
Demilitarisation of the Siachen Conflict Zone: An Idea whose Time has Come

Gurmeet Kanwal

Treacherous Terrain and Adverse Weather

The death of 130 Pakistan Army personnel in an avalanche at the battalion Headquarters (HQ) at Gyari in the Siachen conflict zone in April 2012 once again brought to the fore the dangers of the prolonged deployment on both sides of the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL) despite the fact that an informal ceasefire has been holding up quite well since November 25, 2003. Earlier, in mid-March 2007 also, five Pakistani soldiers had perished in an avalanche. Even at the peak of fighting in the 1980s and 1990s, maximum casualties on both sides occurred because of the treacherous terrain, the super high altitude, which affects the human body adversely, and the extreme weather. The lack of oxygen at heights between 18,000 and 20,000 feet and prolonged periods of isolation are a lethal combination and result in pulmonary oedema, frostbite and other serious complications. Besides, prolonged deployment at such heights takes a heavy psychological toll. While these casualties are now better managed due to early evacuation, improvements in medical science and the establishment of forward medical facilities, they can never be completely eliminated.

The economic cost of maintaining an infantry brigade group at Siachen to guard the desolate super-high altitude mountain passes and approaches leading to them from the western slopes of the Saltoro Ridge has been estimated to range between Rs 3.0 to 3.5 crore per day – Rs 1,000 to 1,300 crore annually. The costs are high because the logistics tail is long, the only road ends at the base camp

Brigadier **Gurmeet Kanwal** (Retd) is Adjunct Fellow, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C. and former Director, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

close to the snout of the Nubra river where the almost 80-km glacier ends, and a large number of infantry posts can be maintained only by light helicopters that air-drop supplies, with attendant losses, as recoveries are often less than 50 per cent. The frequent turnover of troops adds to the costs as a battalion can be stationed at the Saltoro Ridge for a maximum of six months.

Though the Pakistanis are relatively better off due to the lower heights on the western spurs of the Saltoro on which their troops are holding defensive positions and their shorter lines of communication to Dansam and Skardu, the weather Gods have been equally unkind to troops on both sides of the AGPL. Dr. Stephen Cohen, a well-known and respected Washington-based South Asia analyst, has described the Siachen conflict as a fight between two bald men over a comb. In his view, "Siachen... is not militarily important... They (Indian and Pakistani armies) are there for purely psychological reasons, testing each other's 'will'."

Entrenched Mindsets

Both governments have been finding it difficult to overcome deeply entrenched mindsets and are unable to look for innovative and creative approaches. India insists that the present forward positions of both the armies on the Saltoro Range along the AGPL should be demarcated after a joint survey so that there is a reference point in case a dispute arises in future. Pakistan's position is that by suddenly occupying the Saltoro Range west of the Siachen Glacier, India violated the 1972 Shimla Agreement and must, therefore, undo its "aggression" without insisting on legitimising its illegal occupation through the demarcation of present positions. After Pakistan's intrusions into Kargil in 1999, the Indian Army's advice to the government that the AGPL must be jointly verified and demarcated before demilitarisation begins, is operationally sound, balanced and pragmatic military advice. However, if Pakistan's military capacity to grab and hold on to vacated Indian positions after the demilitarisation agreement comes into effect is carefully analysed, it will be found that Pakistan is in no position to occupy any of the posts vacated by India.

Process of Demilitarisation

Ever since Gen Kayani, the Pakistan Army chief, made a statement seeking peaceful coexistence with India and pushed for the demilitarisation of the Siachen conflict zone, the commentary that has been published on the subject in India has been mostly negative. Some of the views are ultra-jingoistic and deserve

to be discarded as there is no scope for jingoism in international negotiations. Other opposition to demilitarisation is primarily on two major issues: firstly, that the Pakistan Army cannot be trusted to honour the demilitarisation agreement; and, secondly, that China and Pakistan will gang up and join hands at Siachen and threaten Ladakh from the north. Apparently, the finer nuances of the demilitarisation process have not been clearly understood. The demilitarisation agreement between India and Pakistan will be a legally binding international agreement. It will lay down a step-by-step process to turn the Siachen conflict zone into a demilitarised zone (DMZ). The first step will be authentication of the present deployment positions. This will be followed by disengagement from the AGPL and, finally, the movement of troops, guns and war-like stores to previously agreed positions. The step-by-step demilitarisation process will be mutually agreed by the two directors general, military operations (DGMOs) and approved by the political authorities.

The demilitarisation agreement will be without prejudice to either country's stated position on the extension of the Line of Control (LoC) beyond NJ9842. This reference on military maps is the point up to which the ceasefire line was jointly demarcated under the Karachi Agreement of 1949 and the Shimla Agreement of 1972. In fact, a Joint Commission will be appointed to negotiate the extension of the LoC beyond NJ9842. This commission will begin its work simultaneously with the commencement of the process of demilitarisation. However, an agreement on the extension of the LoC beyond NJ9842 cannot be a prelude to the commencement of demilitarisation, as some analysts are suggesting. Such a condition, if imposed by India, will make demilitarisation of the Siachen conflict zone a non-starter and both sides will be forced to continue to maintain their present deployments with all the attendant costs.

As part of demilitarisation, the disengagement and redeployment of all military forces to agreed positions will be verified independently by national technical means (satellites, air photos and electronic surveillance) as well as physically through joint helicopter sorties. Subsequent monitoring of the DMZ will also be similarly undertaken. No military activity will be permitted in the DMZ. In addition to mutually agreed physical monitoring being conducted jointly with laid-down periodicity, both sides will have the right to conduct surprise inspections of suspected military movements. A joint monitoring centre (JMC) will be established. This could be set up near Chalunka, where the LoC passes over the Shyok river and road access is easily available. The JMC will be jointly

manned by Indian and Pakistani personnel and will have communications with the controlling HQ on both sides. Updated satellite photos and streaming videos from helicopter and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) sorties will also be regularly available. All joint verification and monitoring activities will be controlled from here.

As both verification and monitoring will be transparent joint activities, it will be ensured that the process of demilitarisation is completed to the mutual satisfaction of both India and Pakistan. Alleged violations of the demilitarisation agreement will be jointly verified. The demilitarisation agreement will contain a clause permitting both sides to take any action that is deemed appropriate, including the use of military means, in case the agreement is violated by the other side. Unauthorised military movement will not go unchallenged. The intruding personnel will be targeted by helicopter gunships and the fighter-ground attack aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF), as also by armed drones. In case any bunker that is vacated by Indian troops is occupied by the Pakistanis, it will be destroyed by using precision strike munitions. Under these circumstances, even if the Pakistan Army has intentions of attempting to occupy vacated Indian bunkers, it will not succeed in doing so.

Small enemy patrols intruding surreptitiously into the DMZ will not be able to survive beyond a few days in the high altitude wilderness. They will need sustained helicopter support for ammunition, rations and fuel for warmth. Supply helicopters will be easily detected and shot down. Large-scale intrusions of platoon to company size will be neutralised by air-to-ground strikes by the IAF with quick reaction reserves—that will be maintained in a high state of operational readiness in Ladakh—being employed for ‘mopping up’ operations. Hence, it will be militarily impossible for Pakistan to ‘hand over’ portions of the DMZ to China or to gang up with that country to jointly threaten Ladakh. Those who are imagining such linkages are seeing phantoms and vastly overstating the threat.

Joint Working Group

A joint working group should be constituted to draw up the demilitarisation agreement. It should be headed jointly by the two DGMOs and their staff assisted by Ministry of Defence (MoD) officials and diplomats. They should meet at the Attari-Wagah border and prepare a draft demilitarisation agreement that addresses the apprehensions and concerns of both sides. The draft agreement should be thoroughly debated in both Parliaments and among civil society

luminaries, including military veterans. Of course, it has to be remembered that it will be impossible to reach an agreement if all possible objections have to be removed first. Simultaneously, a Joint Commission should be appointed to delineate the LoC beyond NJ 9842 up to the international boundary. India should insist on inserting a suitable clause into the demilitarisation agreement to ensure that in case the agreement is violated, both sides reserve the right to take whatever action they deem appropriate, including offensive military measures. Simultaneously with the withdrawal of its troops from the glacial heights, India should create and maintain suitably structured reserves for counter-action across the LoC at a point of its choosing. These reserves would also be handy for intervention on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China should it ever become necessary.

On the completion of the demilitarisation process, a “Science Park” could be established at Siachen Glacier to promote the study of Himalayan glaciers and to take regular measurements for monitoring climate change. Later, the Siachen Glacier zone could be opened up for international mountaineering expeditions in a step by step manner as both militaries gain confidence in monitoring and verification. These activities should be jointly supervised and monitored by both sides. International help would be necessary to clean up the environmental damage caused over almost three decades of conflict and the dumping and disposal of war supplies in the area. India must ensure that the demilitarisation agreement takes care of all political and military apprehensions and should make it clear to the Pakistani leadership that no military violation of the agreement will be tolerated. The demilitarisation of the Siachen conflict zone will act as a confidence-building measure of immense importance. For India, it is a low-risk option to test Pakistan’s long-term intentions for peace. It is, therefore, an idea whose time has come. Indian and Pakistani leaders need to find the political will necessary to accept ground realities. Trust begets trust and it will be well worth taking a political and military risk to give peace a chance. It is time the Indian government began the process of building a national consensus around this important bilateral confidence-building measure.