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SIACHEN GLACIER FLASHPOINT:
A STUDY OF INDIAN PAKISTANI RELATIONS

by

Ashutosh Misra

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INTRODUCTION

The overall relationship between India and Pakistan has been bitter ever since the legacies of colonial rule tore them asunder in 1947. In the last five decades India and Pakistan have fought four wars (excluding the proxy war in Kashmir since 1989 and the regular heavy shelling on the border), causing enormous loss of human lives and resources. The conflict continues to date. This paper looks at how, despite a hostile relationship, India and Pakistan have been negotiating on the pending disputes. The paper looks at the Siachen Glacier dispute and analyses the role of leadership in it.

Between 1988, when the first round of talks were held under Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, and 1998 eight rounds of negotiations have taken place but without substantial results. After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi (1991) and overthrow of Benazir (1990 and 1996), peace efforts had been struggling to take off until I.K. Gujral and Nawaz Sharif became prime ministers. There was a great deal of optimism prevailing on both sides on the premise that both leaders, being Punjabis, share a common origin (Punjab), and therefore, understand each other well. Quite expectedly, both took initiatives to restart the stalled talks. Unfortunately, Gujral did not remain in office for long, and was succeeded by Deve Gauda under whom some progress on talks was made.

In India, there have been significant political developments causing frequent changes in leadership after 1995. Pakistan, on the other hand, has been somewhat stable politically under Nawaz Sharif, who had shown an interest in improving relations with India. The advent of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), the 'right wing Hindu nationalist party' under the leadership of Atal Behari Vajpayee, to power in India aroused fears in Pakistan. However, Vajpayee's first tenure lasted only 11 months, but his second tenure, in 1998, proved otherwise. This time leading a coalition government, Vajpayee was determined to prove his critics, both in India and Pakistan, wrong, by making efforts to boost ties. But he also had his domestic agenda to meet. So he worked out his domestic and external agendas in tandem. On the one hand, in May 1998, he took the decision to go ahead with nuclear tests in Pokhran

(Rajasthan) and advance the missile programme, on the other hand, he extended the olive branch to Pakistan.

In return, Pakistan also responded by exploding its first ever-nuclear device in the Chagai hills and carrying out a series of missile tests. Amidst these developments Vajpayee made a historic bus trip, in February 1999, to Lahore through the Wagah border, and the two prime ministers signed the Lahore Declaration in Lahore. The efforts of the two leaders evoked favourable responses in the two countries, and were hailed by the international community as well. But while the people had started hoping for a transformation in the hostile relations, a severe jolt was given to these peace efforts. In the following May, Pakistani regular soldiers, along with *mujahideen* fighters, intruded almost 15 to 20 kilometres inside the Indian territory in the Kargil region of Jammu and Kashmir state and occupied most of the Indian posts. Because of the harsh weather conditions in winter, Indian troops always vacated these posts, which are situated at high altitudes. It is believed that these intruders had occupied these posts in winter, but it came to the notice of Indians only in May, when they returned. As a result the two sides engaged in a two-month long fierce battle that eventually battered the already fragile peace fabric.

What worsened the relations considerably was the military coup in October 1999, which brought down the democratically elected Nawaz Sharif government putting him along with other ministers under house arrest. Alarm bells rang in India because both countries were now believed to be possessing nuclear weapons. A military coup in such a situation would have been the last thing India would have wanted. Besides, India believed that the Pakistani Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf had masterminded the entire Kargil intrusion. As he became the 'Chief Executive' of Pakistan, after the coup, India had no reasons to feel optimistic about its relations with Pakistan.

As expected, in the aftermath of the Kargil war, Pakistan intensified the proxy war, which it has waged since 1989, by stepping up militancy in the Kashmir valley and the north-east regions of India. Recently, ties between the two countries have gone from bad to worse, and there seems to be no signs on the horizons of any peace efforts being made. But the logical question to ask here is: whither Indo-Pakistan relations? And what would happen to the pending disputes on which progress has been made in the past? Would all those efforts and hard work put in by the negotiators go in vain?

The Kargil war has again highlighted the strategic importance of the Siachen region. Its significance can be gauged from the fact that the intention of the intruders was to cut the supplies to Siachen (Leh) by controlling the Srinagar-Leh highway and then launching a massive attack on the Indian troops in Siachen. As events have unfolded in the past couple of years another conflict between the two should not come as a surprise. Therefore, it goes without saying that the role of Siachen in such a conflict is very vital.

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THE DISPUTE

Siachen holds the distinction of being the highest battlefield in the world. It has witnessed conflict between India and Pakistan for over thirteen years now. So far, it has resulted in hundreds of casualties caused mostly by adverse climatic conditions and harsh terrain rather than military skirmishes. The conflict is also putting an enormous financial burden on the national exchequer on both sides. Sliding down a valley in the Karakoram Range, the glacier is 76 kilometres long, and varies in width between 2 and 8 kilometres. It receives up to 6-7 metres of the annual total of 10 metres of snow in the winter months. Blizzards can reach a speed of up to 150 knots (nearly 300 kilometres per hour). The temperature drops routinely to 40 degrees centigrade below zero, and even lower with the wind chill factor. For these reasons the Siachen Glacier has been called the "Third Pole".¹ The Indian and Pakistani leadership have acknowledged the human and economic costs of the conflict and conducted several rounds of negotiations, but with no substantial results.

The altitude of some Indian forward bases on the Saltoro ridge ranges from Kumar (16,000 feet) and Bila Top (18,600 feet) to Pahalwan (20,000 feet) and Indira Col (22,000 feet). Because of the steep gradient of the Saltoro range, the area is also prone to avalanches. These adverse conditions have had direct consequences on the course of the war. Since the beginning of the war, only 3 percent of the Indian casualties have been caused by hostile firing; the remaining 97 percent have fallen prey to the altitude, weather, and terrain.²

On the other hand, Pakistani combat casualties are low because troops are dug in, artillery fire over mountain peaks is generally inaccurate, and infantry

¹ Samina Ahmed, and Varun Sahni, "Freezing the Fighting: Military Disengagement on Siachen Glacier", Cooperative Monitoring Center Occasional Papers, Sandia National Laboratories, Albuquerque, March 1998, pp. 10.

² *Ibid.*

assaults are seldom made in the harsh climate and difficult terrain. Most Pakistani casualties, too, occur because of the climate, terrain, and altitude. Pakistani positions are, for the most part, at a lower altitude in the glacier area, ranging between 9,000 and 15,000 feet (some are at a much higher altitude, such as Conway Saddle at 17,200 feet, which controls ingress to the glacier). Glaciers at the Pakistani front lines begin at 9,440 feet. Pakistani troops are stationed on steep slopes, and are therefore exposed to harsh weather. As a result, the main causes of Pakistani casualties are treacherous crevasses and ravines, avalanches, high altitude pulmonary and cerebral edema and hypothermia.³

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³ According to a Pakistani officer stationed in Siachen, "We have lost many more men to avalanches, crevasses and cold than we have to shells and bullets." Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal, "Siachen", *News*, 12 April 1995.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONFLICT

The State of Jammu and Kashmir had formally and legally acceded to India, in accordance with the provisions of the Transfer of Power Act passed by the British Parliament, which granted British India its independence. The instrument of accession of the State was duly accepted by the British Governor General of India on 26 October 1947, on the recommendation of the Government of India. That the whole state of Jammu and Kashmir is an integral part of India from that date onwards is, therefore, unquestionable, in the Indian view.

On the other hand, Pakistan until now has maintained a fairly ambiguous position in respect of its jurisdiction over different parts of the State occupied by it in 1947-48. As a consequence, Azad ("independent") Kashmir does not appear on any published Pakistani map, and it has its own constitution, its own capital city (Muzaffarabad), a full-fledged Government, a national flag, but no formal recognition by Pakistan. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's effort to integrate Azad Kashmir into Pakistan as a fifth state in 1973 was strenuously objected to by Kashmiri leaders in Pakistan. As a result, he amended the Azad Kashmir constitution to include provisions granting the area its own Supreme Court, Prime Minister, and Chief Election Commissioner, thus reinforcing the political separateness of Azad Kashmir from Pakistan.

Pakistan has maintained a different position with regard to the Northern Areas of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, which Bhutto insisted did not belong to the State. Pakistan has been even more ambiguous about the boundary between Azad Kashmir and the Northern Areas, which include the erstwhile principalities in the State of Jammu and Kashmir. For instance, General Zia-ul-Haq maintained a contradictory stand. He was quoted as having said that the Northern Areas, including Baltistan, were disputed areas but part of Pakistan.⁴

⁴ "Indian Envoy Stays Away from Zia's Dinner", *Times of India*, 10 November 1983.

Two years later, he was reported to have stated that the Siachen Glaciers lay in a disputed territory and that it was a no man's land.⁵

The very fact that initially Siachen was considered to be completely inhospitable and not worth any conflict on the ground perhaps was responsible for the absence of more definitive arrangements concerning the line between territories of India and Pakistan. The original cease-fire line (CFL) agreed to by India and Pakistan in the July 1949 Karachi Agreement did not cover the area of "the glaciers" because of the difficulties of delineating the line. Beyond the delineated grid, Point NJ 9842 near Chalunka, the Karachi Agreement spoke of the line passing "north to the glaciers". When the CFL was changed into a mutually accepted line of control (LoC) in October 1972, the newly delineated line ran from the Shyok river west of Thang (which is in India) to Point NJ 9842. The area north of it was left blank and open to subsequent Pakistani encroachments, and then, since 1984, to military attacks to gain territory by force.⁶

The reason for the controversy is that Siachen Glacier region falls within the undelineated territory beyond the last defined section of the LoC map grid (point NJ 9842). As a result, Indians and Pakistanis have tried to lay their territorial claims by interpreting the vague language contained in the 1949 and 1972 agreements to prove their respective points. For Pakistan, 'thence northwards' means from NJ 9842 up to the Karakoram Pass.⁷ India, on the other hand, draws a north-westerly line from NJ 9842 along the watershed line of the Saltoro range, a southern offshoot of the Karakoram range.⁸

⁵ Jasjit Singh, "Siachen Glacier: Fact and Fiction", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 12, no. 8, October 1989, pp. 696.

⁶ For a better understanding see the map in Michael Krepon and Amit Sevak (eds.), *Crisis Prevention, Confidence Building and Reconciliation in South Asia*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), pp. 82.

⁷ Robert G. Wirsing, "The Siachen Glacier Dispute - I: The Territorial Dimension", *Strategic Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, autumn 1986, pp. 60-61.

⁸ Jasjit Singh, 1989, *op. cit.*, pp. 700-701.

Military Confrontation on the Glacier

The genesis of the Siachen dispute has been described objectively by Indian Lt. General M.L. Chibber, who, as Army Commander (Northern Command), was responsible for directing the April 1984 Indian military initiative in the vicinity of the Siachen Glacier. The operation, code-named *Meghdoot*, triggered armed clashes between Indian and Pakistani forces in the area and eventually led to the current phase of the dispute. The lack of clarity over territorial rights in the glacier area was a sufficient catalyst for a new round of armed rivalry between India and Pakistan. Regarding the outbreak of hostilities, Robert G. Wirsing, who has done an in-depth study the Siachen dispute writes:

What is publicly known about events leading up to the outbreak of hostilities in the vicinity of the Siachen Glacier in the winter of 1983-84 does not supply unambiguous evidence that either India or Pakistan was the aggressor. Precisely who shot first is probably impossible to determine. Which of the two armed forces had the "right" to be on the glacier - since the question of the legitimacy of the two sides' territorial claims have never been submitted to impartial adjudication - is a matter obviously open to disagreement. There is ample evidence, however, that the Indian armed forces were the first to establish permanent posts on the glacier and that they had prepared themselves long and well for the task. Published Indian accounts of Operation Meghdoot leave little room for doubt, in fact, that the Pakistanis were caught napping and that their principal strategy for fortifying Pakistan's claim to the glacier - sponsoring foreign mountaineering expeditions to the area - had failed.⁷

General Chibber, justifying the logic of operation Meghdoot in 1984, refers to his 1978 decision to sanction the first Indian expedition to Siachen, Colonel N. Kumar's "Operational Patrol" to Teram Kangri in the Siachen area. The discussion was influenced, he recalls, by an episode in the mid-1950s, when the Government of India had turned down the Army's plans for reconnaissance and hunting trips to the Aksai Chin area north-east of Kashmir

⁷ Robert G. Wirsing, "The Siachen Glacier Dispute- II: The Strategic Dimension", *Strategic Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, autumn 1988, pp. 41.

only to discover one day later that the Chinese had built the Xinjiang-Tibet highway through it. After Kumar's trip in 1978, it was decided that the Siachen area 'should be regularly patrolled during the summer months' but that 'it would be impractical to establish a post in such a hostile environment'.¹⁰ Although Pakistan claims that twenty mountaineering expeditions had been undertaken between 1974 and 1980 (mainly by Europeans and Japanese), such expeditions, according to Pakistan, had begun in the 1950s; Chibber makes the claim that none came thereafter.¹¹

Colonel Kumar's trip in 1978 to the glacier and subsequent activities by Indians alarmed the Pakistanis. On 29 March 1982, Pakistan registered its protest with India. Subsequent protest by Pakistan's Northern Sector Commander on 21 August 1983 disturbed Chibber because 'for the first time ... Pakistanis formally projected in black and white their claim to all the area north-west of the line joining the terminal point of the LAC at NJ 9842 with Karakoram Pass. A subsequent protest on 29 August 1983 referred to the 'LAC North of Point NJ 9842 - Karakoram Pass'. The Pakistanis asserted that the Siachen Glacier was 'Inside Our Territory'.¹²

Around September-October 1983, Indian intelligence spotted a column of Pakistani troops moving toward the Saltoro ridge, presumably with the intention of occupying the passes. The Saltoro range - an off-shoot of the Karakoram range - is topped by a high ridge punctuated by several passes that offer the only viable routes to the Siachen Glacier from POK. Inclement weather, however, prevented the Pakistani troops from reaching their destination that season. Pakistani writer, Zulfikar Ali Khan, notes that 'Later the Pakistanis decided to establish a permanent picket at Siachen. To pre-empt

¹⁰ M.L. Chibber, "Siachen - The Untold Story", *Indian Defence Review*, January 1990, pp. 89-95.

¹¹ A.G. Noorani, "CBMs for the Siachen Glacier, Sir Creek and Wular Barrage", in Michael Krepon and Amit Sevak (ed.), *Crisis Prevention, Confidence Building and Reconciliation in South Asia*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 84.

¹² Chibber, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-95.

this move, the Indians airlifted a Kumaon battalion by helicopters'.¹³ On 13 April 1984, at least two months before the beginning of the regular mountaineering season in the area, an Indian platoon was placed at each of the two key passes along the Saltoro ridge, the Sia La and Bilafond La.

Since then India and Pakistan have been involved in a conflict which is putting an enormous amount of burden on them in terms of both men and money. A.G. Noorani remarks that the fight could have been averted had Indian and Pakistani leaders acted in 1983 to freeze the status quo as it then existed. The establishment of a permanent picket in the area contemplated by Pakistan, on the one hand, and accomplished by India, on the other hand, constitutes a breach of the Simla Agreement. No LAC was violated, to be sure, but both sides have sought to unilaterally alter the situation. In the tense atmosphere of late 1983, a political decision at the highest level of leadership in both countries was needed in order to divert the course of events from the use of force and toward a diplomatic solution.¹⁴

Quite expectedly, Pakistan reacted to 'Meghdoot' by launching its own operation, 'Ababeel' (the Swallow), sending one platoon to each of the key passes atop the Saltoro ridge, Sia La and Bilafond La. In spring 1984, Pakistani forces carried out two unsuccessful attacks on the Indian picket at Bilafond La.

By the end of 1993, Indian troops were in possession of Indira Col and controlled both Sia La and Bilafond La. Pakistani forces controlled Gyond La overlooking the Nubra River Valley, the Indian access route to the Siachen Glacier from Leh. Pakistan also held Conway Saddle at the junction of the Karakoram and the Saltoro ranges, thus controlling ingress to the Siachen Glacier. Strategically speaking, the three southern passes under Pakistan's

¹³ Zulfikar Ali Khalid, "Geopolitics of the Siachen Glacier", *Asian Defence Journal*, November 1985, pp. 44-50.

¹⁴ A.G. Noorani, 1995, *op. cit.*, pp. 85.

control are barely 20 kilometres from the road head at Dzingrulma, and consequently pose a threat to the Indian supply route.

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WHY IS SIACHEN VITAL TO INDIAN SECURITY?

From an Indian perspective, the Siachen Glacier is the wedge of territory that separates Pakistan - Occupied Kashmir (POK) from Aksai Chin, the part of Kashmir claimed and occupied by China.¹⁵ In Indian perceptions, Siachen's geostrategic importance lies in the fact that its control would support the defence of Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir against Pakistani and/or Chinese threats.¹⁶ It would prevent outflanking of Indian forces in Leh and Kargil sectors, and connection of the Aksai Chin highway with the Karakoram pass. Control over Siachen would enable India to keep watch over the Karakoram highway and the Kunjarab pass, while fortifying India's position in border negotiations with China.¹⁷

For India, controlling the commanding heights is a crucial aspect of the Siachen conflict. This issue flows out of basic infantry tactics: height confers a tactical advantage. According to General Chibber, the notion that 'reasonably well-prepared defensive positions could not be dislodged' was basic to the Indian concept of operations. He argues that 'at these formidable altitudes it is difficult, almost impossible to dislodge a force that occupies a height'.¹⁸ Except at Gyong La, Indian forces occupy and control the commanding heights. Thus, Pakistani military efforts since 1984 have been aimed at dislodging Indian forces from their positions.

¹⁵ S. Ahmed, and V. Sahni, *op. cit.*, pp. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Rita Manchanda, "Indo-Pak Mountain Diplomacy", *Telegraph*, 9 June 1985.

¹⁸ Chibber, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151.

But India has disadvantages too. As long as Pakistan does not commit its forces to an offensive against the Indian positions, the Indians have the disadvantage of being deployed at much higher altitudes. In order to block Pakistan's access to the Siachen Glacier, India has no option but to maintain its hazardous posts on the Saltoro ridge, thereby exposing its forces to the dangerous altitude, weather, and terrain. India's strategy is also extremely expensive in financial terms and most of the Indian pickets and posts on the Saltoro ridge are air-maintained. Personnel, weapons and ammunition, fuel, and food are usually flown in by helicopters and occasionally parachuted. As M.J. Akbar remarks, "India's problems are greater than Pakistan's because the latter's supply lines need roads; ours need helicopters."¹⁹

India's Official Stand

India has interpreted the "thence northwards to the glaciers" to mean that the LOC proceeds from NJ 9842 along the watershed line of the Saltoro range. Air Commodore Jasjit Singh, says that

*in mountainous terrain the high crest line marking the watershed is the internationally accepted norm for working out boundary settlements, much as the Thalweg (or the mid-channel) riverine principle is used to delineate boundaries along rivers.*²⁰

However, India's declared policy is not a sufficient indicator of the different perspectives, concerns and objectives in the Indian policy community on the Siachen dispute. According to Samina Ahmed and Varun Sahni, three alternatives are readily discernible in India: (1) maintaining the deployment on Siachen at all costs; (2) negotiating a military disengagement with Pakistan; and (3) withdrawing Indian forces from the Glacier, unilaterally if necessary.²¹

¹⁹ M.J. Akbar, "Fresh Bid for End to the Siachen War", *Telegraph*, 25 October 1985.

²⁰ Jasjit Singh, "The Siachen Imperatives", *Hindu*, 13 July 1989. Also see Jasjit Singh, "Siachen: The Himalayan Battlefield", *Hindustan Times*, 18 October 1987.

²¹ S. Ahmed, and V. Sahni, *op. cit.*, pp. 14.

A.G. Noorani thinks that a negotiated or unilateral Indian withdrawal would be a wise decision as the disputed region is uninhabitable and has no strategic value. Some believe that a Siachen settlement could be the first step in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute.²² Lt. General Masih, whose brigade was posted in Siachen for one year, remarks: "Siachen is a political problem and not a military one. If guys in Delhi decide to pull out from Saltoro ridge the army would have no problems in that."²³ But J.N. Dixit, former Indian Foreign Secretary, strongly reacts to Masih's remarks saying:

There's a great deal of ambiguity on the part of the military. Why does the military not go and say that Siachen does not have any strategic significance. Calling it just a political problem is nonsense. Of course, all problems are political first.²⁴

There's another section of analysts that holds the view that the Kashmir and Siachen disputes can be de-linked and that Siachen can be resolved without compromising on Kashmir.

Strategists averse to Indian withdrawal from Siachen argue its strategic significance on the grounds that it physically separates Pakistan and China, the country's primary adversaries. Furthermore, a Siachen withdrawal would weaken India's position on Kashmir. Lt. General Chibber expresses the view that 'the whole of Jammu and Kashmir belongs to India; so where is the need for compromise?'²⁵ Similarly, Air Commodore Jasjit Singh argues that

²² A.G. Noorani, "Easing the Indo-Pakistani Dialogue on Kashmir: Confidence Building Measures for the Siachen Glacier, Sir Creek, and the Wular Barrage Disputes", Occasional Paper 16, Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington, D.C., April 1994.

²³ Author's interview with Major with Major General A.B. Masih, UYSM, General Officer Commanding (GOC), 11 Infantry Division, 33 Core, 18 June 1997.

²⁴ Author's interview with J.N. Dixit, Former Foreign Secretary, 19 December 1997.

²⁵ Chibber, *op. cit.*, pp. 151.

*the issues related to the Siachen Glacier constitute only a subset of a larger conflict ... concerning the state of Jammu and Kashmir ... The fundamental issue here is not a border/territorial dispute ... in the sense it would have been if the area held by Pakistan across the Indian defence line on the Saltoro range was Pakistani territory.*²⁶

Control of the commanding heights gives India the tactical advantage and denies Pakistan access to the glacier. India should, therefore, not relinquish its battlefield gains on the negotiating table, because Pakistan would occupy the heights as soon as India has withdrawn. Mahendra Ved, who rejects the idea of Indian withdrawal, says:

*Positions gained and maintained after fierce fighting cannot be given away through talks, since there is no guarantee who will violate the pact and regain more than what was in their possession earlier.*²⁷

As for the human cost, because Indian military personnel are volunteers, casualties are not a sufficient reason to withdraw. In any case, only a small part of the Indian army is deployed on the Saltoro range, and over the years the Indian forces have learned how to engage in glacial warfare.²⁸ Although the financial cost is significant, India has already borne this financial burden for 13 years and could continue to do so indefinitely. Here a very interesting and significant development should be brought to light. The Indian Defence Ministry has said that India plans to build a vehicle road in the Siachen Glacier area to carry arms, ammunition, and supplies to the troops.²⁹ Two obvious facts are discernible from this move. One, India wants to minimise the high

²⁶ Jasjit Singh, "Far From a Thaw: What Blocks a Full Settlement", *Frontline*, 4 December 1992.

²⁷ Mahendra Ved, "'Siachen Talks' Aim is Status Quo", *Hindustan Times*, 30 May 1989.

²⁸ S. Ahmed, and V. Sahni, *op. cit.*, pp. 15.

²⁹ For details on the strategic and geographical aspect, see the account of the Indian Defence Review Research Team, "Glacier Warfare: The Indian Army Experiences a New Dimension in High -Altitude Warfare", *Indian Defence Review*, July 1989, pp. 96.

cost of warfare And, secondly, the Indians are thinking of a long-term engagement, and are there to stay.

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PAKISTAN'S CONTENTION

For Pakistan, the Siachen dispute has a linkage with the Kashmir dispute with India. Because of the hostile nature of the terrain, negotiations responsible for delineating the 1949 India-Pakistan CFL in the disputed territory of Kashmir have left an undefined area that encompassed the Siachen Glacier and its approaches. After the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, neither state attempted to delineate a CFL or LoC in the Siachen region because of the nature of the terrain and the absence of any physical military presence.³⁰

Pakistan has interpreted the 1972 Simla Agreement to mean that the LoC should extend in a straight line in a north-easterly direction from NJ 9842 towards the Karakoram Pass. This also helps it to project Siachen as a disputed region. In the 1963 Sino-Pakistan Agreement, for example, in which the Karakoram Pass had been defined as the terminal point for the delineation of the Sino-Pakistan international boundary, the areas south of the border were described as 'the contiguous areas the defence of which is under the actual control of Pakistan', and not as Pakistani territory.³¹ Pakistan also claims that the Siachen Glacier and its approaches fall within the Pakistani-controlled and administered territory of Jammu and Kashmir, more specifically, in the Baltistan district in the Northern Areas. Pakistani analysts claim that the Siachen Glacier has been a '*de facto* and *de jure* part of Pakistan's Northern Areas ever since the creation of the ceasefire line'.³²

Pakistan has very cleverly argued that the anomalous status of the Northern Areas has no parallel with Kashmir and India. Siachen has been portrayed by Pakistan as a regional issue, in contrast to its stand on Kashmir which it

³⁰ S. Ahmed, and V. Sahni, *op. cit.*, pp. 16.

³¹ R.G. Wirsing, 1988, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.

³² Shabbir Hussain, "Siachen Glacier- Facts and Fiction", *Pakistan Times*, 6 September, 1985.

considers an international issue. The Pakistan Foreign Office expressed willingness for demilitarisation of Siachen and claimed it was not directly linked with the Kashmir dispute.³³

In Pakistani estimates, Indian expenditure on the Siachen operations is five times higher, while the casualty ratio is 10 to 1. Lt. General Imranullah Khan, who served as Corps Commander responsible for Siachen, claims, 'our aim has been to make it expensive for them, and that has worked'.³⁴ While Pakistani troops are stationed outside the glacier, in less forbidding terrain than their Indian adversaries, the Pakistani military presence forces India to retain its troops on the more elevated and hazardous mountain passes, resulting in higher attrition rates because of the dangerous altitude, weather, and terrain.³⁵

Pakistan's Official Stand

Pakistan's official stand has always been averse to India's presence on the Glacier, and always questioned India's right to be there. The Siachen Glacier and its approaches are located within Baltistan in the Pakistani-administered northern territories. Pakistan will not accept the status quo on Siachen because India's military presence on the glacier and environs, in its view, is illegal and unlawful. Hence, Pakistani policy makers rule out any unilateral withdrawal, and seem to have the following policy options: (1) to continue the armed conflict; (2) to sign an agreement limited to conflict containment; or (3) to reach a comprehensive and permanent settlement with India. The adoption of any of these options depends on the perceptions, preferences, and bargaining power of various sections of Pakistan's policy-making community.³⁶

Hard-liners within the Pakistani military and bureaucracy favour the continuation of conflict because India is perceived as the aggressor. Major

³³ Aroosa Alam, "Siachen Likely to be Demilitarized", *Muslim*, 7 December 1993; also see Umer Farooq, "Pakistan Ready to Discuss Withdrawal from Siachen", *Nation*, 2 March 1995.

³⁴ See A. Alam, *op. cit.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ S. Ahmed, and V. Sahni, *op. cit.*, pp. 20.

General Jehangir Nasarullah, head of Pakistan's armed forces, Inter-Service Public Relations, declared, 'Every square inch is sovereign territory. You can't throw it away'.³⁷ For this segment, a negotiated settlement is uncalled for and regarded as an unnecessary concession. The military stalemate is seen in Pakistan as a victory because neither side can claim to have ousted the other from disputed territory. A more important motive for continuing the conflict is the desire on the part of Pakistan to avenge its initial military reverses. All that Pakistan now seems to be interested in is to put unbearable pressure on India in terms of human and financial costs.

But the segment having a moderate view favours a negotiated settlement. Announcing the resolve of the Nawaz Sharif's government to maintain 'normal good neighbourly relations with India', Foreign Office spokesman Khalid Saleem declared that, 'we are always willing to discuss the question of withdrawing troops from Siachen provided it is based on agreements and agreed principles'.³⁸ For this segment holding on to Siachen does not make any sense as the Pakistani casualties and the economic burden do not justify sustaining a conflict over inhospitable territory with no population or resources and little geostrategic value.³⁹ Even among Pakistani supporters of a negotiated settlement, however, there are concerns based on a history of mistrust that India would attempt to use a settlement to legitimise its claim over the disputed area. Pakistan has rejected any Indian claim over the disputed territory on the basis of its physical presence in the area. According to the Minister of State for Defence, Rana Naeem Mahmood, in the first rounds of negotiations in 1986 and 1987, Pakistan had rejected Indian demands for a cease-fire on existing positions, insisting that a mutual force withdrawal to pre-1984 positions must precede any agreement on a cease-fire. In subsequent negotiations, a changed Pakistani stand called for the withdrawal of troops to

³⁷ Molly Moore, "Siachen Glacier Winning War", *Dawn*, 4 May 1993.

³⁸ Tariq Butt, "Pakistan Ready to Discuss Withdrawal from Siachen", *News*, 2 March 1997.

³⁹ "India-Pakistan Agree to Disengage Troops in Siachen", *News*, 23 August 1992.

positions held at the time of the 1972 Simla Agreement, when the line of control had been demarcated.⁴⁰

Pakistan would never accept any agreement that alters the territorial status of the Siachen region to its disadvantage. That is why it has always rejected Indian proposals for authentication of Actual Ground Positions (AGP) prior to a withdrawal or the delineation of the line of control beyond NJ 9842 along existing ground positions in the Siachen region.⁴¹ Besides, any settlement which does not ensure that the disputed region does not become vulnerable to Indian encroachments in the future would find no place in Pakistan's policy options.

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⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; also see Maleeha Lodhi, "India Flunks the Siachen Test", *News*, 30 November 1992.

⁴¹ Abdul Ahmed Husaini, "Confusion Mars Indo-Pak Talks on Siachen", *News*, 5 November 1992.

NEGOTIATED EFFORTS: EIGHT ROUNDS

For the first time, in 1984, the Siachen Glacier boundary issue was added to the list of major issues of contention between the two countries. In December 1985, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and President Zia-ul-Haq agreed in New Delhi to hold talks at the Defence Secretaries' level on the Siachen issue. During the first round of Defence Secretaries' talks in January 1986, both sides indulged in accusing the other of violating the Simla Agreement. Furthermore, Pakistan cited the statements of Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and India's protests in 1962-63 over Sino-Pakistani negotiations, which resulted in the boundary agreement of 1963, and from these it attempted to infer India's recognition of Pakistan's possession of areas to the west of the Karakoram Pass. Specifically, Pakistan cited India's protest note of 10 May 1962, which referred to 'that portion of the boundary between India and China west of the Karakoram Pass, which is presently under Pakistan's unlawful occupation'.⁴² It also cited Nehru's statement in Parliament, on 5 March 1963, that 'Pakistan's Line of actual control reached the Karakoram Pass'.⁴³ India rejoined that these statements were made on the basis of Pakistan's claims and did not express India's acceptance of those claims.

The second round of talks in June 1986 saw a repeat of familiar assertions on both sides. India hinted at a cease-fire in all but name and proposed an accord, an on non-escalation of the situation. Pakistan rejected anything approximating a cease-fire. The talks were reportedly held in a 'cordial and friendly atmosphere' and it was agreed that the talks should be continued at a

⁴² A.G. Noorani, 1995, *op. cit.*, pp. 89.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

later date. There were no signs of any material progress, however. The talks were highly repetitious, a 'pantomime' of the first.⁴⁴

After a lapse of two years, the two sides again met for the third round of talks in Rawalpindi in May 1988. The two became quite specific over the issue of disengagement of troops. But they were conscious of the domestic political costs, which they might have to pay over disengagement. The situation in Pakistan became complicated because of the tussle between General Zia-ul-Haq and Benazir Bhutto. Ultimately, these talks ended inconclusively with a promise to meet again.

The fourth round of talks were scheduled to be held in New Delhi in September 1988 in a new political atmosphere because of the untimely death of Zia-ul-Haq in August in a plane crash. The interim government announced that it would hold elections in the coming November to choose a new leader, this time a civilian. Pakistan, despite these surprising political developments, wanted to carry on the process of dialogue.

India pressed for a cease-fire and for the demarcation of the LAC in places where the troops of both sides confronted each other; the rest of the demarcation could be postponed. Pakistan's rejection of the proposal prompted another Indian offer: a cease-fire and partial withdrawal of troops, with a token military presence left by each side in existing positions. Pakistan rejected the offer, as this put a seal of approval on the Indian presence in Siachen. Nor would Pakistan accept an accord on mutual restraint, lest it be misconstrued as a cease-fire. The Pakistanis were prepared, though, to make concessions to Indian concerns about its domestic constraints by introducing the concept of 'redeployment' under an agreed schedule and with a view to the eventual total withdrawal of forces. However, the talks failed yet again, producing no results.

On 8 February 1989, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had expected India to withdraw its forces to the 1972 pre-Simla positions.⁴⁵ Her assumption of power in late 1988, as the first democratically elected head of government

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 46; also see Robert G. Wirsing, "The Siachen Glacier Dispute: Can Diplomacy Untangle It?", *India Defense Review*, July 1991, pp. 98.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99.

since 1971, had vastly improved the climate on the subcontinent. Robert G. Wirsing writes that the two sides' initial positions in the fifth round in June 1989 were revealed to him on 12 June 1990. The Indian army headquarters in New Delhi put forward the following proposals:

1. Cessation of 'cartographic aggression' by Pakistan (that is, of its unilateral attempts in recent years to extend the LAC from its agreed terminus at map reference points NJ 9842 to the Karakoram pass of the border with China.
2. Establishment of a demilitarised zone (DMZ) at the Siachen Glacier.
3. Exchange between India and Pakistan of authenticated maps showing present military dispositions on the ground.
4. Delimitation by India and Pakistan of a line from map reference point NJ 9842 northward to the border with China 'based on ground realities'.
5. Formulations of ground rules to govern future military operations in the area and definitely of 'the last step' to be taken.
6. Redeployment of Indian and Pakistani forces to mutually agreed positions.

Pakistan's formal terms, by contrast, were fewer in number. As identified for A.G. Noorani, by members of the Pakistani delegation to the fifth round, they contained two essential points:

1. Deployment of Indian and Pakistani forces to mutually agreed positions held at the time the cease-fire was declared in 1971 (i.e., pre-Simla positions); and only then
2. Delimitation of an extension of the LAC beyond map reference point NJ 9842.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ A.G. Noorani, 1995, *op. cit.*, pp. 91.

Noorani writes that against this backdrop the use of the word 'agreement' in the joint statement at the end of the fifth round, on 17 June 1989, was highly significant. He found it in striking contrast to all previous joint statements.⁴⁷ The next day, separate talks were concluded between the Foreign Secretaries of the two countries. At a joint press conference, Foreign Secretary Humayun Khan of Pakistan, referring to the Defence Secretaries' meeting, called it 'a significant advance' and spoke of the Simla Agreement. He went on to say, 'The exact location of these positions will be worked out in detail by military authorities of the two countries.'⁴⁸ Foreign Secretary, S.K. Singh of India, said, 'I would like to thank to Foreign Secretary, Dr. Humayun Khan, and endorse everything,' he had said.⁴⁹ The next morning, the press was summoned by Aftab Seth, the joint secretary and official spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi, who stated that no agreement had been reached on troop withdrawals. 'There was no indication of any such agreement in the joint press statement issued at the end of the talks', he noted.⁵⁰

Interestingly, Noorani writes that the reasons for India's veto of the accord that had been reached, conformed with Benazir Bhutto's assessment and was confirmed three years later by a journalist who was close to Rajiv Gandhi and who was also a member of his Congress Party.⁵¹ That journalist wrote:

*S.K. Singh had his knuckles rapped sharply on his return to Delhi because it was felt that photographs of Indian troops withdrawing from Siachen would not look too good for the government in an election year.*⁵²

On 2 July 1989, Pakistan's Minister of State for Defence, Ghulam Sarwar Cheema, urged the press to be less optimistic and speculative. He said that a

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ "India Says No To 1972 Troop Pull Back Status", *Telegraph*, 20 June 1989. Also see R.G. Wirsing, 1991, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-107.

⁵¹ A.G. Noorani, 1995, *op. cit.*, pp. 91.

⁵² M.J. Akbar, *op. cit.*

Siachen agreement would only be signed when Rajiv Gandhi visited Pakistan. The Indian Prime Minister's visit to Islamabad on 16-17 July 1989, the first bilateral visit after twenty years by an Indian Prime Minister, since 1960, produced no results on this issue.

The two meetings of military representatives on 11-13 July and on 17-18 August 1989 also proved futile. In these meetings India insisted on Pakistan's withdrawal from all military positions in the vicinity of the glacier that it had taken since 1972, including those at Conway Saddle. India also declared that the Indian forces would redeploy only as far as Dzingrulma near the glacier's snout, and that a 'civilian' camp be placed at this centre.⁵³

The sixth round of talks was held in New Delhi, on 2-6 November 1992.⁵⁴ For Pakistan, the task was as simple as implementing the agreement of June 1989. During the discussions, a broad understanding had been reached on disengagement, redeployment, monitoring, maintenance of peace, and implementation schedule.⁵⁵ It was agreed that the immediate focus should be on restoring peace and tranquillity in Siachen. Towards this end, without prejudice to the position taken by either side in the earlier rounds of talks, India's position was that Point NJ9842 should extend to Sia Kangri while Pakistan's position was that Point NJ9842 should join with the Karakoram Pass. Both sides agreed that the delineation of the LOC beyond NJ 9842 would be examined by a joint commission later.⁵⁶ Both sides also agreed that to reduce tensions in Siachen, the two sides would disengage from authenticated positions that they were then occupying, and would fall back to positions as under:

This disengagement and redeployment of forces, aimed at securing peace and tranquillity in the area, is without prejudice to the known positions of either side. Both sides agree that the positions/areas

⁵³ R.G. Wirsing, 1991, *op. cit.*, pp. 102.

⁵⁴ This brief description of the talks has been touched upon by J.N. Dixit, *Anatomy of a Flawed Inheritance: Indo-Pak Relations 1970-1994*, (New Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1995), Annexure3, pp. 312.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 313.

vacated will constitute a zone of complete disengagement (ZOD). Both sides commit:

- (a) That they shall not seek to re-occupy the positions vacated by them or to occupy the positions vacated by either side or to establish new positions across the alignment determined by the vacated positions.
- (b) That they shall not undertake any military, mountaineering or any other activity whatsoever in the zone of disengagement.
- (c) That if either side violates the commitment in (a) and, (b) above, the other shall be free to respond through any means, including military.⁵⁷

Both sides agreed to evolve monitoring measures to prevent violations and to maintain peace and tranquillity in the area. Besides, it was also agreed that they would disengage and redeploy according to a time schedule, which was to be worked out to mutual satisfaction.⁵⁸

In June 1997, in Islamabad, dialogue resumed for a seventh time but was largely seen as a mere gesture, aimed at nudging the stalled talks ahead. The dialogue resulted in a basic agreement to fix the agenda for talks on seven issues (which included Siachen) and mechanisms for future negotiations. Nothing specific was discussed and negotiated.

Issue based talks were held again after a gap of six years, amidst continued firing and conflict on the glacier. The Defence Secretaries from India and Pakistan met on November 6, 1998 in New Delhi for the eighth round of talks to find a mechanism to reduce tensions. Pakistan's Defence Secretary, Lt. General (retired) Iftikhar Ali Khan, led the twelve-member delegation from Islamabad for the composite and integrated dialogue.

The twelve-member Indian side was led by Defence Secretary, Ajit Kumar. The talks, this time, however, came at a time when there were reports of

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

attacks by Pakistan on Indian posts at Siachen almost everyday. Diplomatic sources said that Pakistan, during the eighth round of talks on Siachen, called for the 'redeployment of troops'. A troops pull back, they said, should be considered on the basis of the 1989 'agreement'. In a joint statement, India and Pakistan agreed to continue the talks as part of a 'composite dialogue process'. While acknowledging the need for negotiating 'redeployment', the Indian side has preferred to adopt an 'incremental' approach, which could lead to complete normalisation eventually.⁵⁹ The sources said, 'India at the talks proposed a package of confidence-building measures which would lead to a "comprehensive ceasefire" in the Saltoro range region.'⁶⁰ New Delhi also sought a 'freeze' on the ground positions of troops from both sides to 'immediately defuse tension and atmosphere of confrontation in the area'. It was also agreed in principle that specific 'modalities', which would make it durable, could be discussed in an 'agreed framework'.⁶¹

It was hoped that both sides could establish a bilateral monitoring mechanism: 'This could include flag meetings, meetings with formation commanders at "periodic levels" and the establishment of a hotline between divisional commanders. But New Delhi has rejected the Pakistani proposal of placing an international monitoring mechanism' to supervise the cease-fire in the Siachen area. These steps conformed to the Indian 'suggestion' made in October 1998 in Islamabad at the Foreign Secretary-level talks to improve communication links.⁶² India and Pakistan, as part of the confidence-building measures

⁵⁹ "Pakistan Rejects India's Siachen Ceasefire Plan", *Hindu*, 7 November, 1998.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

(CBMs) package, needed to authenticate the 'existing ground positions' of troops in the Salto range beyond NJ9842, the location where the existing LoC in Jammu and Kashmir terminates. Finer details were left for the experts to work out later. The recording of troop positions was essential to ensure the implementation of the cease-fire in a 'practical and useful' manner.

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THE PAST ENDEAVOURS: AN ANALYSIS

Since 1984, when Siachen was discussed for the first time and until 6 November 1998, when the eighth round of talks was concluded, negotiators have held extensive discussions and exchanged data, maps, documents, and other information. When nothing resulted out of the flag meetings between the Indian and Pakistani sector commanders, in 1984, a high level meeting was held at the Foreign Secretary-level in January 1986. Senior military personnel were also part of the negotiating teams. After these meetings, Defence Secretary-level talks were held, and India and Pakistan expressed their resolve to 'find a negotiated settlement of the Siachen issue in accordance with the Simla Agreement'.⁶³ In short, there was a desire on part of the two sides to lay the basis for a peaceful and negotiated settlement through a preliminary set of discussions and exchange of views.

In June 1989, after the fifth round of talks, both sides agreed to work towards a comprehensive settlement of the dispute. But the 1989 'agreement', it is said, was dumped by India, which reveals that the Indian side had not fully made up its mind to withdraw from present positions. Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, was very eager to strike a peace with Pakistan; hence, the talks pertaining to the 1989 'agreement'. But he quickly realised that vacating the present posts after losing so many men and so much money would not be a wise decision. Besides, in an election year, it might have an adverse impact on the prospects of the Congress Party.

In 1992, when the sixth round of talks were held at the Defence Secretary-level, military experts were also part of the negotiating team. This was because every minute detail of the Siachen region relating to its map, geography, terrain, CFL, Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL), various posts, troop deployments, and much more had to be presented and discussed. This was

⁶³ Ahmed and Sahni, *op.cit*, pp. 21.

possible only by involving military officials who had on-the-spot experience and knowledge. The agreement which was envisaged at the end of these talks included pledges by the two sides to maintain peace and tranquility in the Siachen region. Also, various alternatives and mechanisms were probed at these talks, leaving the larger and more complete resolution of the dispute for future talks.

Interestingly, between 1989 and 1992, after the talks, both sides denied the existence of any definite and tangible agreement. There were several reasons for this denial - ranging from domestic political pressures, difficulties regarding demarcation of the proposed demilitarised zone, and ensuring the inviolability of such a zone.⁶⁴ But the talks between 1989 and 1992 proved fruitful in at least underlining the potential areas of cooperation and agreement, and spelling out the differences. These talks gave the two sides a sense of direction and approach.

In 1997, the talks were held at the Foreign Secretary-level. Once again the two sides failed to reach any concrete agreement. Some serious efforts were made in this direction in 1998, when, after a lapse of six years, India and Pakistan agreed to pick up from where they had left off. As before, India and Pakistan addressed the issue of ending hostilities in the Siachen region to be followed by other steps such as redeployment of troops and demilitarisation. Pakistan rejected India's proposal for a cease-fire and called for troops disengagement, instead. At the end, the two sides agreed to continue further talks as a part of the 'composite dialogue process'. The Indian Defence Secretary, Ajit Kumar, while denying Pakistan's assertion that India and Pakistan had reached an 'agreement' in 1989 said, 'If this was the case why did we hold talks with Pakistan on Siachen in November 1992?'⁶⁵ This statement reveals that during the talks between 1984 and 1998, the two sides were trying to clarify the basic facts, understand each other's standpoints and develop an approach for any future resolution of the conflict. These talks were merely an assertion of their respective views. The basic incompatibility always persisted though the desire to reach a peaceful resolution prevailed in varying degrees.

⁶⁴ Zafar Abbas, "In From Cold?", *Herald*, April 1997, pp. 47, cited in S. Ahmed, and V. Sahni, *op.cit.*, pp. 22.

⁶⁵ "Pakistan Rejects India's Siachen Ceasefire Plan", 1998, *op. cit.*

The talks between 1984 and 1998 highlighted the sharp differences of perceptions of the two sides of the issue. From the nature of these talks, it can be inferred that the Indian and Pakistani negotiators' effort was to define the problem, discuss the available data, information, maps, and other documents to specify their respective views clearly.

During these years, both governments accepted that a problem existed and that it had to be resolved. Starting from Benazir and Rajiv Gandhi, through the tenures of Narasimha Rao and I.K. Gujral, to Nawaz Sharif and Atal Behari Vajpayee, the basic motive of the leaderships has been to at least understand and acknowledge the seriousness of the dispute and to solve it through negotiations.

During the last ten years, India and Pakistan have agreed to work for transforming the hostility into peace and cooperation through various mechanisms. They seem to have reached consensus to the extent of agreeing that the dispute cannot be settled unilaterally, and was only possible through cooperative and joint efforts. Although differences persist over the mode and mechanism of resolution, the desire to de-escalate the fighting and settle the issue in order to minimise the financial and human costs seems on balance to be also recognised even though that perception has not propelled them to find a permanent solution.

CAN THE CONFLICT BE RESOLVED?

Between 1984 and 1998, India and Pakistan have held eight rounds of talks but to no avail. Why has the leadership in both countries not been able to resolve it to mutual satisfaction? Is it because the dispute is still unripe for a compromise or resolution? Is Siachen another case of a zero-sum game where there are no middle paths? To find an answer to these questions we have to have a look at the following points:

First, the Siachen Glacier has over the years intermittently witnessed heavy artillery shelling and skirmishes from India and Pakistan to dislodge each other from occupied posts. Even when the eighth round of talks was underway in New Delhi on 6 November 1998, heavy shelling continued on the glacier. Since 18 October 1998, Pakistani forces have made seven bids to alter the ground position in the Siachen Glacier area.⁶⁶

Second, in the eighth round of talks in New Delhi, Lt. General (retired) Iftikhar Ali Khan said,

*A ceasefire agreement would only freeze the current situation not lead to peace or troop disengagement and would thereby provide India the opportunity to consolidate its position. It is a very difficult and complex situation. It will take time.*⁶⁷

This indicates that, at present, there are too many differences over the ground situation and the respective negotiating positions of the two sides. Unless all these differences are settled any resolution seems very unlikely.

⁶⁶ "Siachen: Fresh Pak. Tactics Thwarted", *Hindustan Times*, 5 November 1998.

⁶⁷ Rahul Bedi, "Icy Relations", *Himal*, vol. 11, no. 12, December 1998, pp. 19.

Third, resolution of the Siachen dispute would require political will. The political will to reach an agreement, which had grown, between India and Pakistan in recent years, has likely vanished in the wake of the Kargil conflict. In May 1999, intrusion by the Pakistani army regulars and various terrorist groups in the Batalik, Drass and Mushkoh sectors of the Kargil region led to an 'undeclared war' between India and Pakistan. The intention, as mentioned earlier, of the intruders was to cut the supplies to Siachen by attacking the Srinagar-Leh highway and increase the pressure on Indian troops in Siachen. It would seem that whatever tractability had evolved on the Siachen issue in the last couple of years vanished overnight. Indian resolve not to vacate Siachen has only complicated the issue further.

Fourth, there is a lack of willingness to settle the dispute on the Indian side. India's former Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit feels,

*India should have shown more flexibility. The dispute should be solved in stages. Both sides should move back and sign a standstill agreement not to go up again. Then progress can be made towards a solution.*⁶⁸

But the Indians at present are unrelenting and in no mood to withdraw.

Fifth, after being asked at the conclusion of the 6 November 1998 talks as to why India backed out from the 1989 agreement, Indian Defence Secretary Ajit Kumar emphasised, 'the changing ground situation has compelled India to rethink earlier formulations'. He added, 'A primary factor in this regard has been the spurt in guerrilla activities against Indian forces in Jammu and Kashmir after 1989.'⁶⁹ A senior Indian defence official notes,

Ultimately, Siachen is only part of the entire range of Indo-Pakistan disagreements, especially over Jammu and Kashmir. If the Pakistanis gained control of the dominating heights of the Siachen Glacier to the North of Kashmir, infiltration of guerrillas from Azad Kashmir into Ladakh would become much easier. The Indian Army has bitter memories of territory splashed with blood, sweat and tears. And to

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

*lose them in talks with Pakistanis would be very demoralising for the forces.*⁷⁰

He noted that the Indian army has a grouse against the political leadership, which had returned the Pir Panjal mountain range in Western Kashmir, captured in the 1971 war at great cost. For these reasons, India decided to dump the 1989 agreement.⁷¹ In sum, India is not in a terribly accommodative mood over Siachen. Therefore, it is very unlikely that it will agree to Pakistan's demand to withdraw to pre-1972 positions. This, at present, is the major cause of disagreement.

Sixth, although India considers Siachen to be of great political significance, Kent L. Biringer argues that India might eventually withdraw from there. He says, 'The high cost in financial and human terms of continuing this confrontation makes it an excellent candidate for cooperation while minimising strategic or military disadvantage.'⁷² In contrast to Biringer's views, a significant development needs to be mentioned here. Being fully aware of the high human and financial costs, India has proposed to build a road up to the Siachen Glacier and thereby reduce the high expenditures associated with air supplies (the only mode of supply so far). India is also planning to provide the troops with snow-riding scooters to carry commodities with greater ease and swiftness. Constructing a road is an important development because it shows that Indian troops are preparing to stay.⁷³ Although reducing the high financial expenditure is required, it should not be forgotten that India has borne the burden for the last thirteen years and feels it can continue to do almost indefinitely.

Seventh, generally speaking, the shared perception of the desirability of an accord exists, but it seems to quickly evaporate once the talks start and deep-

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Kent L. Biringer, "Peace Dividend: Siachen Science Club", *Himal*, vol. 11, no. 2, December 1998, pp. 28.

⁷³ "India Approves Road Linking to the Siachen Glacier", *Muslim*, 8 September, 1998. Also see "India to provide Snow-riding Scooters at Siachen", *Nation*, 3 May 1998.

rooted differences and disagreements come to the fore. If India and Pakistan succeed in reaching an agreement on Siachen, their ability to implement such an accord will depend very much on the strength of the respective leaderships. However, the question is: can the political leaderships summon the necessary determination given the state of political instability which has become a regular feature of India and Pakistan's domestic politics?

During the long pause between the second and third round of talks, the political scene in Pakistan had been marked by the tussle for power between Benazir Bhutto and General Zia. In that period, Pakistan was finding it very difficult to handle the Siachen talks. Before Zia's death, when Rajiv Gandhi was in power, both Zia and Rajiv had agreed to a cease-fire in Siachen. Tensions on the glacier eased, but domestic political tensions upset things. Benazir, who was in the opposition, marched on the streets with a plate-full of bangles for the Pakistani generals. 'Wear these bangles if you cannot fight on the Siachen,' she taunted. Subsequently, Zia died in an air crash on 17 August 1988, and Benazir came to power and hostilities resumed⁷⁴ on the glacier. Later, she visited Siachen and thereafter there was little talk of peace.

As things stand, it does not appear that any political leadership in India or Pakistan will go to the extent of jeopardising the interests of their militaries, for whom Siachen carries great strategic significance. The strategic importance of Siachen lies in its location, which overlooks Leh and Kargil, starting from Zojila at a height of 14,000 feet. India is also apprehensive of the fact that the Karakoram Highway may be extended to the Aksai Chin Highway in China and thus be connected with the Karakoram Pass. This would facilitate Pakistan's access to the Nubra Valley. In Pakistan, where Nawaz Sharif has had an absolute majority in the National Assembly since February 1997 and has also consolidated his position by revoking the significant clauses of the Eighth Amendment, he could order the withdrawal of troops unilaterally from the present positions. On the other hand, in India, the Atal Behari Vajpayee coalition government showed considerable political will by conducting five nuclear tests on 11 and 13 May 1998. Given its determination to strike a harder position on security issues, it is unlikely to vacate the occupied

⁷⁴ Harish Kapadia, "High Stakes", *Himal*, vol. 11, no. 12, December 1998, pp. 25.

positions. Siachen's strategic heights, captured after exceptionally high human and financial costs, make them ever more difficult to be relinquished.

Besides, after the Kargil war and the military coup, terrorist activities in the Kashmir valley have increased manifold. India has been reiterating time and again to Pakistan that before anymore talks could take place between the two countries, the latter has to create a conducive climate for these talks by withdrawing all kinds of aids and support to the terrorists in Kashmir and elsewhere. So far there are no signs of Pakistan doing this; and, therefore, the tension continues.

And last, as far as negotiations are concerned, the two parties are yet to formulate a mutually agreed upon approach. At the eighth round of talks, Pakistan rejected India's proposal for a cease-fire in Siachen, insisting that the two sides should first address the question of troop disengagements in the area. India proposed a CBMs package that would lead to a 'comprehensive cease-fire' in the 'Saltoro range region'. Indian Defence Secretary Ajit Kumar said that a cease-fire in Siachen was necessary in order to address the altered military situation in the area and 'freeze' on the ground position of troops from both sides to defuse tensions.⁷⁵ But Pakistan was against any proposal, which would record present military positions, as it wanted the Indians to withdraw to the pre-1971 positions. A senior Pakistani diplomat, in a press conference after the 6 November talks, said that the cease-fire in the region would bring no peace and tranquility unless the troops had been disengaged. This shows that there still remains a great gulf between the approaches of the two sides. Writing for *The News* in Pakistan, Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal's observation also supports the view that Siachen is not yet ripe for resolution. Afzal observes:

A negotiated settlement between Pakistan and India is possible but the atmosphere is not conducive. The dispute has become linked with the overall Kashmir issue. Both countries cannot retreat from their positions because it will amount to recognition of the other's stand. India has invested so much human and material resources in it that any retreat means defeat for it.

⁷⁵ "Pakistan Rejects India's Siachen Ceasefire Plan", 1998, *op. cit.*

There is a general feeling of mistrust about each other. Moreover, both countries perceive that their high national interests are at stake. Air Marshal (retired) Ayaz Ahmed Khan holds the view that the Siachen aggression is not an isolated event. It is a part of the grand strategy of India in the region. India links the issue with the Kashmir issue and with the survival of the Indian Union. In fact, Suneet Chopra (Indian journalist) has also argued against the compromise over Siachen. He is of the opinion that it will affect the Indian claim to the whole state of Kashmir. Furthermore, it will not end the dispute but begin a process of dismemberment of India. It is very difficult to foresee the success of a negotiated settlement in such a highly charged ambience.⁷⁶

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⁷⁶ Muhammad Mujeeb Afzal, "Siachen", *News*, 12 April 1995.

CONCLUSION

To date, India and Pakistan have negotiated but with no substantial results. This shows that given the strategic significance of the glacier, it is required on part of both India and Pakistan that they work together towards building an atmosphere of peace and tranquility on the border. The onus lies more on Pakistan because in the wake of the Kargil war, India feels betrayed and its trust needs to be boosted by some conciliatory and good will gestures. This should include among others: cessation of shelling on the border, withdrawing all kinds of support to the terrorists in the Kashmir Valley and elsewhere, shutting down terrorist outfits in Pakistan, refraining from polemics and making inflammatory statements, showing restraint, and respecting LoC.

At present, India and Pakistan are proposing quite different modes of resolution in respect of an ultimate settlement. At the eighth round of talks, Pakistan rejected India's cease-fire proposal and India declined the Pakistani 'redeployment of troops' or 'troops pull back' offer. For Pakistan, cease-fire is only possible if the troops withdraw to their pre-1971 positions and if the cease-fire is monitored by an 'international monitoring mechanism'. India rejects any third party involvement and has turned down this proposal. It proposed its own CBMs package, which suffered the same fate at the hands of Pakistan.

The greatest obstacle in the entire process is that neither party is ready to make any concessions to the other and both are maintaining their respective positions. During the talks, all sorts of alternatives and mechanisms to lower the intensity of conflict and promote peace have been spelled out but to no avail. As a result, after all these years of hard work put in by the negotiators, not much has been achieved. The fighting on the glacier continues, claiming lives as ever before.

But it is important to mention here that the biggest challenge for the leadership is to minimise the 'linkage politics'. All the pending disputes between India and Pakistan are victims of this linkage politics, as all these disputes are in one

way or the other related to the larger dispute of Kashmir. And Pakistan insists that unless the Kashmir conflict is resolved, progress cannot be made on other issues. In other words, the disputes are pending not because they are intractable, but because they are linked to a larger one. This is the general perception in Pakistan, and the military leadership, not to mention, is a staunch proponent of it. However, to be realistic, given the *modus operandi* of Musharraf and the school of thought, which the military rulers adhere to in Pakistan, it seems unlikely that there can be any breakthrough on Siachen in the near future.

The talks so far have produced no joint proposals to resolve the dispute. All that has come to the table reflects the deep-rooted differences between the two countries. But these negotiations have helped in at least clarifying the key elements of the dispute. The reason for not being able to reach any significant agreement during the negotiations is that the issue is still in the pre-negotiation stage, where a basic framework to resolve the dispute is yet to be constructed. As J.N. Dixit says, the Siachen dispute has to be solved in stages. Trying leaping and moving too fast would only prove counter-productive. Every stage has to be dealt with in a meticulous and mature way.⁷⁷ The phrase *trust but verify* describes the dispute and prospective resolution quite aptly.

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⁷⁷ Iftikhar Gilani, "Indian Stance on Siachen Stuns Observers", *Nation*, 11 November 1998.

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