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## Issue Brief

# Siachen: The Land of Roses or an Ice Graveyard

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Siachen, which literary means "land of wild roses", is witness to thousands of deaths of both Indian and Pakistani soldiers. Yet, the Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar insists that the question of withdrawing troops from the region "does not arise".<sup>1</sup> Pakistan, for its part, has no option but to follow suit, though reluctantly.

It was April 13, 1984 when Indian troops moved to occupy the peaks of Siachen Glacier. Pakistan responded in the same manner. With this move, Siachen Glacier, which is also known as the "roof of world", became world's highest battleground where two armies have fought more against the environment than against each other. Once uninhabited, the area now hosts the two armies deployed at the altitude of 16,000-22,000 feet above sea level for the past almost 32 years. The 1949 Karachi Agreement, which both sides signed after fighting their first war soon after the independence, gave control of Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir to Pakistan, whereas control of the Kashmir Valley, Jammu and Ladakh was given to India. Taking into account the actual positions of the troops of the two countries, a cease-fire line was drawn between two parts of Kashmir up to a point at the base of Saltoro Range which is also known as NJ-9842. The area beyond this point remained un-demarcated and uninhabited until 1984 when India launched "Operation Meghdoot" to occupy the Glacier on the pretext of perceived Pakistani military designs in this region.

This is a unique battlefield where both the countries have lost more soldiers to extreme weather conditions than to active hostilities. The temperature at the glacier can touch minus 60 Celsius making it impossible for any kind of life to survive. Since November 2003, when both sides agreed to a ceasefire agreement, active hostilities have stopped. However, this agreement has not reduced deaths as the result of extreme cold weather causing lethal frostbites. Some soldiers suffer memory loss, and problems of hearing and eyesight due to extreme weather conditions. Others develop psychological problems due to prolonged periods of isolation. According to some reports, the Indian Army has lost more than 1000 soldiers in Siachen out of which only 220 died in active hostilities. The rest of them have succumbed to extreme weather conditions,<sup>2</sup> whereas one Pakistani soldier on average dies every fourth day.<sup>3</sup>

The economic cost of the conflict has also been immense for the two poverty stricken countries. According to some independent observers, the cost of maintaining such heavy army presence in Siachen stands at around \$438 million a year to the Indian exchequer.<sup>4</sup> In comparison, Pakistan spends much less - around \$ 182 million,<sup>5</sup> but given the limited resources of the country even the former Chief of Army

Staff Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani had acknowledged that the cost of Siachen war still consumed a mammoth portion of national exchequer which should be diverted to the people.<sup>6</sup>

The Indo-Pak hostility in Siachen has also taken its toll on the area's environment. Many reports indicate that due to human intervention, the glacier is melting at a faster rate thereby creating glacial lakes and snow holes. Increased avalanches are projected to take place on both sides of the Saltoro Ridge. The melting of the glacier will cause increased floods and droughts. It is important to mention here that the glaciers regulate the environment in the region and are a major source of water for Pakistan. The projection that these glaciers in the region might disappear in the next half a century presents Pakistan with an existential threat. It was in April 2012, that a massive avalanche struck Gayari in the Eastern part of Ganche district of Gilgit-Baltistan burying a whole battalion headquarters of 6 Northern Light Infantry. A total of 140 Pakistanis, mostly soldiers, lost their lives. Similarly, recently, ten Indian army soldiers got buried and died under tons of snow when an avalanche hit their post.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these hazards to human life, economy and environment, many Indian observers highlight the strategic importance of Siachen for India and support its continuous occupation. They argue that by controlling the peaks, India has successfully cut off the border links between China and Pakistan. Some see it as a severe blow to Pakistan as India is at an advantageous position.<sup>8</sup> Others disagree. The admission that "Siachen does not have strategic significance" has come from none other than Lt. General M.L. Chibber who had planned "Operation Meghdoot" to occupy Siachen in 1984.<sup>9</sup> Brigadier (Retd.) Gurmeet Kanwal has also rightly pointed out that continued military occupation of the area by both India and Pakistan is counterproductive and is a retrograde step in the efforts to pursue a genuine rapprochement. He goes on to suggest that Siachen, after its demilitarisation should be converted into a "science park".<sup>10</sup>

Since long, saner voices in both India and Pakistan have been questioning the utility and sanity of fighting this war. The fact that soldiers have been deployed at a place which is not suitable for any kind of existence or habitation and where lives are being lost frequently because of extreme weather conditions makes it a humanitarian issue. The latest incident of the ten Indian soldiers buried under the snow had many people in India raise their voice against this war and demand the withdrawal of troops. However, all such demands have been rejected by Indian Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar saying that "the decision (on deploying troops) on Siachen is based on the security of the nation."<sup>11</sup>

India's allegations that Pakistan had military designs in this region are questionable because the later claims that the territory between NJ-9842 and Karakoram Pass was always under the administrative control of Pakistan. Additionally, since 1950, all international mountaineering expeditions in the area took permission from Pakistan.<sup>12</sup>

By far, thirteen rounds of talks between India and Pakistan on Siachen have taken place without bearing any fruit.<sup>13</sup> In 1992, Defence Secretaries of India and Pakistan had almost reached an agreement on the withdrawal of troops.<sup>14</sup> But later, India backtracked. Indian army insists that joint demarcation of the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) on the ground as well as the map should be the first step which should be followed by a joint verification agreement and redeployment of forces to mutually agreed positions. This, of course, is not acceptable to Pakistan which feels that by agreeing to any such demand, it would be accepting Indian claims on Siachen. Pakistan feels that demilitarisation of the region, withdrawal of forces and authentication should proceed simultaneously.

Since India and Pakistan are once again on the path of dialogue and Siachen has been identified as one of the issues to be discussed bilaterally, it is absolutely imperative that an amicable solution is found with demilitarisation of the area as a first step. It will not only restore trust between the two countries, but also save hundreds of precious human lives from falling victim to extreme cold. The two incidents of avalanches mentioned above should be an eye opener. Billions of rupees can be transferred to the social uplift programmes by demilitarising Siachen. Demilitarisation of the region will also help in preserving nature for the future generations of the two countries. It is therefore need of the hour that this issue gets serious and result-oriented attention from the policy makers of the two countries for the sake of humanity as well as the Mother Nature.

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