balti language, refers to the rose family plant widely dispersed in the region. "Chun" refers to any object found in abundance. Thus the name Siachin refers to a land with an abundance of roses and also "Black Rose" in Balti, discovered in 1907, holds another and less benignant record of being the uninhabited, unexplored and relatively unknown icy-caped region has become the highest battlefield in the world, where Pakistani and Indian troops are entrenched against each other.

Siachin, in the north western Himalayas is amongst the longest of non-polar glaciers. It holds, within its folds the philanthropic waters to millions of South Asians. Siachin is situated on that unique mountain environment. It is the world's longest mountain glacier. It was 13 April 1984, when Indian troops moved to occupy the peaks of Siachin Glacier and Pakistan responded in the same manner. Siachin, the world's largest non-polar glacier, is referred to as the third pole. Its length is 76 kilometers long and varies in width between 2 to 8 kilometers. It is situated at an altitude of 5,472 meters above sea level. It receives 6 to 7 meters of the annual total of 10 meters of snow in winter alone. Blizzards can reach up to 150 knots. The temperature drops routinely to 40 °C below zero, even with the wind chill factor.

India and Pakistan the two neighboring countries in South Asia, have had a history of hostile relations over the last seven decades on a number of issues and have fought three wars. Amongst other bilateral issues, occupation of Siachin glacier in the Himalayan region has become a major dispute between both countries. Siachin, 'land of wild roses' has witnessed thousands of deaths of both Indian and Pakistani soldiers.

Following the UN-mediated ceasefire in 1949, the line between India and Pakistan was demarcated up to point NJ 9842 at the foot of the Siachin Glacier. The inaccessible terrain beyond this point was not demarcated, as the international community assumed that no battle could be fought under such hazardous environmental conditions. Karachi Agreement 1949 and Simla Agreement 1972 failed to determine as to which country would exercise the administrative and political control of these snow-capped peaks of Siachin. A major military confrontation erupted up after Pakistan granted permission to a Japanese expedition team to scale the important Rimo peak in 1984. It prompted Indian pol leadership to do something drastic in order to get their hands on the glacier. Indian Forces climbed the heights on April, 13 1984, followed by Pakistani troops to stop further advance of Indian troops and a battle was recorded on the highest battleground. Siachin Glacier still assumes the status of disputed territory where forces of both the countries have remained involved into military controversies despite serious health implications and weather atrocities.

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Strategic Importance of Siachin

Both Pakistan and India have been involved in an unending conflict since the partition in August 1947. The reasons of the conflict are many-fold, i.e. Kashmir issue, border dispute and so forth but the battle between these two countries on the heights of Siachin glacier has been a curious case in the strategic and international arena. Spending a heavy financials on patrolling a glacier which has extreme sub-zero temperature. There are some reasons that show the strategic significance of Siachin glacier:-

Silent Water Reservoirs

Believed to be the largest single source of fresh water on the Indian subcontinent, Siachin glacier is located in the Karakoram Range, a source of Nubra River that eventually feeds the mighty Indus; a major water source that irrigates the Punjab plains in Pakistan. During 2007, Dr Zaman from Rawalpindi said that "Siachin glacier is a natural dam and needs to be saved for future generations". Indus River Water Treaty between India and Pakistan allows the latter use 20% of its water and hence, both the countries aspire to control the source.

Issue over Saksgam Valley Cession

Indian claims that the entire of J&K state including Northern Areas was acceded to India on October 26, 1947. Saltoro is termed as an occupation of territory by the Indian Army followed by Pakistan ceded a major part of Saksgam Valley to China in 1963. The Indian claim over the Saltoro Ridge implies that Saksgam Valley ceded to China, actually belongs to Indian Kashmir and hence China will have to negotiate with India for its settlement. Saltoro Ridge looks over Gilgit and Baltistan to its west, needs to be crossed for seeking access from Skardu in the Gilgit and Baltistan area through to the Karakoram Pass which enters Tibet.



Siachin-Fresh Water Source



Figure 1: Map indicates the strategic location of Shaksgam Valley clearly dictating its strategic importance for China and India.

Path towards Aksai Chin

The peak, located east of Siachin overlooks the western areas of the Aksai Chin (disputed territory held by China). Therefore, Pakistani location in Karakoram would be a threat to India in Ladakh from the north in conjunction with Chinese locations in Aksai Chin, providing these countries with an added tactical advantage over India. Siachin in the possession of Pakistan would mean that Pakistan would have access from Skardu through to the Karakoram near the Aksai Chin and eventual linking with Shahidullah on the Kashgar-Xigatse road that runs parallel to the Tibet- India border. Siachin is near the Karakoram pass, forming almost a triangle with India, China and territory occupied by Pakistan touching the edges.

Siachin- A near triangle with territories of China, India and Pakistan



History of Conflict

Circumstances leading to Conflict

- a. In 1949 the “Karachi Agreement” and the 1972 “Simla Agreement” presumed that it was not feasible for human habitation to survive north of NJ 9842. The absence of a boundary line beyond the “dead end” of the Line of Control occurring at NJ 9842 has led to the existence of a contested space in an area where no humans have ever lived, or would wish to live, or could live for protracted periods of time even if they wanted to. Prior to 1984 neither India nor Pakistan had any permanent presence in the area. The dispute is regarded as a disagreement between two bald men fighting over a comb; this war is more about egos rather than national interests.
- b. In the 1970s and early 1980s Pakistan permitted several mountaineering expeditions to climb high peaks on this glacier. This was to reinforce their claim on the area as these expeditions arrived on the glacier with a permit obtained from the Government of Pakistan. Operation Meghdoot [named after the divine cloud messenger in a Sanskrit play] was launched on 13 April 1984 when the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force went into the Glacier. Pakistan quickly responded with troop deployments.



Pakistan’s Stance

India’s selfish interest behind this conflict was also the major cause of problem. Due to its strategic location, India aspired to conquer K.2. Moreover; it also wanted to reach Karakoram Highway and intervene between the Pak-China relations. Even an Indian Senior Army official claimed that glacier was important not just strategically but also a “5,000 square km water reservoir” of the future. Hence; it would also be proved that in April 1984, India captured Saltoro Ridge and also two important passes, the Sia La and Bilafond in the Pakistani region. India also aimed to advance further to K.2 but Pakistani Army became an obstacle in their purpose. During 2018, Pakistan Air Chief Marshal Sohail Aman after his visit in Skardu, stated that Pakistan would give a "befitting response to any misadventure by the enemy". Furthermore; according to a report by Radio Pakistan in 2018, Pakistan Air Chief Marshal also said that "Pakistan has and must have zero concern over the statements of the enemy. Our response to any aggression by the enemy will be such that their future generations will also remember it".

Indian Stance

During 2016, Indian Defense Minister stated in the Indian parliament that his government would not withdraw from Siachin because it believed that Pakistan would reoccupy areas vacated by India and therefore put India at a strategic disadvantage in the glacier region. India’s staunch community is not in favor of pulling out of the Siachin, rather improved living conditions for soldiers stationed there. Even if deployment is costly, they argue, no cost is too great if it is to defend the country’s sovereignty, especially in the Siachin context.

Operations Conducted During the Conflict

Siachin Conflict is characterized by series of military confrontations between Pakistan and India. The most important events under these battles are as follows:-

Operation Meghdoot.

- (1) It was the first ever Indian attempt to move to Siachin, aiming at capturing the whole area to resist to Pakistan’s movement in the Kashmir region, precipitated the Siachin Conflict. Op Meghdoot was launched on 13 April 1984, focused at occupying the Saltoro ridge was commanded by Brigadier Vijay Channa. War critics view it as a futile capture of non-strategic land which antagonized relations between India and Pakistan. It was also considered that the both the countries maintain respective positions in the area

paying a very heavy cost in terms of both men and material. The operation and the continued cost of maintaining logistics to the area is a major drain on both militaries. Pakistan then launched an all-out assault in 1987 and again in 1989 to capture the ridge and passes held by India, managed to capture important high points. Despite divergent claims from both sides, it is a strong belief amongst the defense analysts that 'the Siachin war in neither a victory nor defeat'.

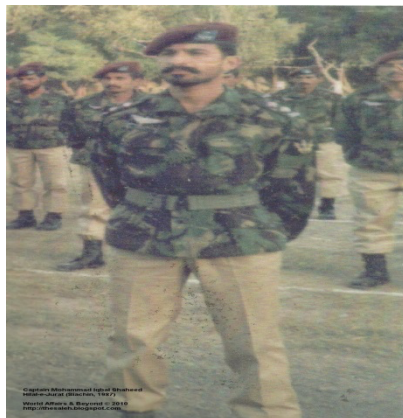
- (2) Pakistan Army in response launched its troops of Northern Light Infantry and Special Services Group to evict enemy from its position. A dozen individuals of 3rd Commando Battalion (Special Services Group) using ladders and ropes climbed a near vertical cliff and occupied a height at 21000 feet which dominated Indian positions on Bilafond La pass, named it as Quaid Post. Soon afterwards, several attempts by Indian troops were made to capture the post but remained unsuccessful every time.

Operation Rajiv

Quaid Post was commanded by Subedar Atallah Mohammed. Pakistani troops' position at the peak gave them a clear view of the Indian movement in the Saltoro-Siachin area. On 18 April 1987, Indian Army launched a reconnaissance party under 2nd Lieutenant Rajiv which laid rope along the route. Party was detected by troops on Quaid post and was killed. On June 1987, Indian Army planned to evict Quaid post from Pakistani troops and launched Operation Rajiv named after 2nd Lieutenant Rajiv. The 8 JAK LI assembled a new task force led by Major Varinder Singh to capture the Quaid Post. Captain Anil Sharma was assigned as Singh's deputy. The task force included 62 people, including 2 officers, 3 JCOs and 57 soldiers. Due to weather atrocities, party of 13 soldiers was sent to find the rope laid by 2nd Lieutenant Rajiv. Party managed to find the rope under heavy snow but was encountered by Pakistani troops. Reinforcements and pre-deployed artillery were not used due to severe climatic conditions and danger of damage to own men and material. Indian. Attack was successfully repulsed by own troops three times with heavy casualties to enemy. In his 4th effort led by Subedar Bana Singh, Indians managed to capture the post when Pakistani troops ran out of ammunition. Indians renamed the post as Bana Post.

Operation Qiadat

The Indian forces had established scores of bunkers, trenches and posts at most strategic location in the illegally occupied territory of Siachin from where they were consistently targeting Pakistani posts besides monitoring activities at the same time. To give befitting reply to the Indian unprovoked aggressions, an operation 'Qaidat' was launched commanded by Brigadier Pervez Musharaf on September 1987 in which Capt Iqbal was assigned the task of evacuation of casualties, provision of food ration and other necessary assistance to Pakistani troops. The Pakistani troops took control of a number of key posts but several of their team members had either embraced martyrdom or received injuries during the operation. Help was asked for and Capt Iqbal swiftly reached by leading his platoon from the front side, inflicting heavy losses to the Indians. Capt Iqbal kept climbing the steep mountains of Siachin over 21000 feet with a gun in one hand and holding himself with the other in spite of receiving serious bullet injuries on his legs but did not lose courage, determination and proceeded forward. He destroyed many pickets on his way till he reached the highest picket on the Siachin Glacier, held by the Indians where he waged the fiercest battle and in the process embraced martyrdom on 25 September 1987.



Operation Chumik.

- (3) Chumik is a minor sub sector of Bilafond Sub Sector, which has remained quiet since 1984 with the exception of Chumik Operation in 1989. A Pakistani post was established in the Location of present Sher Post in 1985. The post was later withdrawn suffering heavy losses due to avalanches and enemy artillery fire the same year. The post was re-established in 1988 by 9 Northern Light Infantry on the order of Commander Force Command Northern Area. In the early spring of 1989, there were signal intercepts

indicating enemy activity in the area, so Commander Force Command Northern Area ordered to reoccupy the post. Reconnaissance conducted revealed that enemy had already occupied 4 major posts in the sector forcing Pak Army to react.

Plan

Plan was that individuals ex 9 Azad Kashmir and Special Service Group) to be sling – dropped at the base with the aim of occupying the area, facilitating ultimate eviction of enemy followed by 2 platoon size expeditions (1 platoon each of 6 NLI and 9 AK) to occupy the area.

Execution

A volunteer officer from 6 AK Lieutenant Naveed, team of Special Services Group along with some stores were dropped at the base of Naveed Post and soon weather deteriorated making further drops impossible. When weather cleared, race to reach to top begun. Pakistani troops made it to top and forced Indian troops in the region to retreat under heavy fire.

6 NLI Expeditions.

It met its end when the force was on saddle while three officers and one jawan came under tons of snow.

9 AK Expeditions.

Expedition under Captain Tariq took a great start on 22 April capturing enemy Agra I post followed by an attack on Agra II which could not meet success due to difficult terrain. Post was then engaged with artillery fire. On 30 April 1989, a raiding party consisting of 11 persons including 4 officers was organized by Major Abdul Rehman Bilal. The party closed in with enemy machine gun position at approximately 1900 hours. The fire was opened which caught enemy by surprise forced enemy to withdraw asking for a meeting where almost all of our terms were accepted. The area was vacated and declared as de-militarized zone.

Operation Ibex

The Pakistan Army under Brigadier Pervez Musharraf (later President of Pakistan) launched Operation Qaidat to retake Quaid peak. For this purpose units from Pakistan Army SSG (1st and 3rd battalions) assembled a major task force at the newly constructed Khaplu garrison. In this sequel, on March 1989, Operation Ibex by Indian Army was launched to seize the Pakistani post overlooking the Chumik Glacier. The operation went unsuccessful at dislodging Pakistani troops from their positions. Indian Army under Brigadier R. K. Nanavatty launched an artillery attack on Kauser Base the Pakistani node in Chumik and successfully destroyed it. The destruction of Kauser Base induced Pakistani troops to vacate Chumik posts and Operation Ibex concluded.

Kargil War

The Kargil War, also known as the Kargil conflict signifies an armed conflict between India and Pakistan that took place between May and July 1999 in the Kargil district of Kashmir with Pakistan occupying positions on Indian side of Line of Control followed by Indian Forces reaction to situation. Linked with Siachin Conflict in terms of time, two months of intense high-altitude fighting, during which each side suffered more than 1,000 casualties, Pakistan ordered its soldiers home, India regained its mountain posts along the LOC, and the conflict ended. Although in the end no territory changed hands, as it had in the previous Indo-Pak wars.



Post-Kargil Scenario

During 2003, President Musharraf called for a cease fire during UN General Assembly meeting. Both India and Pakistan decided to end violence across border by implementation of a Cease-fire agreement of 2003 to avoid

violence on the Line of Control and Working boundary including Siachin Sector in order to ensure peace followed by avoidance of hardship for the civilian population. In 2008, when the peace process was derailed, Cease-fire violations started on Line of Control. In 2017, the violations reached to a number of 2000 incidences, but remained intact in Siachin mostly due to the hardships of terrain and difficulties offered by weather.

Present Situation of the Conflict

Indian Army holds few of the top most heights of Sia La and Bilafond La, have a tactical advantage of high ground while Pakistan Army controls Boltoro and other valleys and glaciers in immediate west of Soltoro Ridgeline. Pakistan Army holds Gyong La pass which overlooks Nubra river valley and India's access to Leh district. Logistically, Pakistan Army has an advantage over Indian forces as they can maintain their logistics supply, since its road-head is 20 km away from the farthest post. At the same time, Siachin is a logistical nightmare for Indian Army as their posts are 80 kms away from the road-head and needs to maintain their supplies only by air.

Physical / Environmental Implications of Siachin

Sustained human activity on glaciers gives rise to environmental problems as well as different health problems for humans present in the area. This section is focused on analyzing various problems posed by Siachin Glaciers for the troops present.

Operational Cost and Logistics Waste Removal

High operational costs and difficult logistics removal of waste is mostly ignored in characterization of this issue. By some estimates as many as 4,000 containers of materials have been dumped in glacial crevasses or left strewn across the landscape. This waste has been one of the major reasons for avalanches and snowstorms. It also holds the responsibility for the depletion of the glacier, which is the large water reservoir which can be utilized by the coming generations.

Depletion of Siachin Glacier

The Siachin glacier at an elevation of 5,400 meters is at risk of disappearing from the world map, not for one but two reasons: the impact of global warming and militarization of the glacier. In 1984, when India occupied a large part of the glacier it was transformed into the world's highest conflict zone. Siachin is melting fast. Though global warming may be a blanket cause, however geologists point squarely at the frenzy of Indian military developments on the glacier as the sole reason to this. The snout of the longest Himalayan glacier has already receded more than a kilometer. Given Indian plans for further 'development' of support infrastructure, glaciers will continue to recede causing catastrophic results for both India as well as Pakistan.



Frostbite

The soldiers in Siachin always live with the fear of Frostbite (a situation in which if your skin touches any steel (for soldiers, it's gun barrel) for nearly 15 seconds or more, the steel gets attached to the skin and that results in damage of skin tissues. Sometimes, the body ends up in the falling of the organ. Rifles must be thawed repeatedly over kerosene stoves, and machine guns need to be primed with boiling water. At altitudes of 18,000 feet, mortar shells fly unpredictable and extraordinary distances, swerving erratically when met by sledgehammer gusts.

Preservation of Eatables

Preserving eatables in Siachin is regarded in the same way as breathing in space. Eatables such as fresh food in Siachin glacier are rare for the troops of both countries. For instance, if any fruit says apple is kept for a while, it will turn into a hard product. Troops are given tin food in winters as it is impossible to store and preserve fresh food under such conditions.

Snowstorms and Avalanches

Avalanches had been the deadliest while working in Siachin in winters. When the temperature drops around 40° below zero, snowstorms and avalanches loses control. An avalanche which claimed life of 145 people in Giyari Sector has raised the concerns of environmentalist and policy maker as to foresee the decision of deploying troops at such sky-high peaks. In the last 31 years, the militarization has inflicted a great deal of damage on this fragile environment. Building of pipelines, drilling, chemical leakage, human waste and construction of buildings in defiance of agreements, as well as troop movements and helicopter flights, have put pressure on the glacier and surrounding regions.



Ex COAS Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kiyani visited after the Gyari incident

Medical Evacuation of Troops

Medical Evacuation of troop of both armies is a major concern especially in winters when there is no move possible on foot while troops remain deployed on heights of over 22000 ft. Evacuation of troops in any emergency is only possible through helicopter which at times is also not suitable due to the climatic conditions and strong blowing winds of the winters.

Lack of Trust

There is an immense lack of trust between India and Pakistan. This deficit in confidence has proved to be a major hindrance for any peace building process between the two states. Both sides lack confidence in each other which marginalizes any efforts made by either side to bring down the temperature. As mentioned above, Defense Ministers India have pointed to the fact time and again that adversary is reluctant to back down from their positions because there is an over whelming lack of trust and confidence on the opposing side. India firmly believes that backing out from their current positions would be perceived as vulnerability by the other side and encourages the other side to take advantage in their absence.

Recommendations

Considering the sensitivity of conflict between two nuclear states, apathy of world community and drastic implications if stays unresolved, fol recoms are offered to help resolve the long standing issue:

Withdrawal of Forces

Pakistan and India must withdraw their forces from the area and relocate at a position which may not entail hostility between the two countries. Pakistan has shown interest in this regard but Indian Government has always shown stubborn attitude towards any breakthrough for decades long conflict.

Dialogue not War

India and Pakistan must engage each other to discuss and find out viable solutions to all the burning issues between both of them though meaningful dialogue.

Arbitration

India and Pakistan will select Arbitrators who will in turn pass an award regarding resolution to the dispute. Both the disputed parties are not bound to accept the resolution. Arbitration provides the resolution keeping the secrecy of the matter intact.

Enquiry and Conciliation

Enquiry and conciliation are other methods to solve the dispute in which the enquiry committee would be producing a report of facts related to dispute and commission of conciliation would produce a proposal regarding solution of dispute.

Four Point Formula

First, both the sides must de-militarize the region. Secondly, the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) can be reviewed which can be exchanged for study. Thirdly, the cease-fire line be extended till Siachin, must be delineated on the map and identified on the ground from NJ 9842 northwards. Fourthly, to then sit down and discuss the situation between India and Pakistan to reduce tension.

High Altitude Precautions

High altitude causes lots of medical issues which mainly including frostbite due to very high temperatures which can be ultimately be avoided by demilitarizing the area, if not following precautions may be taken;

Location of the Base Camps

It should be selected after a detailed reconnaissance of the area and must avoid the avalanche sites to ensure the safety of men, equipment and material.

Better Quality of Eqpt/ Infrastructure

The equipment provided to the troops should be of adequate quality to ensure that even at even lowest temperatures soldiers are able to keep themselves warm and carry out move during winters. More than two thousand casualties have been due to weather since 1984. Introduction of technical means of monitoring and surveillance including surveillance cameras permits meaningful reductions of forces to be negotiated.

Introduction of Aerial Monitoring

In 1998, various specialists under the umbrella of the Cooperative Monitoring Centre, Sandia National Laboratories (Albuquerque, USA) proposed a Siachin Science Centre for cooperation-Operation in the area and a Military disengagement on the Siachin Glacier. With input from Indian and Pakistani technicians; the same organization also explored how Cooperative Aerial Monitoring could be used in the de-militarization of the India –Pakistan border. Employing the Aerial Monitoring devices can solve the problem of inaccessibility and both armies would withdraw some troops from Siachin.

Trust Building and Demilitarization

Since Independence both countries had trust issues, trust can only be built if both sides cooperate equally. Confidence building measure should be adopted in order to build trust like gradual demilitarization of the disputed area, high level diplomatic and secretary level talks should be held and militaries of both countries should be taken into confidence (as national and strategic interests are attached to this conflict) before reaching any solutions regarding the Siachin conflict.

CONCLUSION

Divergence of interests is destined to be resolved through peaceful and significant dialogue between the conflicting parties. Both the countries, Pakistan in particular, have suffered massive financial losses as the conflict has cost them flight of capital and shift of industrial business to other countries owing to permanent threat of war. The role of UN in this regard is of paramount importance for sustainable peace in the region. Kashmir, of late, has emerged as a flashpoint, a potential threat for a nuclear war which will cause immense devastation not only for Pakistan and India, but will affect the comity of world, in entirety. China and USA can also play momentous role to bring both the countries to negotiating table, but more importantly, both the states need to realize the importance of peace to save their masses from horrendous effects of war.

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