
Siachen: The Non-Issue

PC Katoch

General Kayani's call to demilitarise Siachen was no different from a thief in your balcony asking you to vacate your apartment on the promise that he would jump down. The point to note is that both the apartment and balcony are yours and the thief has no business to dictate terms. Musharraf orchestrated the Kargil intrusions as Vajpayee took the bus journey to Lahore, but Kayani's cunning makes Musharraf look a saint. Abu Jundal alias Syed Zabiuddin an Indian holding an Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) provisioned Pakistani passport has spilled the beans on the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack: its complete planning, training, execution and minute-to-minute directions by the Pakistani military-ISI-LeT (Lashkar-e-Tayyeba) combine. More revealing is the continuing training for similar attacks under the marines in Karachi and elsewhere. The US says Pakistan breeds snakes in its backyard but Pakistan actually beds vipers and enjoys spawning more. If Osama lived in Musharraf's backyard, isn't Kayani dining the Hafiz Saeeds and Zaki-Ur-Rehman, with the Hamid Guls in attendance? His demilitarisation remark post the Gyari avalanche came because maintenance to the Pakistanis on the western slopes of Saltoro was cut off. Yet, the Indians spoke of 'military hawks' not accepting the olive branch, recommending that a 'resurgent' India can afford to take chances in Siachen. How has Pakistan earned such trust? If we, indeed, had hawks, the cut off Pakistani forces would have been wiped out, following the avalanche.

Kashmir

Facing the marauding Pakistani hordes in 1947, when Maharaja Hari Singh acceded his state to India, Kashmir encompassed today's regions of Kashmir Valley, Jammu, Ladakh (all with India), the Northern Areas, Gilgit-Baltistan,

Lieutenant General **PC Katoch** (Retd) is former Director General, Information Systems, Army HQ and a Delhi-based strategic analyst.

balance Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) (all illegally occupied by Pakistan), and Aksai Chin and Shaksgam Valley (both illegally occupied by China). In 1956–57, China constructed a road through Aksai Chin. India only became aware of it 11 months after its construction began and one month before its completion. This was confirmed through the 1958 edition Chinese maps. In 1962, China occupied the entire Aksai Chin (38,000 sq km) and in 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded Shaksgam Valley (some 5,800 sq km) to China.

Delineation of the Ceasefire Line (CFL) between India-Pakistan under the Karachi Agreement of 1949 was done only up to NJ 9842, stating, “runs thence north to the glaciers”. In 1994, the Indian Parliament passed a unanimous resolution that entire Kashmir, in accordance with the accession document, is an integral part of India. Wikipedia describes two points denoting the northern extremities of undivided Kashmir state as Dafdar in Taghdumbash Pamir near Beyik Pass (bordering Wakhan Corridor) and Karakoram (KK) Pass (bordering Xinjiang in China), giving precise coordinates. While India remained intransigent, quick on strategic appreciation, Pakistan drew a line directly linking NJ9842 with KK Pass as the Line of Control (LoC), which by no means coincides with “runs thence north to the glaciers”.

Siachen

Siachen means ‘place of roses’ in the local language. The area is well chronicled in the biographies of Capt Young Husband who himself traversed the glacier, crossing into China many times. An Italian expedition once entered the Siachen glacier from the north, travelling east via the Teram-Shehr glacier to KK Pass and back by the same route. In early 1984, an Indian expedition to Siachen discovered Pakistanis poised to creep up the Saltoro Ridge. India preempted the Pakistani move and occupied the Saltoro Ridge through a daring heliborne operation. Pakistan rushed to gain control of the range as well. At Gyong La, both Indians and Pakistanis arrived simultaneously. A flag meeting was held and an agreement reached for both to withdraw. The Indians did but the Pakistanis double-crossed and occupied the pass in clear violation of the agreement made hours earlier. This is the only significant foothold Pakistan has on the Saltoro Ridge. Their second significant foothold was the Qaid-e-Azam Post, at 22,143 feet, which was captured by India and renamed Bana Post. Pakistan does not acknowledge its loss and visitors on the Pakistani side are briefed that it is still held by Pakistan. A Pakistan Army captain faced a court-martial for leaking the truth to media.

Saltoro Ridge

Siachen is a glaciated flowing river – an enormous reservoir of fresh water. Of strategic significance is the Saltoro Ridge that India holds. If Saltoro had no strategic significance, why did Pakistan make ‘extensive preparations’ to occupy it in 1984, why would it draw an imaginary LoC from NJ9842 directly to KK Pass, why would it make repeated attempts to gain footholds, why the Kargil intrusions to cut off Siachen, and why repeatedly harp on demilitarising? Pakistan is at a tremendous disadvantage at Saltoro Ridge since, save Gyong La, India dominates the entire ridge, and Pakistan can be made to bleed here if it ups the ante elsewhere. Pakistan’s genocide in Shia-dominated Baltistan (forced demographic changes, deliberate conversions to the Sunni form of Islam, state sponsored Shia massacres) is turning the situation in Baltistan explosive that can threaten the sustenance of the Pakistani troops in Siachen. Since the late 1990s, Pakistan’s ISI has been nurturing Shia terrorist organisations, including the Tehreek-e-Jafaria and its many sub-groups, with an eye on the Ladakh and Zaskar Ranges. However, infiltration into Ladakh and south of it is stonewalled by Saltoro.

The China Factor

China provides tacit support to Pakistan’s ‘1,000 Cuts’ anti-India policy, itself employing the ‘1,000 Creeps’ policy—creeping forward in every bit of our territory besides claiming Arunachal Pradesh (90,000 sq km). The Chinese designs on Kashmir are obvious. Illegally occupying Shaksgam, it capitalises on this region holding massive fresh water sources while internationalising it by sponsoring foreign expeditions. The 2006 Google imagery showed an extraordinary large scale (1:500) terrain model extensively duplicating eastern Aksai Chin built close to Yinchuan (capital of Ningxia autonomous region), the 3,000 × 2,300 feet area being used for tank war-games. When India was battling the Pakistanis in Kargil in 1999, China was developing a road in eastern Aksai Chin towards south of the KK Pass. In April this year (2012), China called upon Japan and South Korea to establish astronomical observatories in Aksai Chin. The USA’s Middle East Media Research Institute now reports a Pakistani move to lease the disputed Gilgit-Baltistan region to China for 50 years. To say that China has no plans in Ladakh will be the height of naiveté considering the persistent ground and air Chinese violations in the area.

The Debate on Demilitarisation

There has been much hype about an earlier demilitarisation plan that ‘almost came through’ though the details remain classified. It is, however, unthinkable

that a riposte to the Pakistani double-cross post demilitarisation was not factored in. The question is, where? If the riposte was across the international boundary (IB), holding on to it was doubtful, considering we gave up the strategic Haji Pir Pass captured in 1965 with enormous sacrifices. Today, armchair warriors talk of the recapture of Saltoro should the Pakistanis reoccupy it. They obviously haven't the faintest idea of glacial warfare, besides the fact that a riposte in the plains sector needs to factor in nukes if critical areas are to be captured. Those who talk of fallback to pre-1984 positions have no idea what that defence line was and the huge gaps facilitating infiltration. Perhaps Musharraf's confidence in extracting demilitarisation from Siachen led him to declare, "There will be many more Kargils." Should Pakistan double-cross us post demilitarisation and reoccupy the Saltoro Ridge, our next line of defence would possibly be the Ladakh Range, hold ridges south of the Shyok river, and Leh will be within enemy artillery range. Sub-Sector West (SSW), west of the Siachen glacier and Sub-Sector North (SSN), south of the KK Pass will become untenable. Maintenance of Sub-Sector Haneef (SSH) on the Ladakh Range will be severely threatened. Our new defence line will need additional troops—may be two additional divisions. Large reserves will be required, including for counter infiltration since the Ladakh and Zaskar Ranges will be targeted for terrorism by ISI nurtured groups. Enormous expenditure and time will be needed for preparation of new posts, bunkers, gun positions, helipads, administrative echelons, communications infrastructure, maintenance and recurring expenses.

A continuous belt of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), Shaksgam Valley, demilitarised Siachen (including forced vacation of SSW, SSN, SSH) and Aksai Chin, coupled with the anti-India China-Pak nexus and the implications thereof need to be viewed seriously. Coupled with the reoccupation of Saltoro by Pakistan is the likely Chinese surge in Nubra and Shyok Valleys, with both leaning on Leh. A China-Pak regeneration of the old Silk Route via the KK Pass will be to India's disadvantage since China will be looking to provide depth to it from the south – pushing the Indian defences further south.

There has been much discussion on the daily expenditure and weather casualties in Siachen. The figure of a daily expenditure of Rs 10-15 crore comprises guesswork considering that land routes have been opened to even most of the difficult posts that were earlier air maintained, roads have been built to feed posts in the southern glacier, porters have been located on the glacier itself for the past several years and kerosene pipelines have been laid that pump kerosene all the way from base camp. The costs need to be compared with same sized formations

deployed in equally difficult terrain elsewhere, though costs should not matter where national security is involved. Besides, what expenditure are we crying about, sitting smug with a daily Rs 12 crore loss by Air India? There have been suggestions that trade will get a boost after demilitarisation, which is absurd. There are better areas other than Siachen to increase trade. For weather casualties, we should not view Siachen in isolation. We have many more troops deployed on the Ladakh and Pir Panjal Ranges in Kashmir and in the northeast facing China, some of them holding equally difficult posts, including in glaciated areas. Equally dangerous avalanches occur periodically in such areas, resulting in loss of lives. Gun positions get buried under avalanches in Kargil's Drass sector. Does this mean we should demilitarise from Kargil as well? Notably, there have been units that have done a full tenure in Siachen without losing a single man to weather and terrain following pre-induction training and practice of yoga. The enormous strategic significance of the area, particularly the Salto Range, becomes clear only when you view the demilitarisation issue along with the defence of Ladakh post demilitarisation and the resultant ramifications on India's security.

Munificence

It is habitual for Pakistani speakers to keep harping that India should be more generous, but how much more largesse should India keep giving? Despite Pakistan illegally occupying one-third of Kashmir, India declared a ceasefire and went to the UN when the Pakistanis were on the run. India is giving 80 percent of water to Pakistan under the Indus Water Treaty – far in excess of global norms related to the size of the river basin. The captured strategic Haji Pir Pass was returned to Pakistan in 1965. Despite 93,000 prisoners of war in 1971, India did not make Pakistan sign on the dotted line for Kashmir on the verbal assurance of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who pleaded that his government would fall if he signed an agreement, and who later reneged on his promise. The Indian Army treated the Pakistani prisoners with respect and even gave a religious burial to their abandoned dead during the Kargil conflict, while Pakistan killed Capt Saurabh Kalia and five other captured soldiers most heinously. “The postmortem revealed that the Pakistan Army had indulged in the most heinous acts; of burning their bodies with cigarettes, piercing ear-drums with hot rods, puncturing eyes before removing them, breaking most of the teeth and bones, chopping off various limbs and private organs of these soldiers, besides inflicting all sorts of physical and mental torture before shooting them dead, as evidenced by the bullet wound to the temple,” says Wikipedia. Similarly, Sqn Ldr Ajay Ahuja, whose MiG

was shot down over Indian soil on May 27, 1999, was used for target practice by Pakistani soldiers after he bailed out and opened his parachute. On balance, what has Pakistan done to receive such benevolence? We most definitely cannot trust Pakistan or, more importantly, the Pakistan Army in the foreseeable future and any more territorial concessions should be totally out of the question.

It is a Non-Issue

Being our territory, Siachen is a non-issue for India. India should tell Pakistan that the LoC beyond NJ 9842 should run thence north to Dafdar in Taghdumbash Pamir near Beyik Pass bordering Wakhan Corridor (on the J&K-China border). In addition to the defence of the Ladakh region, the strategic value of holding the Salto Ridge should be seen in relation to the extension of the line north from NJ 9842. We should only talk of extension of the LoC north of NJ 9842 to Dafdar and not demilitarisation. Any other issue pertaining to delineation, demarcation or demilitarisation must await the successful outcome of defining the line north from NJ 9842. Pakistan must be told it has no business in Siachen and should cancel its 1963 agreement with China that ceded the Shaksgam Valley, which is Indian territory. We should also make it clear to Pakistan that the limits of our munificence are over, it is time for reciprocation and the Indus Water Treaty needs to be renegotiated in accordance with global norms related to the river basin. India must also focus on the genocide unleashed by Pakistan in Baltistan. The Baltis are our own people under the accession of Kashmir to India by Maharaja Hari Singh.

Any international pressure must be viewed in the context of the global games being played, especially by countries whose economies mostly rely on weapon exports. This has been happening for ages—partitioning of India and Korea, deceit by the British in forcing Skardu into Pakistan's lap despite the presence of Indian forces, the aftermath of Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and now Syria. Those who want India to give up more territory should be advised to establish a 'Peace Park' astride the Durand Line, and resolve the Middle East and Syria issues. Any external pressure to 'normalise' relations with Pakistan should be treated as per our national interests – upgrade economic relations and increase trade that are good for both countries but no more sacrificing territory. It is naïve for anyone to think that pushing India into talks on Siachen and possible disengagement of one brigade will help stem terrorism across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The world and the US policy-makers, in particular, must not ignore the advice of US military and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) commanders that the

Afghanistan problem is actually centred in Pakistan and drone attacks comprise, at best, a peripheral response.

Conclusion

Our priority should be to establish the LoC north of NJ 9842 to Dardar on the J&K-China border. Siachen is Indian territory and its demilitarisation will have an adverse strategic effect on the defence of Ladakh and the rest of India. Not only can Pakistan double-cross, what is the guarantee that it will not cede the demilitarised Siachen-Saltoro to China. To say that Pakistan is in no position to reoccupy the area is foolish. Even while holding Saltoro, the Kargil intrusions were never visualised, thinking that the terrain was not negotiable. In 1999, Pakistan's Special Services Group (SSG) tried to establish a post at the glaciated unoccupied Point 5770 in the southern Siachen glacier but were dislodged in the nick of time by our troops. China may not occupy the Saltoro Range but what will stop it from sallying forth into Nubra and Shyok Valleys and SSN? A two-front threat must be holistically viewed in all its facets, including the asymmetric war unleashed on us by both China and Pakistan.

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