

The ball is in Pakistan's Court

DIMILITARISATION OF SIACHEN

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Considering that it was Pakistan that started the process of occupation of Siachen and has been itself instrumental in creating a dispute where there should have been none, General Musharraf's assurance that Pakistan would not seize a disputed Glacier if India were to withdraw its forces from there, would appear most amusing. Starting with charging of license fee from international mountaineering expeditions and sending with them liaison officers from its Army during the 1970s, Pakistan started sending own military expeditions and military patrols to the Glacier from the beginning of the 1980s. All this had gone unnoticed by India till the middle of 1983 when realising the significance of Pakistan's potentially dangerous moves India also started sending own patrols into the area. Pakistan now reacted by laying a formal claim to this territory (north of line joining NJ 9842 and Karakoram Pass) and protesting strongly against the Indian "intrusion". At the same time it decided to present a fait accompli by establishing permanent posts at the key passes on Saltoro Ridge. Unfortunately for Pakistan, the two companies that it sent up for this task in September/October 1983 itself, could not reach their objective due to weather, and when they eventually went there at the end of April next year they found the place already occupied by the Indian Army. After the series of their attacks on the Indian positions prove unsuccessful Pakistan decided to withdraw and come back better prepared. It now raised special troops for the task and after the fullest preparations launched a major offensive on the Ridge in September 1987. This offensive also fell through as the Indians held on doggedly to their positions. Pakistan has since then continued to struggle for gaining a foothold on this vital ground but in vain till date. It may be noted nevertheless that in contrast to these moves, India's role in the episode has only been defensive. Any call for withdrawal of forces from the region, therefore, needs to be addressed more to the former than the latter.

Strategic Considerations

While India's requirement of occupying Siachen for preventing Pakistan from breathing down its neck in the Nubra valley of Ladakh is understandable, Pakistan does not have any such plausible excuse of self defence for being there. The excuse of protecting the famous Silk Route would seem to be too far fetched. For, one, the Silk Route is too far away to be dominated from the Saltoro Ridge that Pakistan is trying to occupy and, two, there is no apparent threat. Evidently, Pakistan can have only two motives – both aggressive – for remaining in occupation of the Glacier. One, of taking advantage of the region not being demarcated by the Cease-fire Line of 1947 and grabbing as much of territory as possible for adding to its illegal occupations in J&K; and, two, opening up a second front in Ladakh in support of its proxy war in Kashmir.

Defending Siachen

Keeping Pakistan at bay on the Siachen Glacier has been a very arduous task for the Indian Arm and a costly one for the Government of India. While the features in this area vary in height from 19000 ft to 27000 ft, its treacherous terrain and extremely harsh climatic conditions make it a land with the most hostile environment under which man has ever lived, let alone fought a war. In their struggle for survival the troops must face, with grave risk, such hazards as are posed by high altitude, extremely low temperatures, (down to minus 60 degrees Celsius at times), avalanches, and movement over the maze of unstable crevasses, some of which are covered and hidden under snow. The Glacier has, indeed, extracted its toll by claiming a large

number of lives, and physically incapacitating many more. Interestingly, although exchange of fire with Pakistani troops is almost a daily occurrence, the casualties have occurred more as a result of the great struggle for survival that the troops are engaged in at the Glacier, than from enemy action. The Government of India is under tremendous financial strain for providing to the troops not only the means for their survival and well being at the Glacier but also in procuring for them specialised arms and equipment for fighting effectively under these peculiar conditions. The question naturally arises as to why Indian must undergo this ordeal – both physical as well as financial.

Demilitarisation of Siachen

Of late there has been much talk in India of demilitarisation of Siachen. However, as usual in our country for matters pertaining to defence, the talk has been prompted more by the great strain and drain involved in the continued occupation of Siachen than the considerations of India's strategic needs. Otherwise, with Pakistan's interests in Siachen being related to its proxy war in Kashmir, India, on its own, would appear to have no option but to keep holding on to its positions against all odds. Even if it is believed that Pakistan would not be able to move so sizeable a force over the Glacier as to pose any appreciable threat to Ladakh through Nubra valley, the need for remaining in occupation of the Siachen region would be there nevertheless. We would still have the obligation of maintaining our sovereignty over territory that legally and rightfully belongs to us even if it were "a vast expanse of wasteland where not a blade of grass grows". However, considering that we are not quite in a position to push Pakistan out of the occupied territory, it may be prudent to accept the *status quo*. Having already accepted, *de facto* if not *de jure*, the partition of the State else where along the Cease-fire Line, we could do the same in this part of the State also with the actual ground position, as it exists here today, substituting for the Cease-fire Line. However, as India is at the Glacier because of the aggressive designs of Pakistan, initiative in this regard rests with Pakistan. Having entered the arena first, it must also leave first, if it wishes to stop the fight. It may be well for Pakistan to remember that the ball is now its court.