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Siachen: Too Slow a Solution

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Introduction

There is one thing whose movement is slower than a glacier, and that is the India-Pakistan peace process. The Siachen issue is a case in point. It is a 70-km long glacier, where Indian and Pakistani armies confront each other eye-ball to eye-ball. At 20,000 ft above sea level it is said to be the highest battleground in the world. There have been occasional military flare-ups since 1984, though a ceasefire of sorts has been in operation since 2004. It has been costly in terms of lives. Two thousand soldiers have perished, not so many from shots fired in anger, but much more from the inhospitable climate. Some weeks ago, an avalanche killed 139 Pakistanis. That led to a statement by the Pakistani Army Chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, in which he underscored the importance of a settlement. The problem is such that renewed awakenings to the need for resolution are not accompanied by new ideas on solutions. When both sides meet for talks, as they did on 11 and 12 June 2012 (at Defence Secretary level), the positions are as dug in diplomatically as they are militarily. Figuratively and literally, both sides stuck to their guns. No surprise therefore that the talks end in failure.

Origin of the Conflict

The conflict had its origin in the presumption that there could not be any dispute between India and Pakistan over such a barren terrain. Not only is it a sheet of ice where not a blade of

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grass grows, but the climate is also woefully rough. The terrain has always therefore remained un-demarcated beyond the coordinate known as NJ 9842. In 1984 India, largely through 'Operation Meghdoot' established control over the entirety of the glacier, while Pakistan controlled the glacial valley. In the current stalemate situation, the Pakistanis cannot get up to the crest, while the Indians cannot come down from their high grounds.

The line between them is now called the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL). From time to time, including during the Kargil War, Pakistan made attempts to recapture all or part of the 1,000 sq mile territory lost to India, but without success. An Indian soldier received his country's highest gallantry award for combat, the 'Param Vir Chakra' for fighting in the Siachen. So the conflict is also wrapped in some glory, and for the fighting men therefore not entirely meaningless.

So Close Yet So Far

There were clashes between the two sides in 1990, 1995, 1996 and in 1999, the year of the Kargil War. Since that War, Indian apprehensions have been that Pakistan would move in to occupy any territory vacated by India, in the absence of an official acknowledgment on both sides of their current positions on the ground. There were intermittent negotiations, and according to the Indian newspaper 'The Hindu' (9 June 2012), a Siachen accord was almost a done-deal in 1992.

The paper reported that in the talks held that year, the sixth round held on the issue, the Pakistani delegation offered a proposal that met India's demand of recording existing ground positions before withdrawal of troops from a proposed zone of disengagement. It quoted the then Indian Defence Secretary N. N. Vohra, currently Governor of Jammu and Kashmir, as saying that just as he was about to sign on, he received instructions from the government led by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, at a time when the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)-led campaign on Babri Masjid was on high gear, to wait till the next round of talks in Islamabad in 1993. Vohra added that that day never came. In India-Pakistan negotiations windows of opportunity are rare, and once missed, rarely recur.

Diplomatic Dig In

So both sides dug themselves in diplomatically, not unlike their militaries. Pakistan called for demilitarisation. India wanted demarcation of troop positions on the ground first. The two Ds were too far apart to merit easy compromise on. The Indian fears persisted that any withdrawal on their part would invite Pakistani intrusion. Pakistan on its part could not provide reassurances to India's satisfaction. It was against this difficult background that the two Defence Secretaries met on 11 and 12 June 2012.

The talks were doomed even before they started. As it is, the Defence Secretary–level is a bureaucratic and non-political one subject to higher political control. On the eve of the meeting, the political master of the Indian Defence Ministry, following a Cabinet Committee meeting, quashed any undue hopes in anyone’s minds. Minister A K Antony said no major breakthrough could be expected from the talks as “the subject was very important to (India) especially in the context of national security” and one could not “expect dramatic announcement from one discussion”. On the Pakistani side the Foreign Secretary, Shahid Malik, about to become High Commissioner to India, said that along with this, “progress should also be made on other issues (along with Siachen): Sir Creek, Kashmir and water issues...There is a golden phrase, all issues must move in tandem”. This, too, was a death knell for the talks, as it was made clear that no issue could be resolved in isolation of one from another. For all intents and purposes, it was a signal for a wait till the cows came home.

Unsurprising Failure of Talks

Unsurprisingly, the talks met its low expectations. There was much pomp and ceremony, however, mostly signifying nothing. An eight-member Indian delegation led by Defence Secretary Shashi Kant Sharma arrived in Islamabad for the thirteenth round of Siachen talks. An equally formidable Pakistani side was led by Nargis Sethi, Pakistan’s most senior lady official, who held discussions with the visitors “in a cordial and friendly atmosphere”, the emphasis on atmospherics (in the official Joint Statement) probably indicating the lack of substance.

Reportedly, both sides remained glued to their positions, only agreeing to continue their dialogue process for the resolution of “Siachen and other outstanding issues”. The conversation was entirely scripted. Importantly, it was agreed that the document to be signed would not specify the ‘other unresolved issues’. In other words, India and Pakistan could not even agree on what the unresolved issues between them were.

Conclusion

The buck was to be passed to the Foreign Ministers for now. The Indian Foreign Minister S M Krishna is expected to pay a return visit to his Pakistani counterpart Hina Rabbani Khar soon. Thereafter, like the baton in a relay race it would be given to the Prime Ministers – a visit to Pakistan by Manmohan Singh is on the cards. But nothing has transpired recently between the two sides that holds out hope – except for some forward movement on trade, which, alas, may become hostage to progress on other issues, which alas is so often wont to happen between these two neighbours. One silver lining may be the trading instincts of the two countries: As a Pakistani businessman said, they want the ‘Line of Control’ to be converted into a ‘Line of Cash’!

Unfortunately, in any negotiations between India and Pakistan, even the ‘lowest hanging fruit’ is often beyond grasp. At times, sheer ego plays a greater role than cold strategic calculations. Even the perceived national self-interest suffers because of that. The main driver of any understanding between the two protagonists is political will. Success or failure depends on its presence or absence.

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