

State Times March 27, 1997

Strategic relevance of Siachen

Dear Editor,

Mr BK Mathur deserves kudos for his very informative and thought provoking article "Strategic relevance of Siachen Glacier" (ST Mar 21). Few in our country are aware of the great struggle that our Jawans are engaged in at the World's highest battle-field, in holding on to positions of strategic importance, against Pakistan's utmost efforts to dislodge them. The Indian soldier who is roughing it out on the Glacier without the slightest demur, no doubt, deserves the highest praise.

It is true that nothing hurts a soldier more than when he is asked to withdraw from positions, to defend which he has made sacrifices, and which he is still in a position to hold. Mr Mathur's concern at the Army being made to withdraw from the Glacier after thwarting concerted Pakistani efforts at gaining a tactical foot-hold on it is, therefore, understandable. A soldier, however, may not feel that frustrated if he were made to understand that our withdrawal, if at all, would be part of the demilitarisation of the area and not a retreat. Whereas retreat cannot prevent the enemy from occupying positions so vacated, mutual demilitarisation would bind both sides to keep away from the vacated area.

There are, in fact, two ways of securing a strategic area. One, by occupying it, and, two, by dissuading the enemy from doing that. While force must be used in the former case, the latter may be achieved through diplomacy. Diplomacy is a recognised method of promoting national interests through peaceful means. It is for his satisfaction that no amount of diplomacy can succeed unless it is backed by military strength. The Indian soldier on his part may take pride in the fact that it is because of his grit, determination and valour displayed at Siachen that Pakistan has been forced to the negotiating table.

It is generally feared that considering its past record, Pakistan, notwithstanding the agreement that it may enter into with regard to the demilitarisation of Siachen, might occupy the territory vacated by India before it has had time to make a counter move. This would seem unlikely in view of the fact that the requirement for keeping Siachen demilitarised is as much in Pakistan's interest as it is India's. Much will, however, depend on the provisions for keeping the vigil over the area by both sides that would form part of the agreement. Ultimately it would be the credibility of India's threat of use of force in retaliation to any violation of the terms of the agreement, not only at Siachen but also where it is likely to hurt Pakistan most, that would effectively deter it from entering the demilitarised zone.

Dr K. Brahma Singh