

Siachen Glacier : The Highest Battlefield and Strategic Importance

Abstract

Indian Army and Pakistani army occupied the Siachen Glacier and surrounding regions for decades and have lost hundreds of soldiers due to adverse climatic conditions. There is nothing here to fight over except a frozen wasteland. In spite of all this armies of both countries spend crores of rupees per day just to keep the battle going and the troops supplied. Political and defence analysts from India, Pakistan and other parts of the world now questions the strategic importance of Siachen Glacier.

Keywords: Strategic, Polar, AGPL, Aksaichin, Militarily, 'Mountain of Peace'.

Introduction

Siachen is high up in the Korakoram Range (between Saltoro Range and Korakoram Range) is the biggest glacier outside the polar region and is approximately 70 km. long and varies width between 2 to 8 Km. stretches across Ladakh and Pakistani occupied Kashmir. The word 'Siachen' ironically means 'the place of wild roses'. It separates Central Asia, East Asia and South Asia. Siachen is the world's largest non-polar glacier and this is some times called third pole. K-2 and Godwin Austin is a part of this range. It receives an annual snow fall of more than 35 feet. Wind reaches at a speed of more than 100 miles per hour and temperature can plunge to -60° C. This is world's highest battlefield where more soldiers are died due to cold weather than the bullets. World's highest Sonam helipad is also here at the height of 21000 feet.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to analyse the strategic importance of Siachen Glacier and to analyse various diplomatic and defence factors which are dominating over human factors and this paper also analyse the lack of will-power in the political leaders of both (India & Pakistan) countries.

Background of the Siachen Problem

Due to the lack of trust and diplomatic foresightedness, when India and Pakistan settled the LOC (Line of Control) issue which divides Jammu and Kashmir between two countries. They stopped the LOC at a point known as NJ 9842 and this is the base of glacier and that time, it was decided that mountains and glaciers are so high and inhospitable and it is useless to demarcate the border, but due to improvement in Sino-Pakistan ties and the construction of Karakoram highway linking two countries soon gave Siachen a strategic importance.

In July, 1949 India and Pakistan agreed on original CFL (Cease Fire Line). This agreement was signed in Karachi but this agreement did not cover the area of the glaciers because of difficulties of delineating the line. The AGPL (Actual Ground Position Line) refers to the current position that divides Indian and Pakistani troops in the Siachen Glacier region.

Causes of Conflict

The Siachen Glacier became a bone of contention following a vague demarcation territory as per the Simla Agreement of 1972 which did not exactly specify who had authority over this area. In 1983 American map showed the Siachen as part of Pakistan and Indian Army came to know that a Japanese mountaineering expedition team was seeking Islamabad's permission to scale certain mountains in the area.

Pakistani govt's permission to Japanese expedition to scale an important peak (Rimo 1). By this Pakistani govt. tried to legitimise their claim. This peak located east of the Siachen glacier and also overlooks the north western areas of Aksai Chin, the area occupied by China but claimed by India. Pakistani govt. also invited climbers to ascend Siachen



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which would imply that the glacier was a part of Pakistan. In 1983, Pakistani generals decided to stake their claims through troops deployment to the Siachen Glacier. After analysing the Indian Army's mountaineering expeditions, they feared that India might capture key ridges and passes near the glacier and decided to send their own troops first. Islamabad ordered Arctic-weather gear from a London supplier, unaware that the same supplier provided outfits to the Indians. The Indians were informed about this development and initiated their own plan providing them with a head start.¹

Operation Meghdoot

'Operation Meghdoot'. Lit. "Operation Cloud Messenger" was the code name for the Indian Armed forces operation to capture the Siachen Glacier in the J&K State of India. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, Indian Prime Minister gave the go ahead call to the Indian Army and Indian Air Force. Earlier intelligence agencies reported that the Pakistan planned an operation to occupy the glacier by 17th April, 1984. On 13 April, 1984 Indian forces launched an operation led by Lt. General Prem Nath Hoon, the then General Officer Commanding the 15 Corp in Srinagar (J&K). This was a unique operation launched in the world's highest battlefield with the military action. Indian troops became successful in gaining control of entire Siachen Glacier. Pakistan quickly responded with troops deployment and a mad race was virtually started for this place and Indian forces controlled most part of this glacier and Indian forces were the first to establish permanent posts on the glacier.

Cost of Conflict

Geo political compulsions of India, Pakistan and China brought it (Siachen Glacier) to the central stage. It was the region where the three countries attempted to improve their military control. Mani Shankar Aiyer, an Indian diplomat once said about Siachen "In the frozen wastes of Siachen general frost bite kills hundreds of jawans in the never ending battle which both countries wage against nature".

Since 2003 ceasefire is there and the maximum casualties occurred because of medical reasons due to the harsh terrain and climate conditions, on an average one Pakistani soldier is killed every fourth day and one Indian soldier is killed every other day. The lack of oxygen and the prolonged periods of isolation are a lethal combination and take a heavy psychological toll. Siachen is prone to avalanches. Only 3% of the Indian casualties are by firing and 97% soldiers die due to poor weather conditions.

In 1987, Pakistani forces tried to dislodge the Indian positions. This unsuccessful attempt was made under the command of Brigadier Parvez Musharaff, (later President of Pakistan).

Stephen Cohen in an autobiography on sub continent at the Brookings Institutions said, "Siachen is the epitome of the worst aspects of the relationship. These are two countries that are paired on a road to Oslo to Hiroshima and at this point they could go either way."

Lt. Col. Dr. K.S. Rao in charge of HAMRC (High Altitude Medical Research Centre) said that the fact is man simply cannot acclimatise beyond a height

of 18000 feet and all crucial Indian posts are well over this critical altitude.

Time Magazine stated that the Indian advance captured nearly 1000 sq. miles (2600Km²) of territory claimed by Pakistan. Camps were soon converted to permanent posts by both countries. The number of casualties on both sides during this particular operation is not known.²

Again in 1989 Pakistan launched assault to capture the ridge and passes held by India in the same year Pakistan lost one major Pakistan post, the "Quaid" which came under Indian control as Bana Post, in recognition of Bana Singh who launched a daring day light attack, code named Operation Razor, after climbing 1500 foot (460m) of ice cliff. Bana Singh was awarded the Param Vir Chakra (Pvc) the highest gallantry award of India for the assault that captured the post. Bana Post is the highest battlefield post in the world today at a height of 22,143 feet (6,749m) above seal level³.

Neither country can afford Rs. 130 for a litre of Kerosene and Rs. 200/- per Chapati.

According to the estimates of Strategic Foresight Group (SFG) in their report, the Second Freedom-South Asian challenges 2005-2025 published in 2005. The Siachen conflict would have cost India Rs. 72 Billion and Pakistan Rs. 18 Billion from 2006 to 2010. Both countries have lost about 1500 soldiers in the same five years without fighting a war⁴.

A Pakistani Glaciologist Arshad H.Abbasi who has done the extensive research on the subject argues that Siachen Glacier is receding at the rate of 110 sq. meter per year.

India through 250 Kms long pipe line provide Kerosene for troops to survive. Currently temperature rise in the area is recorded as 0.2°C annually. Due to this war Siachen has experienced large scale loss of plant and animal diversity as a result of this conflict the glacial habitats like brown bears, snow leopards, cranes and many other species are threatened.

General Khalid Mehmood Arif the retired former Vice Chief of Pakistani military said, "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".

In his memoirs Former Pakistani President General Parvez Musharaf states that Pakistan lost almost 900 sq. miles (2300 Km²) of territory.⁵

On April 7, 2012 after the massive avalanche 124 Pakistani soldiers and 14 civilians were killed. There is a pressure on the Pakistani establishment to demilitarise the Siachen area. Even Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif when he was the leader of the opposition party pleaded for unilateral withdrawal of Pakistani forces from Siachen.

Even General Kayani when he was the Chief of the Army was in favour of the demilitarisation of Siachen Glacier for development of Pakistan and Environmental reasons. He further said it was India which started this dispute in 1984. Indian and Pakistani leaders need to show the political will necessary to accept ground realities.

Eris S. Margot's in his book 'War at the top of the world' : The struggle for Afghanistan, Kashmir and Tibet' records the account of his travel to Siachen and opinions of some Pakistani military men. He wrote what a Pakistani Commando Officer told him in Peshawar in those words,

"Its madness..... Siachen is a hell on earth. We are fighting the bloody Indians to prevent them from grabbing what we say is our rightful part of hell. That's how much we hate each other".

Strategic Importance of Siachen Glacier

There are many observers who think that the glacier has little strategic significance but not at the cost both the countries have to pay for it.

But foreign policy experts and Defence experts has different opinion because Siachen is the only place which keeps the Chinese and Pakistanis at bay in that region from openly confronting India from its north and taking away Laddakh and Kashmir. This glacier can also be useful as a 5000 sq. km. water reservoir that would be crucial for the water wars of the future. Major General V.S. Budhwar who was the Indian Commander in Leh whose region included Siachen said,

"No body can win, no matter how long we fight..... but this is our land.....it is a portion of our nation, state and will not cede it."

As Pakistani just know it well that it is a strategic place and Pakistani Army made many attempts to throw us back but all such attacks were repulsed.

Robert Wirsing records his opinion in his famous book- India, Pakistan and the Kashmir Dispute : On Regional Conflict and its Resolution in the following words,

"Chibber who retired from the Army in 1985, has acknowledged that he was one of the small group of influential senior officers who began lobbying in the late 1970's for a more aggressive Indian policy toward the Siachen territory".

Lt. General M.L. Chibber, who planned the occupation of Siachen (Code named Operation Meghdoot) in 1984 said flatly in an interview in Dec, 2004 that

"Siachen does not have strategic significance....the strategic significance being talked about is all invention: yet Siachen invokes strong passion in India and Pakistan.

Talks on Siachen

Defence Secretaries and Foreign Secretaries of India and Pakistan met a number of times to solve the Siachen issue but Pakistan attach this issue with Kashmir problem.

N.N. Vohra, the then Defence Secretary said,

"We had finalised the text of an agreement at Hyderabad House by around 10.00 P.M. on the last day" "Signing was set for 10.00 A.M. but later that night instructions were given to me not to go ahead the next day but to conclude matters in our next round of talks in Islamabad in January, 1993". of course that day never came.

Mr. Vohra added "That's the way these things go." He said P.V.N. Rao was the Indian Prime Minister and the B.J.Ps campaign against the Babri

Masjid was in high gear and Siachen issue skipped from the govt's priority list.

Defence Secretaries of India and Pakistan also met in Islamabad on 6th and 7th April, 2007 to discuss Siachen and Sir Creek issue but they failed because Pakistan again insisted that there should be some tangible progress on Kashmir. Again 30th and 31st May, 2011 Indian Defence Secretary Pardeep Kumar and his Pakistani counterpart again met on this issue.

Former Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Ahmed Kasuri said "We had worked out certain schedules of disengagement whereby both Indian and Pakistani concerns could be met". He further said there was "Substantial agreement on Siachen"⁶

Conclusion

In recent years India and Pakistan has lost hundred of soldiers in maintaining control over a system of glaciers where nothing grows, no minerals even no grass and still futile battle goes on. It is simply a war of prestige and question of who blinks first. Some people are of the opinion that this futile capture of non-strategic land which antagonised relations between India and Pakistan. Some Civil Society organisations and some scholars are of the opinion that Siachen should be declared as a jointly controlled peace park for the scientific study at the height of 22000 feet of glacial belt. Dr. Manmohan Singh, the then Prime Minister of India called it "Mountain of Peace" during his visit to Siachen on 12 June, 2005.

In Siachen Govt. of India spends Rs. 7 Crore per day and in this amount govt. can develop 4000 secondary schools in a year. But foreign policy makers and defence strategists are of the opinion that India is now a major regional power that can take greater risks. India has the weight of International public opinion on its side and this is the place from where Indian Army dominates the heights and overlook the Pakistan-China highway.

Now the time has come when both countries (India and Pakistan) should take decision on the basis of humanitarian grounds and India should not compromise with its national interest. Atleast Siachen issue needs an urgent solution with immediate demilitarisation from both the sides and it should be done not only to break the ice but also for the safety of future generations.

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