



DE-CONFLICTING SIACHEN: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*Wg Cdr Nishant Gupta
Research Fellow, CAPS*

On December 4, 2013 Sartaj Aziz, Adviser to the Prime Minister of Pakistan on National Security and Foreign Affairs, called upon India to withdraw Indian forces deployed at Siachen Glacier. He brought out that the presence of the Indian troops is an environmental threat to Pakistan as it is polluting the glacier, the primary source of water supply to the country.

Indeed the pollution caused by the presence of troops and the associated waste is polluting the glacier in two ways. On one hand the pristine snow, that feeds the Pakistani rivers, is getting polluted and on the other this pollution is contributing to glacier retreat having strategic implications. But, this call brings several questions to the fore. First, is it strategically desirable and practicable for India to withdraw deployments from Siachen? Secondly, if the answer to the first question is affirmative, then are such calls enough to realise the desired aim or we need to do more? And, if we need to do more, then what is the way forward?

It is well known that the Indian troops were deployed at Siachen in 1984, though the Indo-Pak conflict had been in existence for more than three decades. Revisiting the compulsions that considered the deployment necessary to safeguard national frontiers and national security interests would be in order. In 1984, India was fearful of Pakistan Army's plans of extending their reach to the Karakoram Pass and thereby linking up Pakistan Occupied Baltistan with Chinese Occupied Aksai Chin inside J&K's Ladakh region.ⁱ

This was a blatant violation of the Cease Fire Line (CFL) Agreement of July 1949 (Karachi Agreement) under which the CFL was delineated until point NJ9842 and from there onwards it was to run *'thence north to the glaciers'*.ⁱⁱ Thus, under this agreement, larger part of the Siachen glacier and the region east of it was left with India.ⁱⁱⁱ Indian Army had confirmed intelligence reports that Pakistan Army was treading on Siachen Glacier's western flank under the garb of *'scientific'* expeditions. And if Pakistan had been allowed to pursue this adventure, then China and Pakistan would link up to surround Central Ladakh on three sides, ^{iv}within our own territory. Such a situation would give them dominance over the Shyok Valley and easy access to Khardungla Pass. And from this vantage point they would threaten Leh, as it would be just a half day's march away from the Pass. ^v

Meanwhile, two of the Pakistan's powerful and long time allies - US and China - had started publishing maps showing the entire glaciated region up to the Karakoram Pass as territory under Pakistan's control. Therefore, international opinion was also being built against India's legitimate strategic interests.

**ARTICLES BY SAME
AUTHOR**

**YET ANOTHER DASTARDLY
TERRORIST ATTACK IN
JAMMU : WAY AHEAD FOR
INDIA**

In the absence of any viable diplomatic alternatives, in early March Indian military was ordered to move in and prevent the Pakistan Army from occupying any part of Saltoro Ridge or the Siachen glacier. This deployment must have been undertaken as the last resort since in Kargil, and other such forward areas, Indian army was following the practice of vacating inhospitable posts in winters. ^{vi} Thus, deployment at such heights was unprecedented. Secondly, prior to this no military in the world had any experience of deployments at such altitudes.

Since then, Indo-Pak relations have faced many ups and downs. On one side there have been many conflicts and skirmishes including Kargil, Op Parakram and 26/11 Mumbai Attack; and on the other there have been several diplomatic confidence building measures and engagements at various levels to reduce mutual trust deficit. But in totality both the

nations are still far away from any semblance of mutual trust - a precondition for demilitarisation or any meaningful cooperation.

Over the past three decades, there have been repeated calls to *deconflict* Siachen. In 1992, within eight years of militarisation of Siachen, India and Pakistan were very close to reaching an agreement to resolve this conflict. There have been reports that the negotiations were almost finalised but no agreement could be reached. During the discussions both the countries pursued the proposal of redeployment of troops on the mutually agreed positions. In the process, Zone of Disengagement (ZoD) was to be created. But the finer grains of the proposal could not be thrashed out.^{vii}

The issue again came to centre stage in April 2012 when about 150 Pakistani soldiers died in an avalanche tragedy. Since then the issue of demilitarisation of Siachen, has repeatedly surfaced in the public domain. The matter has been well debated amongst strategic thinkers, environment experts, scientists, NGOs, military leaders as well as political and diplomatic circles. But, there are divergent opinions on the issue. Some experts feel that Leh region is secured and there is no need for Siachen deployments, while others strongly oppose this concept and advocate strategic necessity to secure Siachen militarily.

**ARTICLES BY SAME
AUTHOR**

**YET ANOTHER DASTARDLY
TERRORIST ATTACK IN
JAMMU : WAY AHEAD FOR
INDIA**

In the prevailing distrust between India and Pakistan on national security matters, especially after recent violation of cease fire and other unpalatable instances from across the LoC and International Border, it is highly unlikely that the Indian national security apparatus will be in a positive frame of mind for exploring meaningful negotiations on strategic issue like Siachen.

Therefore, it would be better to approach the issue from a different angle and environmental perspective is one of the most appropriate dimensions to pursue.

Environment cannot be divided through political demarcations as implications of environmental changes do not understand political borders. Therefore, addressing the environmental challenges require cross-border cooperation (and not competition). Hence, the possibility of meaningful discussions and co-operation on non-traditional security matters like climate change, receding Himalayan glacier, rise in temperature, impact on Asian monsoon, availability of fresh water, waste disposal management matters and sustainability of ecosystem is much higher. Enhancing the weightage attached to the environmental stress would certainly create some amicable ambience. However, the biggest challenge is to mainstream the subject of environmental stress and its implications on South Asia.

There is a need to highlight that the greatest loss of human life and economic damage to South Asia in the 21st Century has not been due to inter-state wars or terrorism and its ensuing conflicts, but rather due to environmental disasters ranging from 2005 Kashmir earthquake, Indus floods of 2010, Siachen avalanche of 2012, to seasonal water shortages and droughts. The most recent cloud burst in Uttarakhand has been termed as *Himalayan Tsunami* primarily due to the enormity of destruction and loss of life.

The regional organisation like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP) that can pursue the agenda of environmental co-operation should be strengthened and deliberations on non-traditional security threats like Siachen should find greater attention.

It would be in India's best interest to de-conflict Siachen and thereby invest its energies and resources towards social and economic progress in a peaceful manner. However, any de-conflicting mechanism must be enforceable, implementable and verifiable. There must be enough provisions to monitor violations and to take necessary corrective measures in a timely manner. India cannot afford to give away its vantage military positions unless it is sure that Pakistan Army would not occupy them subsequently. Being benevolent and withdrawing as a friendship gesture will not help as the past gestures like halting advance

at Uri in 1948; or not capturing Skardu; or giving up Haji Pir in 1966; or returning 93,000 troops and territory in 1972 has not improved Indo-Pak relations in any manner.^{viii}

Given the tensions and distrust between immediate neighbours, any kind of demilitarisation in Siachen doesn't appear to be feasible in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, call by Sartaj Aziz should serve as another opportunity to revisit the Siachen issue (as well as other environmental concerns having trans-boundary implications) in a non traditional manner. The matter, being multi-disciplinary, should not be left to strategic experts alone. Rather it necessitates involvement of experts from different fields including security, defence, environmental scientists, academia, NGOs and others.

Endnotes:

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ MK Rasgotra, *The Siachen Story: Why Indian Army Cannot Withdraw from the Glacier* accessed at <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2012/20120518/edit.htm#4> on May 2012. Mr Rasgotra was the Foreign Secretary from 1982-1985.

ⁱⁱ Jasjit Singh, *Defence from the Skies: Indian Air Force Through 75 Years*, (Delhi: KW,2007), pp 151-152.

ⁱⁱⁱ The core issue is why this ambiguity was allowed to exist during the CFL Agreement of 1949. And secondly, why no corrective measures were taken during the Simla Agreement, when India was distinct advantage over Pakistan.

^{iv}

^v Rasgotra, n. 1.

^{vi} Pakistani Army exploited this practice of vacating forward posts in winter and intruded Kargil in 1999.

^{vii} "Siachen Was Almost A Done Deal In 1992" in *The Hindu*, June 10, 2012. p. 1.

^{viii} Vikram Sood, "Why India cannot Afford to Give up Siachen" April 13, 2012 accessed at <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/why-india-cannot-afford-to-give-up-siachen/20120413.htm> on December 26, 2013.