

## DANCING ON ICE

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*"We, the willing, are doing the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much, with so little, for so long, we are now qualified to do anything, with nothing". Notes from the diary of a soldier who served in Siachen. (Original quote by Mother Teresa.)*

India and Pakistan may have their guns aimed at each other at Siachen, but in reality they are both fighting nature, nature defeating them and being defeated by them. At 20,000 feet the world's largest glacier outside the North and South Poles, Siachen is the world's highest battlefield.

Till 1984 neither India nor Pakistan had any presence on the glacier, the distrust on Siachen began over mountaineering expeditions. As per the 1949 Karachi Agreement, the cease-fire line between India and Pakistan for disputed Jammu and Kashmir was described as running to map coordinate NJ 9842 and "...thence north to the glaciers". This line was never demarcated over the glaciers keeping in view the utterly inhospitable climate of Siachen. While India interpreted that the LOC here should extend to the last demarcated point NJ 9842 northeasterly along the Salto Range to the Chinese border, Pakistani interpreted that the LOC extends straight from NJ 9842 to the Karakoram Pass towards the Chinese border. The 2003 ceasefire has ensured cessation of military hostilities, but fatalities have not stopped; more soldiers have been killed by the extreme weather conditions than by the conflict.

Military presence at Siachen costs India almost a million US dollars daily, annual costs for maintaining the Siachen outposts for India are around 300 million US dollars and for Pakistan about 100 million US dollars. Although both India and Pakistan have not been divulging any causality figures "On average, one Pakistani soldier is killed every fourth day, while one Indian soldier is killed every other day." (*Stanford Environmental Law Journal*, Vol 25:1)

Soldiers stationed in temperatures as low as  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$  with fierce snowstorms that can reach speeds of 300 km per hour (150 knots) takes more toll than any military confrontation here could.

Majority of Indian outposts are above 18,500 ft altitude (some at 22000 ft), Indian Army controls the Siachen heights while Pakistan Army controls the Gyong La passes. In terms of accessibility Pakistan army is better off since the road head is only 20 km away from its farthest post, while on the Indian controlled side the road head is about 80 km away from its farthest post.

Soldiers coming back from these posts often suffer from vision problems, hearing and memory loss (prolonged use of oxygen masks). Frost bite in such places may lead to loss of feet and hands.

Of all the issues between India and Pakistan, Siachen should have been the easiest to resolve since it involves a lifeless chunk of ice that is inhospitable for any human population. But like other issues between the two countries, this one has also been converted into a 'nationalistic pride' by hawks on both sides of the 'fence'. It is these extreme elements who have been ensuring that any resolution aimed, confidence building between the two countries are held hostage to a general mistrust. Such mistrust has often been preventing the two countries from taking measures which could have led to resolution of all pending issues including Kashmir. Some even believe that such a fringe in India may want to bleed an economically weaker Pakistan on these Siachen heights. This theory also assumes significance in view of lack of any economic interdependent relationship between India and Pakistan, which could have pushed the two nations towards more sustainable peace efforts. All war-mongering experts on both sides of the divide who advocate continuance of the Siachen war should for a change be asked to walk their talk by serving at least one soldier's term at these outposts.

Both armies here have been fighting against nature. As per reports the glacier has shrunk by 10 kilometres in the last 35 years and more than half of this due to military presence. The glacial retreat is reported to be an alarming 110 metres per year, putting at risk of floods and drought millions of people downstream. Much of this damage to Siachen may not be due to global warming as according to another study (*Nature*, 8 February, 2012) Himalayas to Tian Shan the world's largest mountain chain bordering Kyrgystan and China, has not experienced any net loss of ice over the past decade.

Supplies on both sides for thousands of troops stationed there and the leftovers have created Siachen as the world's 'largest and highest' garbage dump. Whatever of supplies and ammunition goes up the Siachen glacier never comes back. Almost more than 40% of the thousands of tons of garbage left at Siachen are plastic and metal. Worn out ammunition, crashed transport, supply canisters, rotten and done away food, plastics, discarded cloth and missed para droppings; everything forms part of this irretrievable garbage dump. Since the ice glacier lacks any biodegrading agents, whatever garbage is dumped at Siachen percolates into the glacier system and eventually releases harmful toxins like cadmium and chromium into the glacial water system, polluting the water that flows downstream into Shyok and finally into Indus. The waters of Indus feed millions of people downstream both in India and Pakistan.

The Siachen conflict is seen as a pointless battle, where the human and economic costs far outweigh the achievements. A withdrawal from Siachen region would not put India and Pakistan at any loss if proper monitoring mechanisms were put in place. The challenge however is to put in place a withdrawal system where no side is shown to have lost face or security.

The hawks in India may portray a withdrawal from Siachen as a window for Kargil type incursion; in reality such hype may not have any basis or connection to the strategic location of Siachen. The deployments across pockets of Siachen are so tough and thinly placed that any major advances from these areas may not be possible. Implementation of efficient monitoring systems could easily counter such concerns. If Sharm-al-Shaikh on the Sinai peninsula, Egypt

could be designated an ecosystem, jointly managed by Egypt, Israel and Jordan why can't the wilderness of Siachen be?

Siachen being a part of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir, the tussle between India and Pakistan on this piece of 'real estate' is seen more of egos, than of strategies.

The posts of Siachen are obscure islands where each soldier, each human is left to fend for himself, cutoff from the real world. It is these places where sanity and insanity coexists closely in the same mind and body, the tripping point towards insanity so thin and undefined. It often becomes a race against a still time when civilization is reduced to a kerosene fume filled snow bunker in the midst of a white, unforgiving desert. In such situations it is not the opposite side that is a soldier's biggest enemy but the merciless nature. The cost of an inconsequential battle is often unseen by the state, borne by the uncelebrated soldier. It is high time peace and sanity prevails over jingoistic nationalism. India and Pakistan can surely find better use to the money, men and efforts that they are freezing in the high wilderness of Siachen. Let Siachen lead the way for Kashmir. □□□

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