THE ELONGATED DISPUTE OVER SIACHEN

Namita Rajesh and Bhavya Raj Joshi

The dispute over the Siachen Glacier has been plaguing India and Pakistan for decades. The relations between the two countries have been through a series of ups and downs, as a consequence of which, the Siachen conflict has failed to arrive at a solution. The highest battleground on earth has become a talking point owing to the vast economic and military expenditure that both countries have incurred. Despite multiple Agreements and talks, the unresolved conflict remains a cause of unrest and is a defining point in the complex relations between India and Pakistan.

THE SIACHEN DISPUTE

Agreements:

- The first Indo-Pak war over Kashmir soon after partition had concluded in 1949, with an agreement in Karachi, also known as the “Ceasefire Agreement”. The Agreement, drafted by experts from the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) as well as the Indian and Pakistani armed forces, established a ceasefire line, running through Jammu and Kashmir (over two-thirds of which, at the time was controlled by India). The ceasefire line was clearly defined till the point called NJ 9842. From this point north to the Chinese border, the area was left un-demarcated because of its physical inaccessibility and the fact that neither country had military troops stationed there. India claims the glacier lies within the jurisdiction of the Jammu and Kashmir state. Pakistan claims the glacier is located in the northern areas of the disputed territory under its administration.

- Following the Karachi Agreement, a major landmark pertaining to the Siachen Glacier was the Simla Agreement, which came during the aftermath of the India-Pakistan war in 1971. The Agreement was signed by Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on 2 July 1972. The Agreement stated that “the line of control resulting from the cease-fire of December 17, 1971 shall be respected by both sides without prejudice to the recognised position of either side. Neither side shall seek to alter it unilaterally, irrespective of mutual differences and legal interpretations. Both sides further undertake to refrain from the threat or the use of force in violation of this Line.”

What has presently emerged as one of the longest and most precarious conflicts in the history of the two nations, started in 1983. There are several accounts of how the events of 1984, particularly Operation Meghdoot unfolded.
In 1983, India received intelligence reports that warned that Pakistan had begun planning an assault on the Saltoro Ridge. A force known as the Burzil Force was to be launched from Skardu under "Operation Ababeel". RAW received information from a London company which had supplied Arctic-weather gear for Indian troops from Northern Ladakh, that some paramilitary forces from Pakistan too had bought similar Arctic-weather gear.

As a pre-emptive measure, India launched "Operation Meghdoot", which was led by Lieutenant General Prem Nath Hoon, the then General Officer Commanding the 15 Corp in Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir. This task of establishing Indian Army's presence over Siachen Glacier was entrusted to one of the Kumaon Battalions, supported by a company of Ladakh Scouts and two companies of another Kumaon Battalion. The next wave under Capt Sanjay Kulkarni, landed on the Glacier, and hoisted the Indian Tricolour on Bilafond La (Siachen Glacier). The foot column led by Capt (later Lt Col) PV Yadav, SM, reached the Glacier subsequently, after a strenuous four-day march over extremely inhospitable terrain. The column set up Camps I, II and III for maintenance of newly established Posts on the Glacier. Pakistan then went on to occupy the Western Ridge, from where it could observe the Indian defences clearly. A heavy exchange of fire took place, and the post was under heavy fire of Medium Machine Guns and mortars, after which, the Pakistanis were forced to retreat.

In 1986, the defence and foreign secretaries of the two nations, along with senior military personnel, began negotiating a peace deal over Siachen. In the talks, India demanded that Pakistan ceased its unilateral attempt to extend the Line of Control from the agreed terminus at map reference point NJ 9842 to the Karokoram Pass on the border with China. Pakistan insisted that the deployment of Indian and Pakistani forces should be in mutually agreed positions that were held at the time of the ceasefire in 1971 (i.e., pre-Simla positions). In June 1989, the fifth round of talks between their defence secretaries 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 Siachen area. The army authorities in both sides will determine these positions.” Foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan endorsed this statement. Further talks were held in 1992, where both sides presented their respective positions:

- The Indian side's proposal dated November 3, 1992 contained the following elements: Delineation of the Line of Control north of NJ 9842; redeployment of troops on both sides to agreed positions, but after demarcating their existing positions; a zone of disengagement subsequent to the redeployment, with both sides committing that they would not seek to intrude into this zone; a monitoring mechanism to maintain the peace in the Zone of Disengagement (ZoD).
Pakistan's proposal was as follows: Both sides would vacate their troops from the triangular area between Indira Col in the west, Karakoram Pass in the east and NJ 9842; troops on both sides would withdraw to a point south of NJ 9842, to the pre-1972 Simla Agreement positions; neither side shall attempt to alter the status of the demilitarised triangle pending delineation of the LoC north of NJ 9842 by a joint commission.

In order to avoid an impasse, the following compromise was suggested: “The armed forces of the two sides shall vacate areas and re-deploy as indicated in the annexure. The positions vacated would not for either side constitute a basis for legal claim or justify a political or moral right to the area indicated”. Despite the two countries responding positively to the suggestions, an agreement was not signed.

PERSPECTIVES

Since 1989, the two countries have continued exploring the modalities of peace settlement over Siachen—but without making any headway. There have been numerous debates and deliberations on issues relating to the Siachen glacier, and consistent efforts over the years have led to it being included as one of the Confidence Building Measures (CBM) identified and accepted by both the countries. A Roundtable Conference was organised by Programme for Social Action (PSA) and Sanctuary Asia in Mumbai on August 14, 2012 in order to build a deeper understanding and engage with the dialogue processes pertaining to this issue.
Many experts and those directly involved in the conflict note that the strategic importance of the region has been greatly exaggerated by both sides, and as a consequence, both countries continue to face exorbitant military expenditures. LtGen V R Raghavan, who commanded the formation responsible for the Siachen sector during a time when several crucial battles were fought and was also the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) when the Siachen talks took place, comes to the conclusion that no military purpose is served by continuing with the occupation of the Siachen glacier heights. In his book, he states: “It is apparent that neither India nor Pakistan secures a strategic advantage by contesting the possession of the Saltoro range. Neither also faces a military threat to the territory it occupies in Jammu and Kashmir from over the Saltoro range. India and Pakistan therefore portray the issue in terms of political or non-military compulsions. A strategic veneer is given to what is actually a political necessity for continuing the conflict.”

It is also worth quoting a letter written by LtGen Inder Gill to *The Hindu* on 5 March 1997. Gill, a highly respected officer, retired as the army commander of Western Command: “The amount of money wasted by both sides is very large indeed. There is nowhere that either side can go in this terrain. You cannot build roads on glaciers, which are moving rivers of ice. We have no “strategic-tactical advantage” in this area and nor does Pakistan”.

Achieving a solution that is acceptable to all parties has clearly proved to be a daunting task. Initially, the Siachen conflict remained a matter of ambiguous territorial definitions. With the progress of time and the events that occurred within that time, the issue has become multi-faceted, and consequentially it has become harder to bring in a solution. The closest the two countries have got towards the issue of demilitarisation was the Draft of 1992. Further talks on the same have been hampered due to newly added tensions between the two nations.

**A COMPENDIOUS GLANCE**

Mutual suspicions appear to be the key hurdle in demilitarising the Siachen Glacier. India currently wants Pakistan to authenticate the 110-kilometre Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) along the Siachen Glacier-Saltoro ridge in Jammu and Kashmir, fearing Pakistan will move its soldiers forward in the event of an Indian pullout. Pakistan refuses to authenticate AGPL; fearing doing so will legitimise India’s holding of the glacier. It insists on reverting back to pre-1984 positions, as agreed in the Simla Agreement. Pakistan perceives Indian presence on the glacier as a threat to strategic Sino-Pakistani Karakoram Highway. India fears the possibility of Siachen falling into the hands of Pakistan, which, in its view, will allow Pakistan access to the Karakoram Pass and to link up with China, threatening the security of Ladakh region in the Jammu and Kashmir state.

The only way that the Siachen conflict can be resolved is by eliminating the cause of military actions based on speculation: the failure to clearly identify territorial control of the area north of NJ 9842. The issue has taken a backseat owing to several other pressing concerns and tensions
between India and Pakistan. What needs to be realised is that all other tensions between the two countries-- be it terrorism, or the nuclear programmes -- fail to get resolved because of the hostility regarding the Kashmir issue. The conflict over the Siachen glacier lies at the heart of the Kashmir issue. The imbalance in power of the government and the military in Pakistan makes Pakistani military activity in the area unpredictable. The obvious solution to this is to remove the ambiguity in border demarcations. The best and most peaceful way to achieve this is through diplomatic discourse.

Current Indian and Pakistani positions on the modalities of Siachen conflict resolution are poles apart, and the two countries might be partly, if not wholly, right in maintaining respective fears about each other’s strategic motivations. However, what needs to be taken into account is the casualties on both sides. The climatic factor has claimed many lives. Pakistan has reportedly already lost some 5,500 troops, over 90 percent of them due to hazardous weather conditions. Many of those on both sides who survive death return home with amputated feet or legs. The rest, besides extreme climate conditions, are agonized by utter isolation and consequent psychological disorders. A question that both countries need to ponder on is whether incurring such expenses and casualties for control of a “cold, barren and uninhabitable area” works in anyone’s favour?

(Prepared by CPA Research Team)

Sources Cited:

4. Indian Army: http://indianarmy.nic.in/
5. The Hindu
6. TIME Magazine (Series: Battle at the Top of the World)
7. Programme for Social Action