

## Review

## Siachen stalemate

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Indian and Pakistani militaries have been occupying the Siachen Glacier and surrounding regions for decades. Although a cease-fire is in place since November 2003, continued occupation carries the risk of an inadvertent conflict, which could escalate into a full-fledged nuclear-backed confrontation. Political and military analysts in India, Pakistan and abroad now question the strategic significance of the Siachen Glacier and agree that under the right circumstances, military withdrawal from the Siachen Glacier region would not adversely affect either state. The Siachen glacier was once considered a no man's land as it was left out in both Karachi (1949) and Shimla (1972) agreements, which demarcated border between India and Pakistan. Siachen is a veritable nightmare even for the experienced mountaineers, who have to traverse the glacier to climb the icy peaks. Yet Indian and Pakistani forces are battling 24 h a day to gain control of the range. In this paper the author narrates the utter uselessness of continuing the conflict any further at the cost of socio-economic development. Besides, the continued military presence has deteriorated the pristine beauty and ecological balance of the region.

**Key words:** India-Pakistan relations, Kashmir conflict, Siachen dispute, demilitarization, confidence building measures.

## INTRODUCTION

The Siachen Glacier is one of the most inhospitable and glaciated regions in the world. Sliding down a valley in the Karakoram Range,<sup>1</sup> the glacier is 76 km long and varies in width between 2 to 8 km. It receives an annual snowfall of more than 35 feet. Blizzards can last 20 days. Winds reach speeds of 125 miles per hour. Temperatures can plunge to minus 60°. For these reasons, the Siachen Glacier has been called the 'Third Pole (Ahmad and Sahni, 1998).

Initially Siachen was considered to be completely inhospitable and not worth any conflict on the ground. The original cease fire line (CFL)<sup>2</sup> agreed to by India and

Pakistan in the July 1949 Karachi Agreement<sup>3</sup> did not cover the area of the glaciers because of the difficulties of delineating the line. When the ceasefire line was changed into a mutually accepted line of control (LoC) in October 1972,<sup>4</sup> the newly delineated line ran from the Shyok River west of Thang<sup>5</sup> to Point NJ 9842. The area north of it was left blank and open to encroachments. Indians and Pakistanis have tried to stake 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 Karakoram Pass. India, on the other hand draws a

<sup>1</sup> The Karakoram is a large mountain range spanning the borders between Pakistan, India and China, located in the regions of Gilgit-Baltistan (Pakistan), Ladakh (India), and Xinjiang region, (China). It is one of the Greater Ranges of Asia, a part of the greater Himalaya while north of the actual Himalaya Range.

<sup>2</sup> The term Line of Control (LoC) refers to the military control line between the Indian and Pakistani-controlled parts of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir—a line which, to this day, does not constitute a legally recognized international boundary but is the de-facto border.

<sup>3</sup> The Karachi Agreement was a cease-fire agreement signed by India and Pakistan on July 27, 1949. It established a cease-fire line to be monitored by observers from the United Nations.

<sup>4</sup> After the 1971 India-Pakistan war, the Kashmir dispute once again came to light when the Simla Accord was signed in July 1972. The accord converted the 1949 UN "Cease-fire Line" into the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan which however did not affect the status of the disputed territory.

<sup>5</sup> 'Thang' is the last Village on the Indian side of the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir.



**Figure 1.** Map showing the area of Siachen. Under the Karachi agreement the border extended to a point known as NJ9842 'and thence north to the glaciers'. Map courtesy: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/amapple/2561626234>.

north westerly line from NJ 9842 along the watershed line of the Salto Range, a southern offshoot of the Karakoram Range. The status quo was not disturbed even during the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971, (Chari and Pervaiz 2001). Geopolitical compulsions of India, Pakistan and China brought it to the centre stage because it was part of a region where the three nations attempted to impose their military control. Thus military compulsions led to the militarizing of the Siachen area more than the mountaineering needs of either India or Pakistan (Figure 1) (Raghavan, 2002).

Between 1974 and 1981, at least 16 major expeditions climbed up to the Siachen and beyond by taking permits from the Pakistan government. Of these, 11 were from Japan, three from Austria, and one each from Britain and the United States (Fedarko 2003). Pakistan's motive for issuing the permits, it seems, was a desire to promote mountain tourism. But as the expedition reports were circulated through the mountaineering community, the

foreigners had concluded that the Siachen belonged to Pakistan. This impression also took root in the minds of the Pakistani government, and today the list of these expeditions is often cited as proof of ownership. India contends the Pakistani claim and both sides are unwilling to admit that either has a solid legal claim to the region. Robert Wirsing, an expert on South Asian Politics, puts it more bluntly. In his view, the claims of both sides are equally spurious. Wirsing said, "The Indian arguments are absolutely 100% false, and so are Pakistan's". "The Pakistanis have no right to base their claim on permits issued to foreign mountaineers. And the only strength to the Indian argument is that it is backed by a force that cannot be dislodged" (Fedarko, 2003).

New Delhi first became furious and suspicious in 1983 when an American map showed the Siachen and places like Lyogme and Lagongma as part of Pakistan. Subsequently, the Indian army came to know that a Japanese mountaineering expedition team was seeking

Islamabad's permission to scale certain mountains in the area (Kuldip, 2003). India launched Operation *Meghdoot*<sup>6</sup> on 13 April, 1984, after the then Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi gave the go-ahead call to the Indian army and air force. Pakistan quickly responded with troop deployments and what followed was literally a race to the top. Within a few days, the Indians were in control of most of the area, as Pakistan was beaten to most of the Salto Ridge high ground in about a week. In 1987, Pakistan made an attempt to dislodge the Indian positions. The unsuccessful attack was carried out under the command of Gen. Pervez Musharraf (Kuldip, 2003), but the positions remained the same. Since then, sporadic fighting has taken place and continues to occur, whereas artillery fire is regularly exchanged with shells lobbed over the ridge at unseen foes. Although this might not destroy the enemy, it certainly destroys the environment.

Nonetheless, 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 Wirsing 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 has never been submitted to impartial adjudication—is a matter obviously open to disagreement. There is ample evidence, however, that 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 (Noorani, 1994).

The altitude of some Indian held forward based on the Salto Ridge ranges from Kumar (16,000 ft) and Bila Top (18,600 ft) to Pahalwan (20,000 ft) and Indira Col (22,000 ft) (Ahmad and Sahni, 1998). Because of the steep gradient of the Salto Range, the area is prone to avalanches. Only 3% of the Indian casualties have been caused by hostile firing and the remaining 97% fall prey to the altitude, weather, and terrain (Kutty, 2012). Pakistani positions are comparatively at a lower altitude in the glacier area, ranging between 9,000 to 15,000 ft. They also face avalanches among other treacherous conditions.

## DIALOGUE PROCESS

Since January 1986, several high-level talks have been held between Indian and Pakistani defence and foreign secretaries as well as senior military personnel to negotiate a peaceful end to the Siachen dispute. Between 1984 and 1985 also, the sector commanders of the two countries tried to negotiate Siachen peace, but without achieving any success, as India tried to freeze the situation brought about by Operation *Meghdoot*. For instance, in March 1985, the Indian army chief, General A S Vaidya, said India was ready for proper demarcation of the Siachen glacier zone, which had escaped "strict" demarcation (The Indian Express, 1985). For its part, Pakistan sought the withdrawal of Indian troops from the region, assuring the Indian side about its own troop's withdrawal from the uninhabited and inhospitable region (Ahmad, 2006).

In the first round of defence secretaries' talks in January 1986, Islamabad accused New Delhi of violating the Simla Agreement. To prove its contention that the Line of Control moves in a straight line in a northeasterly direction from NJ 9842 up to the Karakoram pass on its boundary with China, Islamabad cited Indian premier Jawaharlal Nehru's statements at the time of the signing of the Sino-Pakistan border agreement of 1963; for instance, Nehru's statement in Lok Sabha on March 5, 1963 which said that "Pakistan's line of actual control...reached the Karakoram pass" (Ahmad, 2006).

The second round of talks in June 1986, just as the third round in the following year, saw a repeat of familiar assertions. India hinted at a ceasefire in all but name and proposed accord on non-escalation of the situation. Pakistan rejected the ceasefire option. At the fourth round of the defence secretaries talks in September 1988 again, India pressed for a ceasefire and for demarcation of a Line of Control in places where the troops of both sides confronted each other; the rest of the demarcation could be postponed. Pakistan's rejection of the offer prompted another Indian offer: a ceasefire and partial withdrawal of troops, with a token military presence left by each side in existing positions. Pakistan rejected the offer, as its acceptance would give credence to Indian presence in Siachen. Nor would Pakistan accept an accord on mutual restraint, lest it be misconstrued as a ceasefire. Pakistan, however, was prepared to agree to "redeployment" of forces under an agreed schedule and with a view to the eventual total withdrawal of forces to the pre-Simla positions (Ahmad, 2006).

In June 1989, the fifth round of talks between the defence secretaries of India and Pakistan produced a breakthrough. The joint statement issued at their conclusion stated: "There was agreement by both sides to work towards a comprehensive settlement, based on redeployment of forces to reduce the chances of conflict, avoidance of the use of force and the determination of future positions on the ground so as to conform with the Simla agreement and to ensure durable peace in the

<sup>6</sup> Operation Meghdoot was code-naming for the Indian Armed Forces operation in 1984 to capture the Siachen Glacier in the disputed Kashmir region, precipitating the Siachen Conflict.

Siachen area. The army authorities in both sides will determine these positions." Foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan endorsed this statement. However, the very next day, a spokesman of the Indian External Affairs Ministry denied that India had signed any agreement on troop's withdrawal from Siachen (Ahmad, 2012). Subsequently, the statement of 16 November 1989 by Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, Prime Minister of India at Kolkata, caps it all. The Prime Minister has tacitly acknowledged breach of Simla Agreement when he said "We have recovered about 5000 square kilometers of area from occupied Kashmir in Siachen area" (Hakeem, 2009).

At the sixth round of the Defense Secretary talks in November 1992, with the assistance of military experts, an India-Pakistan agreement was reportedly reached that envisaged (1) the mutual withdrawal of troops from key passes to new positions, and (2) the creation of a "zone of complete disengagement" as a result of troop disengagement and redeployment. The delineation of this area of "peace and tranquility" would be "without prejudice" to the known position of either side. The agreement also reportedly included pledges by both states to refrain from reoccupying vacated positions (Ahmad and Sahni, 1998). No new positions would be occupied in the designated zone nor would any 'activity' civilian or military-be allowed within the designated zone. Time schedules for disengagement and redeployment were to be worked out to the "mutual satisfaction" of both sides, followed by the formation of a joint commission that would be responsible for "delineation of the Line of Control beyond NJ 9842." Until the area was formally delineated, monitoring mechanisms would be devised to prevent the occurrence of violations. Reportedly, either side could resort to "any means," including the use of force, in the event of a violation of these commitments (Aneja, 1997).

The two countries, however, not only failed to implement these tentative agreements, but one or the other side denied that any tangible agreement had been reached on either occasion.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty in reaching or implementing any mutually agreeable proposal was due to a number of factors, ranging from domestic political constraints to differences over the determination of redeployment positions, the demarcation of the proposed demilitarized zone, and ensuring the inviolability of such a zone. The significance of the understandings reached in 1989 and 1992 cannot, however, be understated since they identify potential areas of agreement and discord in any future agreement of the Siachen dispute.

On September 17, 1993, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Robin Raphel stated: "Kashmir remains a major source of Indo-Pakistani tensions which could lead to war. There has been little follow-up to the 1972 Simla

Agreement, when India and Pakistan committed to deal seriously with this issue. They should work on near-term steps such as demilitarisation of the Siachen Glacier and more support for ongoing monitoring efforts along the line of control". Briefing news media on Raphel's visit to Pakistan, a senior U.S. official in Islamabad said, on November 9, 1993, "Indian and Pakistan are crossing the T's and dotting the I's of their agreement on demilitarizing Siachen which was almost complete in 1989" (Noorani, 1994).

The next day, however, Foreign Secretary Shaharyar Khan of Pakistan told the media that the Kashmir and Siachen disputes are linked and could not be discussed and negotiated separately. It was around that time that Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto in an interview with an Indian correspondent appeared to show strong interest in a Siachen accord. She claimed that in 1989 defence secretaries of both countries had "reached an agreement with exact locations on the map on where everybody was supposed to go but Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi delayed it because he had decided to in for an early election. Thus India publicly withdrew from that agreement saying that it had not been concluded." She further said that, "after 1989 the Indian position changed on Siachen and further demands were made on Pakistan" (Noorani, 1994).

The defence secretaries' talks on the Siachen dispute between the two countries suffered a stalemate for six years. It was only by December 1998 that the next round of these talks was held in New Delhi. With the revival of the Composite Dialogue Process in 2004, India and Pakistan have entered a new cycle of negotiations on the Siachen conflict. The eighth round of talks between the defence secretaries of India and Pakistan on 5 to 6 August, 2004 assessed the ongoing cease-fire (effective since Nov. 2003) and agreed to have further negotiations. The ninth round of talks on 26 to 27, May 2005 became deadlocked over the issues of India's insistence that the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL)<sup>8</sup> be demarcated on the ground and map and Pakistan's insistence that Indian troops must withdraw to pre-1972 positions before any meaningful discussions could take place. Talks on Siachen were again held on 23 to 24 May, 2006 in New Delhi. The delegations were headed by Defense Secretaries, Shri Shekhar Dutt of India and that of Pakistan by Lt. Gen (Ret.) Tariq Ghazi. The press has reported that the two sides have come quite close to agreeing on a process of disengagement and demilitarization but very few details of the talks have emerged. The issue was again up for discussion during the Foreign Secretary level meetings on 14 to 15 November, 2006 in New Delhi. Again the basic contention over the authentication of troop positions on the glacier hampered any progress. In a recent significant

<sup>7</sup> While the Indian government repudiated Pakistani claims of a mutually agreed upon formula in 1989, Pakistan refused to accept India's version of the November 1992 accord, spelled out in India's January 1994 Non-Paper on Siachen.

<sup>8</sup> The Actual Ground Position Line refers to the current position that divides Indian and Pakistani troops in the Siachen Glacier region. The line extends from the northernmost point of the LoC to Indira Col.

development, Pakistan proposed a 'middle way'. It offered to 'acknowledge' the current position of the Indian troops rather than 'authenticate' it, which, some argue, suggested a tacit acceptance of India's claim over Siachen (Misra, 2007). The proposal is lying with the Indian government which is giving it a serious consideration and discussing the technicalities involved in detail. As the defence secretaries of India and Pakistan met again in Islamabad on 6 to 7, April 2007 to discuss Siachen and Sir Creek, they failed to make further headway. While Pakistan insisted that there must be some tangible progress on Kashmir for the rapprochement to gather momentum, India continued to reiterate that it is necessary to first build confidence by resolving relatively less intractable problems.

While offering a treaty of "Peace, Friendship and Security" to Pakistan in March 2006, Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh had hinted that issues like the dispute over the Siachen glacier region and the boundary dispute in Sir Creek could be resolved soon. Also the former Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Khurshid Ahmed Kasuri, has been claiming that discussions to demilitarize the Siachen conflict zone, as a prelude to a final agreement to extend the LoC beyond map reference NJ 9842, have been proceeding slowly towards reaching an agreement. He said, "We had worked out certain schedules of disengagement whereby both Indian and Pakistani concerns could be met." He added that there was "substantial agreement on Siachen."<sup>9</sup>

The problem has become all the more intractable because the Indian army has come out in opposition to withdrawal without authentication. During his tenure as army Chief General J.J. Singh has publicly expressed his views on more than one occasion. The army has also aired its position through the media. For instance, before the foreign secretaries talks on Siachen in November 2006, senior army officials claimed that glacier was important not just strategically but also as a "5,000 square km water reservoir that would be critical for the water wars" of the future. (Raghavan, 2007). Furthermore, the political leadership in India is loath to override the army's advice. Visiting Siachen in early May 2007, defence minister A. K. Antony has gone so far as to say that there is no question of progress on demilitarization unless Pakistan authenticates the forward positions of Indian troops (Kanwal, 2007).

Since September 2007, India has welcomed mountaineering and trekking expeditions to the forbidding glacial heights. These civilian treks to Siachen started despite vehement protests from Pakistan which termed it India's tourism in 'disputed territory'. Pakistan conducts similar expeditions in nearby areas under its control with no requirement of a military liaison officer to accompany trekkers. Their permit formalities are simpler, often taking

just two weeks.

The Composite Dialogue process between India and Pakistan was stalled after the November 2008 Mumbai terror attacks. Therefore, after a gap of more than three years, the twelfth round of defense secretary level talks on Siachen was held in New Delhi on 30 to 31 May, 2011. The Indian delegation was led by Pradeep Kumar, the Indian Defence secretary and the Pakistani delegation was led by its defence secretary Syed Athar Ali. During these talks Pakistan presented a non-paper on Siachen. Both sides showed satisfaction over the continuation of ceasefire on AGPL. They agreed to continue the discussions in a meaningful and result oriented manner. However, no major breakthrough could be achieved at the end of the talks.

Except for the 1989 and 1992 rounds, the talks have been characterized by a lack of serious resolve in finding a negotiated settlement to the dispute on both sides. As a former foreign secretary of Pakistan, Riaz Hussain Khokhar, said, "I have attended six or seven of the total 12 rounds of [Defense Secretary-level] talks, and the minutes of all of them read almost the same (Khan, 2012).

## COSTS OF THE CONFLICT

"In the frozen wastes of Siachen, General *Frost Bite* kills hundreds of jawans in the never-ending battle which both armies wage against Nature", said Mani Shankar Aiyar, an Indian diplomat (Aiyar, 2011). Although a cease-fire is in place since 25 November 2003, and there are now no battle casualties, even at the peak of fighting in the 1980s and 1990s, maximum casualties occurred because of medical reasons due to the harsh terrain and climatic conditions. On an average, one Pakistani soldier is killed every fourth day, while one Indian soldier is killed every other day.<sup>10</sup> The lack of oxygen at heights between 18,000 and 20,000 feet and prolonged periods of isolation are a lethal combination and take a heavy psychological toll. Apart from the heavy cost in lives and the human suffering resulting from this situation, the financial drain is also heavy. It costs the Indian exchequer anywhere between RS 1000-1200 crore a year; the cost to Pakistan is less but is nevertheless a heavy drain (Varadarajan, 2005). According to estimates of Strategic Foresight Group (SFG) in their report *The Second Freedom — South Asian Challenge 2005 to 2025* published in 2005, the Siachen conflict would have cost India RS 72 billion and Pakistan RS 18 billion from 2006 to 2010. Together they might have lost about 1,500 soldiers in the same five years without fighting a war (Strategic Foresight Group, 2005).

Imtiaz Gul, director of the Islamabad-based *Centre for Research and Security Studies*, sums up the daily, monthly, and annual figures of economic costs of both

<sup>9</sup> Karan Thapar quotes Khurshid Ahmed Kasuri in an interview with Musharraf on CNN-IBN, 13-01-2012. Karan Thapar is one of India's noted television commentators and interviewers.

<sup>10</sup> Operation *Meghdoot*, supra note 3.

countries on fighting this war in the following words:

According to careful estimates by defence analysts, Pakistan spends approximately RS 15 million a day to maintain three battalions at the Siachen Glacier, which makes RS 450 million a month and RS 5.4 billion a year. On the other hand, the deployment of seven battalions at the Glacier costs India Rs. 50 million a day, RS 1.5 billion a month and Rs. 30 billion a year (Gul, 2012).

The environmental costs of the Siachen conflict are, perhaps, the gravest; because they are not only affecting the current generations but could have longstanding repercussions for the coming generations as well. The 7 April 2012 avalanche is a glaring example of nature's revenge on humans for traversing into its domain. A Pakistani glaciologist, Arshad H. Abbasi, who has done extensive research on the subject, argues that Siachen glacier is receding at the rate of 110 m per year (Khan, 2012). Another estimate suggests that the Siachen glacier is reduced by 1.9 km in longitudinal extent from 1989 to 2006, and its ice-mass has thinned 17% during the same period (Khan, 2012). On the glacier heights, the fuel needed for cooking and keeping warm is provided by India through a 250 km long pipeline (Prakash, 2009). The pipeline meant to pump thousands of litres of kerosene for troops to survive, often causes serious hazards, especially when due to a connection break or pipe bursts hundreds of litres of kerosene is spilled on the snow. The cans, drums, fuel containers, oil and lubricants, tetrapacks for fruit juice, aluminum packaging, chemicals and medical waste can neither be burned nor destroyed, nor can any of them be removed. Human waste amounts to 1000 kg a day on the Indian side alone. It is packed in metal drums and dropped into crevasses at the rate of up to 4000 drums a year (Ali, 2002). Then there is the war material: guns, arms, millions of rounds for small arms, ammunition and shells. Eventually, all this garbage and waste will end up in the Nubra River, which flows into the Shyok River, which latter on flows into the Indus, on whose waters millions of people survive. Such human activities have resulted into modifications and alterations in the delicate ecological balance, causing destructive snow avalanches, formation of glacial lakes, and snow holes which are killing a large number of soldiers every year. Currently temperature rise in the area is recorded as 0.2°C annually. The Himalaya is the water tower of Asia; to put its environment at risk is to gamble with the lives of millions.

Siachen has also experienced large-scale loss of plant and animal diversity as a result of the conflict. The glacial habitats of ibex, brown bears, cranes, snow leopards, and many other species are threatened (Ali, 2004). The presence of these species, as well as a constantly eroding glacier line, has led the 'World Wide Fund for Nature'<sup>11</sup> to designate the entire Tibetan Plateau Steppe,

which encompasses the Siachen Glacier, as one of 200 areas critical to global conservation (Kemkar, 2006). The conflict has also eroded what little government protection the Siachen once enjoyed. Indeed, the Jammu and Kashmir Pollution Control Board, the only government agency charged with environmental protection of the area, has largely failed to prevent environmental degradation. This unique ecosystem requires and deserves protection. In the absence of active conflict, the area might qualify for this protection.

The Siachen conflict has affected four other glaciers as well: Gangotri, Miyar, Milan, and Janapa. The first two glaciers feed the Ganges, while Chenab and Sutlej rivers are fed by the last two respectively. This is because of the heavy traffic on the Indian road from the plains to Siachen passing near these glaciers on the Delhi-Manali-Leh route. This finding is corroborated by a recent report by Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) (Prakash, 2009).

Over the years, both sides have dug in and neither expects a military solution. Much of the fighting is now restricted to artillery fire, which presumably causes some damage to enemy positions but definitely causes a great deal of damage to the fragile mountain environment. On the Indian side, the costs are fairly high because the logistics tail is long. The only road ends at the Base Camp close to the snout of Nubra river where the almost 76-km glacier ends and a large number of infantry posts can be maintained only by light helicopters that air-drop supplies with attendant losses, as recoveries are often less than 50%. The frequent turnover of troops adds to the costs as a battalion can only be stationed at the Saltoro Range for a maximum of six months. Induction and training costs are also fairly high. Though Pakistan has a distinct advantage in terms of costs as it occupies the lower heights on the western spurs of the Saltoro on which their troops are holding defensive positions and their shorter lines of communication to Dansam and Skardu, the weather gods are equally unkind on both sides of the AGPL. On April 7, 2012 a giant wall of snow crashed down on the Pakistani side of the battlefield, swamping the battalion headquarters of 6 Northern Light Infantry, where 124 Pakistani soldiers and 14 civilians were stationed (Walsh, 2012). The avalanche buried a cluster of buildings in 80 ft of snow; weeks later, rescuers are yet to pull out a single person, dead or alive. If today these are Pakistani soldier who got trapped in the glacier heights, tomorrow they might be Indian Soldiers. Both governments must make a dispassionate politico-military assessment about contesting and defending the Siachen Glacier and the costs of the conflict in terms of human lives and material resources. "This is like a struggle of two bald men over a comb," said Stephen Cohen, an authority on the Indian subcontinent at the Brookings

<sup>11</sup> The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is an international non-governmental organization working on issues regarding the conservation, research and restoration of the environment, formerly named the World

Wildlife Fund, which remains its official name in Canada and the United States. It is the world's largest independent conservation organization with over 5 million supporters worldwide, working in more than 100 countries, supporting around 1,300 conservation and environmental projects.

Institution. "Siachen is the epitome of the worst aspects of the relationship. These are two countries that are paired on a road to Oslo or Hiroshima, and at this point they could go either way." He further adds that "Siachen is not militarily important. The Indian and Pakistani armies are there for purely psychological reasons, testing each others will" (Kanwal, 2007).

## OVERCOMING THE PRESENT STALEMATE

The fact is that the Indian Army has blocked a return to the pre-Siachen conflict status of that uninhabitable region. The Kargil misadventure (1999) has sabotaged all efforts of mutual reconciliation. It has developed mutual distrust and suspicion. There is so much mistrust between the militaries of India and Pakistan that to convince one side that the other will abide by a written agreement and will not try to take advantage of a withdrawal is simply too difficult. The first step towards ending the senseless conflict – although a ceasefire for much of the last decade has meant at least the direct fighting has ended – must therefore be taken by the Indian side.

Contrary to the claims of strategic significance of the presence of troops along the ridges astride the Siachen glacier by the hawkish elements in India and Pakistan, there are many observers who think that the glacier has little strategic significance or at least not as much as the cost that both the countries have to pay for it. Many observers believe that the solution to the tangle of the Siachen dispute lies in a return to the 1989 agreement. The 1992 Open Skies Treaty, which came into force on January 1, 2002 and signed by 34 countries, provides for cooperative aerial overflight procedures that can be useful in confidence building and crisis management. Such procedures might be emulated to advantage in a defined zone, such as the Siachen area. India and Pakistan should undertake a full withdrawal of troops of both sides to the agreed points, in the spirit of the Simla Agreement of 1972, without any attempt to legitimize post-1972 military advances by either side, whether by recording the existing AGPL as the sole area of inspection or otherwise. Agreement on "open skies" in the Siachen Glacier region would help enormously generating the mutual trust needed to put this issue to rest (Noorani, 1994).

In his book on the Siachen, *Siachen: Conflict without End* (2002) Lt. General V. R. Raghavan (Retd.) also makes some interesting suggestions for ending the Siachen conflict. Raghavan was the Commanding General in the Siachen and was on the Indian team in at least 4 of the first 7 rounds of talks between India and Pakistan. He combines detailed knowledge of the situation on the ground with a deep appreciation of political considerations. He suggests that both sides recognize each other's claims, agree not to change the status quo by force, and agree not to introduce irregulars.

This would be followed by three steps:

- i. End the fighting without disengaging or redeployment. Let Siachen recede from the public mind; this phase might last for 2 to 3 years.
- ii. Introduce technical means of monitoring and surveillance, permitting meaningful reductions of forces to be negotiated.
- iii. Work out a complete demilitarization (Raghavan, 2002).

Political will and innovative approaches are necessary to stop the conflict on Siachen. Many military and strategic analysts in South Asia now question the strategic significance of the Siachen Glacier. Lt. General M. L. Chibber (Retd.), who planned the occupation of Siachen (code-named Operation *Meghdoot*) in 1984, said flatly in an interview in December 2004 that "Siachen does not have strategic significance....The strategic significance being talked about is all invention" (Varadarajan, 2005). Yet Siachen invokes strong passions in India and Pakistan. Maj. Gen. V. S. Budhwar, the Indian commander in Leh, whose region includes Siachen, said "Nobody can win, no matter how long we fight. ...But this is our land.... It is a portion of our nation-state, and we will not cede it" (Bearak, 1999). In a similar tune Gen. Khalid Mehmood Arif, the retired former vice chief of Pakistan military discerned that "Siachen is an awful place where you can step on a thin layer of snow and, poof, down you go 200 feet.... But no nation ever wants to lose a single inch of territory, so Siachen has psychological and political importance. Its value is in ego and prestige" (Bearak, 1999). Prof. Stephen Cohen observes that both countries have used Siachen to wage a propaganda war as well as a shooting war, and has characterized the war as "a conflict unending caused by states unbending."<sup>12</sup> The continued military occupation of the area is counter-productive. Once demilitarisation is successfully completed, the Siachen Demilitarized Zone can be declared a 'science park'. Environmental cleanup will need to be undertaken as a high priority task so that the mess left by 27 years of military occupation can be cleared up. The demilitarisation of the Siachen conflict zone will act as a confidence building measure of immense importance. After the massive avalanche on April 7, 2012 which killed 124 Pakistani soldiers and 14 civilians, there is now tremendous pressure on the Pakistani establishment to demilitarize the Siachen area. Even Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan and leader of the opposition party PML-N pleaded for unilateral withdrawal of Pakistani soldiers from Siachen. The Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, General Kayani, while visiting Skardu in Northern Pakistan to monitor the rescue operation on April 18, 2012 made a call for withdrawal of troops from the world's highest battlefield. Calling for

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Cohen's foreword to the book, *Siachen: Conflict without End* written by Lt. General V. R. Raghavan (quote from p.vii).

demilitarisation of the Siachen glacier for the development of Pakistan and environmental reasons General Kayani said, "Pakistan was not manning those treacherous heights out of choice. The world knows why we are in Siachen," referring to the Pakistani narrative that it was India which started this dispute in 1984. Indian and Pakistani leaders need to show the political will necessary to accept ground realities. Trust begets trust and it will be well worth taking this political and military risk to give peace a chance. Trust deficit exists for good reasons on both sides but there are precedents to build upon like the Chumik Glacier Agreement, signed on 13 May, 1989 and validated as well as implemented within eight days Hakeem and Gurmeet, (2007). It has not been violated to date despite the presence of troops in the area and the ongoing cease-fire is also effective since November 25, 2003. Siachen disengagement is a high return no cost option and a good first step to be taken. It is ripe time for the governments of India and Pakistan to begin the process of building a national consensus around this important bilateral measure. The two governments must initiate the steps necessary to convince their people that it is in the interest of both nations to demilitarize the Siachen zone of conflict. Once there is public acceptance of the need for a military disengagement, the impediments holding up the process will be easier to overcome. Disengagement in the Siachen Conflict Zone could serve as a precedent for the entire LoC. Particularly after Kargil, it seems impossible to agree a withdrawal without a framework agreement on the larger J&K dispute. There are practical reasons for this – over the years the Siachen battlefield has sprawled outwards, so much so that posts eventually linked up with those in the Kargil sector of the LoC. Any agreement to demilitarise Siachen would now require a similar willingness to demilitarise the LoC.

UNESCO has a plan to convert this region into a World Heritage Site, since it was once part of the ancient Silk Route. However, it needs reduction of armed forces and simultaneous conversion of the region into an ecological tourism site. Fortunately it has been quite peaceful on the world's highest battlefield for the last few years and the proposed adventure park may yet change the course of history.

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