

Siachen - 'war above the clouds'

BRIG GEN M. SAKHAWAT HUSSAIN *ndc, psc (retd)*

SOMETIME in 1987 two soldiers belonging to the Pakistani 'Special Force' were dropped in one of the peaks in Siachen, the highest battleground the world has ever known, to fend Indian occupation of an observation post. It was 21,000 ft above sea level, a frozen glacier, claimed to be the largest outside the two poles, now known world over as Siachen Glacier, that the two embittered countries, Pakistan and India have been fighting ever since India physically occupied it in 1984. Since then the Glacier has become the most disputed region of Kashmir.

What are these two armies fighting for, on a height where temperature varies between minus 30 and 70 degrees Celsius that freezes almost all liquids except kerosene, where not a single blade of grass grows? The answer is national pride more than strategic concerns. Both claim the most weirdly un-demarcated cease-fire line converted to Line of Control (LoC) between

Highway, connecting Central China specifically the Uguyar region, through the Kunjerab Pass.

The Saltoro range, that contains the glacier and claimed by Pakistan, provides access to five ancient passes which remain mostly frozen. These passes, though inaccessible at any given time, had played significant role in the Middle Ages in connecting China and the central parts of Asia, as part of the Silk Route. Since Pakistan's occupation of large parts of the mountainous but strategic regions of Ladakh, now known as 'Federally Administered Northern Area', these passes were never used nor their significance ever noticed until 1984 when Indian troops landed in or around Soltaro Range in strength. Nevertheless, Siachen Glacier has other access through the Nubra River, ascending from south to northwest in Indian Ladakh, but remains extremely hazardous. Northwest to east is China's Uguyar region mostly inhabited by Muslims, which makes the Glacier, and the ranges in dispute more significant ground to be held. Close to

over the years.

This ambiguity in defining the LoC beyond NJ 9842 was the cause of the costliest battle and resulted in recurring extravagant expenditure for maintenance of troops. The battle cost is not only in terms of finance but the standoff exceedingly entails human cost. More troops were killed from frostbite, edema, pneumonia, and lack of oxygen and height related breathing problems than bullets.

It all started in April 1984 when Pakistan, to boost its tourism, allowed some foreign trackers to climb into Siachen Glacier assisted by its para-military. India presumed the Pakistani action to be a ploy to occupy the un-demarcated portion of the strategically significant heights that would provide Pakistani forces the ability to overlook Ladakh and the valley down below. India air-dropped four hundred troops atop a portion of the Soltaro Range and occupied large portions of Soltaro Range and the Glacier. As a counter, Pakistan dispatched around three hundred special forces that resulted in the fiercest battle away from human eye, above the clouds. The bitter fighting that broke out in 1987 remained inconclusive. Artillery duels continued till both sides agreed to a cease-fire. India considers the possession invaluable in terms of strategic gains despite the soldiers' nightmarish experience in the region.

Talks at military commanders' level failed. Efforts to withdraw troops back to the 1972 position also failed. Pakistan proposed to demilitarise the Glacier in contention but India is yet to respond. The situation further deteriorated after the Kargil war till 2004 when both the countries decided to resume dialogue over all outstanding issues to normalise relations.

As a part of the ongoing process of composite dialogue, Delhi hosted a defence secretary level meeting on Siachen from 6-8th August 2004, without any tangible result. Pakistani defence secretary accused India of violating the 1972 Simla Agreement with the purpose of altering the LoC. His Indian counterpart was not in a mood to give in to Islamabad's off and on interpretation of 1972 Simla agreement.

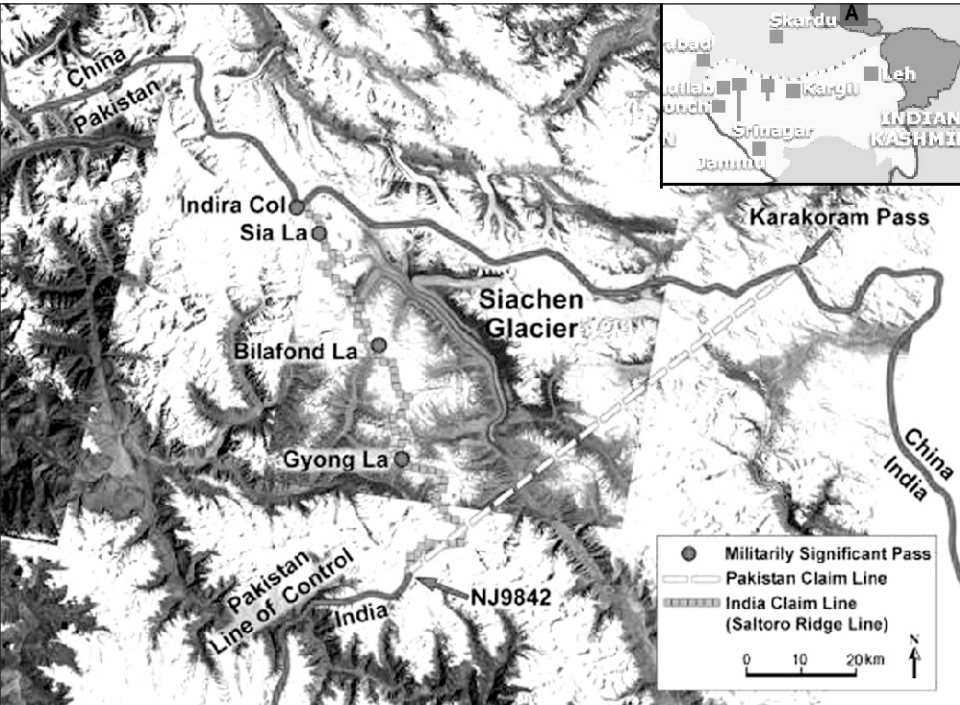
Be that as it may, Pakistan maintained its earlier proposal to demilitarise the region but New Delhi was not in a mood to entertain it unless Pakistan 'verifies the map' and remained insistent on accepting 'Actual Ground Position Line' (AGPL) that began, as Delhi reportedly maintains, from NJ 9842 and ended in the current Indian possessions on Soltaro Range. Pakistan's minimum demand was for India to vacate the occupation before deciding 'future line'. That proposal India would never accept unless entire issue of Kashmir was resolved.

New Delhi is well aware that it is not so much the strategic value of the area in the era of availability of standoff surveillance system, as compromise on Kashmir according to such demand would mean. While the talks remain inconclusive, both parties fully realise that there is neither a military solution nor is the region suitable for conventional battle to resolve the issue. Yet they have promised to meet in near future to resolve the issue through dialogue.

Meanwhile, up above the clouds, in the icy glacier and peaks, the soldiers continue to suffer and die, if not form bullets than from nature, occasionally looking down in the valley where politicians of South Asia find it hard to give peace a chance.

The title is adopted from Martin A. Sugarman's book on Siachen

The author is a defense and strategic analyst



Blowup of Siachen area (A). SOURCE: INTERNET

two parts of Kashmir, apart from the purely military strategic ascendancy associated with it. In fact being part of larger Kashmir region, Siachen issue symbolises the entire dispute. The forty-seven mile long and three-mile wide glacier and the flanking ranges, most ambiguously demarcated, remain a bone of dispute that carries the undertone of the complexity of the Kashmir tangle.

The glacier, once part of the Ladakh region of greater Kashmir, was discovered in 1907. It averages 16,000 feet in height and originates near Indra Koili Pass on the Pakistan-China border, thirty seven aerial miles southeast of the K-2, then runs along Saltoro Range in the southeasterly direction then turns south to Nubra River near Dzingrulma, in Indian occupied Ladakh region. On the south east of the Glacier is the Karakoram Pass with Pakistan, which connects Chinese central provinces. Much to the west, along the Karakoram Range and along the Hunza River runs the most strategic Pakistan-China link, the Karakoram

the glacier is the Chinese held portion of Laddakh i.e. Aksai Chin. A large number of Chinese troops are stationed in that region since 1962, a constant worry for Delhi.

The Siachen Glacier had never come under focus since the Indo-Pak cease-fire Line was established in July 1949. The demarcation runs northeast, through Kargil, up to a point known as NJ 9842 (map reference), north of the Shyok River within Saltoro Range. But area beyond NJ 9842 up to Karakoram Pass that came in possession of Pakistan after the October 1947 military invasion remains un-demarcated. Owing to the fact of inaccessibility the cease-fire line and the ownership of the Glacier remained undetermined. It was for the first time in 1972 Simla Agreement that India agreed and vaguely referred that the cease-fire line, converted to Line of Control (LoC), runs northwards to the glacier from NJ 9842, but without putting it on the map. The ambiguity resulted in claim and counter claim. India accuses Pakistan of shifting from the Simla Agreement

MUMTAZ IQBAL

VICTORY in war happens when one side overcomes its opponent. The victor dictates to the vanquished. This may end hostilities permanently, defer fresh ones indefinitely or is a pause before the belligerents, if evenly matched, resume fighting alone or with allies.

In practical terms, the concept, consequences and outcome of victory are not necessarily cut and dried but complicated and risky, just like the decision to go to and wage war is in the first place.

The two wars Iraq and US have fought since 1991 illustrate this point.

In the Gulf War, Washington forged an impressive coalition, waged a legitimate war against universally condemned occupation of Kuwait by Iraq and in ninety-six hours destroyed the Iraqis, who surrendered.

Why didn't Saddam retreat facing certain defeat? Discretion in war as opposed to foolhardy valour is good tactics. Retreating against superior forces to live to fight another day makes strategic sense. By these yardsticks, Saddam performed miserably in 1991 and lost his job in 2003.

If the Gulf War was a seamless and harmonious web of a just cause, judicious implementation of war plans and achievement of clearly defined goals, Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq is anything but.

Bush's justification for war was dodgy. People worldwide including the US protested.

Combat lasted three weeks. GIs won. The post-combat phase saw Washington "lose" the fruits of victory in a year or so, unable to impose its will on Iraq and achieve its unstated objective of controlling Iraq's black gold and at one remove Middle East energy resources.

This outcome is striking because Iraqi resistance was conducted mainly by a minority ethnic group lacking external sanctuary and support operating within a relatively narrow geographical area bereft of cover and unsuitable for sustained guerrilla activity.

The Iraq war is a work in progress. In the interim, it's reasonable to say the US, which won the conventional war, can't be defeated militarily and may tame the ongoing insurgency to enable puppet Alawi to consolidate his power.

But it's also valid to conclude the setbacks Washington has experienced through GI casualties, war costs, loss of goodwill worldwide and eroded moral standing, collectively come perilously close to constituting 'failure'.

While Americans haven't won, Iraqis have lost a great deal in terms of a state destroyed and their lives turned topsy-turvy by US Occupation. The blowback from this Bushian unilateral folly should linger for years.

How does Iraq compare with US' Vietnam War circa 1956-73 (Second Indo-China War). Like Iraq, Vietnam was a war of choice. US involvement like Topsy grew over time. It started with financial and material support to France till 1954 under Truman and Eisenhower. It escalated to 15,000 Special Forces in Vietnam by 1963 under Kennedy, and jumped to 0.5 million GIs under Johnson (1967-68).

But despite its material superiority and superpower hubris, Washington couldn't prevail against Vietnamese nationalism that organised itself dexterously and battled determinedly for almost two decades to force the Americans out in 1973.

The Vietnamese didn't defeat the Americans in set piece battles; they made it costly for them to stay. Vietnamese won because they achieved their objective--getting GIs to leave.

Vietnam's national liberation wars spanned three decades of unconventional warfare. Bangladesh's war of independence 1971 was shorter--about nine months. In both cases the results were similar. The Occupation armies were defeated.

Like the Vietnamese, the Bengalis had a good cause, effective political leadership, clear goals, burgeoning unconventional warfare infrastructure and external sanctuary.

But the burden of 10 million refugees; Islamabad's disinterest in a viable political settlement with Dhaka; Delhi's heightened security concerns following Kissinger's secret dash to Beijing from Chaklala in July 1971 and the opportunity to settle scores with Pakistan (chance of a lifetime-Subrahmanyam) persuaded India to go to war that saw Pakistan's Eastern Command surrender on 16 December 1971.

with the bigger battalions! The ostensible cause for war to thaw frozen Kashmir was shaky and flaky at best. Ironically, Kashmiris themselves turned in the 'Gibraltar' infiltrators to the Indians! Pakistani planning also substituted wish and myth for thought. Thus, the Indian jawans' prowess was ridiculed or underestimated. This unwarranted hubris was particularly marked after Biar Bet, Rann of Kutch April 1965.

In the desultory 1965 War, neither side won any decisive battles that could have made the other cry uncle. With POL down to two days supply, Pakistan had to accept an UN-brokered cease-fire. India did not win militarily; Pakistan lost strategically, and how. A military stalemate had devastating internal consequences.

The war revealed Pakistan's rickety political structure and generated unbridgeable tensions through the Bengalis' autonomy demands. These led to war, Pakistan's break-up and Bangladesh's emergence.

The Sino-Indian War of 1962 shows the folly of taking on a stronger opponent without proper preparations in the war zone. Nehru's exhortation to Lt. Gen B.M. Kaul to "Throw the Chinese out" from NEFA was bravado masquerading as policy. The PLA overwhelmed the Indians at Se La and Bomdi La, devastating the Indian public and Nehru. Having achieved its objective of teaching Delhi a lesson, Beijing declared cease-fire unilaterally, taking the winds out of India's diplomatic sails.

A battlefield victory doesn't always win a war. The Carthaginian Suffetes didn't know what to do with Hannibal's landmark victory at Cannae (216 BC)--Schlieffen's (CGS German Army, 1891-06) model both of the perfect battle and his Master Plan, 1905. Rome regrouped; 14 years later Scipio Africanus defeated Hannibal at Zama and erased Carthage from the map.

Cannae and Zama show that individual battles don't necessarily determine a protracted war's outcome. What matters also is the will to fight and resource mobilisation.

Dunkirk, June 1940, was Britain's low point. Churchill rallied the country, got America to help and eventually Hitler lost, with the USSR not the Allies--destroying the cream of the German army. London won in 1945 but ceased being a world power.

Victory in warfare is an elastic concept; lies to some extent in the eye of the beholder and the consequences are not always what they seem. Winning a battle often leads to winning the war but not always, especially in prolonged warfare. Victory or defeat in a battle or war is a process as much mental and psychological as physical.

The author is a freelancer.



NIKE - GODDESS OF VICTORY SOURCE: INTERNET

India declared cease-fire the next day. She had achieved her goal of defeating the Pakistanis in the east and had no need to continue the fight in the west.

The Gulf and Bangladesh Wars show the importance of mobilising sufficient internal and external resources behind a worthy cause to achieve clearly defined and achievable ends.

The 1965 Indo-Pak conflict boggles the mind why Islamabad went to war. It's injudicious for a weaker state fighting essentially on its inventory of ordnance to take on a stronger power with better war-making potential. God is usually

Asian giants are waking up

BRIG GEN JAHANGIR KABIR, *ndc, psc (Retd)*

AFTER the emergence of the Asian Tigers, two Asian giants are waking up from their slumber. The philosophy of unbridled and forced distribution under Marxism proved ridiculous on the debris of the Red Empire. Like the gods and goddesses of ancient days, the illusion has succumbed to the indomitable spirit of free man. It has awakened Red China to the reality that pursuing power game without matching economy is illusive. Ever since, the amazing growth of China under free economy suggests the goddess of market economy has seduced the last bastion of communism. It has also given rise to the perception that after the power game played exclusively by the western hemisphere for a millennium the sun is rising on Asia. It, however, depends on how China and India, the two Asian giants fare in the field of economy and technology to compete between them without fighting; like wei qi (Go), an ancient Mandarin strategic game that believes in sharing gains rather than annihilation of the opponent.

China is moving fast with growing confidence. While she is playing ping-pong business diplomacy with USA, a low intensity dollar diplomacy is on in the Pacific. Polynesian countries like Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea are benefitting from increased military and economic aids. But the Pacific remains an 'American Lake'. With staunch allies like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, troop concentration in Japan, Korea, the Midway Islands and awesome power of US' Pacific fleets, confrontation between USA and China is not likely anytime soon. China is already overshadowing Japan as the second largest economy. Should China achieve one-fourth per capita of America, the shadow will radiate on the world economy and the heat will be on the waves of Pacific and elsewhere.

China essentially remains a Pacific Rim power with vast multitude of North-West China without a coastline. But unlike Russia, her thousands of miles of coastline is bustling with round the year activities. To release her full potential and reach a respectable ten thousand dollar per capita income level to enter the club of the developed few, China will have to invest trillions of dollars in infrastructure and wait for another quarter-century ensuring near double-digit growth. She has a disproportionate developmental pattern between the prosperous coastal provinces and

not so fortunate interior that have a history of centrifugal pulls. Unlike the erstwhile USSR, China's transition to market economy and eventually to democracy will be hopefully, peaceful, for market economy cannot be infinitely separated from its twin sister, democracy. Despite flourishing economy and peaceful transition so far, belying many western pundits, a transitional chaos still remains potent threat to China.

In the changed scenario of the new millen-

ium India has courted the hands of USA as strategic partner. It made a costly mistake not doing so at independence, to satisfy Pundit Nehru's love for socialistic economy and non-alliance movement. Nehru and his romance are dead now. With India shining under liberalised market, she is visibly taking-off, if only the

weak infrastructure can sustain the overheating economy. With 8.2 % GDP growth registered last year and sustained high intensity prediction for the future, the gigantic workshop of a billion plus people is on a growing mode. Her pluralistic political system based on redesigned pillars of democracy and market economy, English educated work force at a bargain price, specially, expanding middle class of over 300 million, makes her the sensation of foreign direct investment. Corporate



Map of Asia

America and EC conglomerates are eyeing to make her a hub of regional production and distribution.

India's real concern is about political chaos, likely to come from weak coalition in the centre and pulls from regional political barons. It can derail the growth without notice and discour-

can whittle down her growth potential, retarded in the past. However, the determination she has shown in the last skirmish against Pakistan on the Kargil Heights and continuous development of nuclear and long range missile delivery system beyond the farthest point of the subcontinent, speak of her new found resolve

that her future defense strategy will be proactive. India has learned the bitter way that neither her size against Pakistan nor the mighty Himalayas against China, provides credible deterrence.

India is pursuing a pro-active diplomacy within the region and trying to claim her global role as well. With every sixth person on earth an Indian citizen, she is demanding a permanent seat in the Security Council. She is also trying to make, 'Indian Ocean a lake of littoral countries' thereby denying the legitimacy of USA, the only super power and China the potential one. Firmly footed on the USA bandwagon, her rhetoric on the Indian Ocean is somewhat tamed. Her immediate goal appears to confine China to 'East of Malacca Strait' and play the power game in the Indian Ocean as the strategic partner of the West. Between Suez Canal and tip of Africa on the west, including super sensitive oil-rich Middle East, Australia and ASEAN in the east, the area is very vast, to allow India to be the lone policeman with her barely visible strength in the global arena. Other littoral countries do not matter on the blue seas.

With an imposed civilisational divide on the confluence of three great continents (Asia, Europe and Africa) India has suddenly turned into a front line strategic partner. It's a costly mistake to accept Huntington's antithesis of 'Civilisational Threat' as a prophetic revelation among the monotheists of the world. History will caution India that the Anglo-Americans made strategic alliance with arch enemy USSR to destroy Hitler, then aligned with the borderline Muslim belt to annihilate the Red Empire and today, to tame the frustrated Muslim belt and dwarf China, finds India a strategic partner. India is at the most an erstwhile 'China card' against growing China. If over 1.3 billion Chinese work force is a frightening 'Fire Dragon,' billion plus India cannot be infinitely perceived as a docile friend of USA. Besides, her nuclear and missile delivery programme paid for by the toiling masses still lacking pure drinking water, must have a purpose beyond timidity in global politics. In that grand strategic game it will be interesting to observe which way the 'Siberian Bear' (Russia) moves with her wounded pride.

Asia is truly heating up.

The author is a writer on defense and strategic issues.

SNIPPETS

Pakistan for minimum nuclear deterrence: Musharraf

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf said his country would maintain a minimum nuclear deterrence and made it clear that the nuclear programme was solely for peaceful purposes. This he said while talking to the Japanese Foreign Minister Kawaguchi last week.

Musharraf also assured Kawaguchi of Pakistan's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation. Musharraf reaffirmed his commitment to resolve all contentious issues with India but stressed the need for a proper timeframe for resolving the Kashmir issue to restore peace in South Asia.

"Pakistan will never send troops to Iraq in the existing circumstances," he said.

Kawaguchi emphasised the importance of Pakistan in countering terrorism.

'Indian Navy needs more warships to avoid problems'

The Indian Navy might soon face problems due to declining force levels despite nineteen warships currently being built in shipyards and plans to build six submarines, the force's new chief has said.

Admiral Arun Prakash said a plan to build Scorpion submarines under license from a French company was awaiting the government's approval. Prakash said the force level of the navy, which currently has some 150 warships, had declined as no new orders for ships were placed during 1985-95. Work on creating infrastructure at the Kochi shipyard to build the air defence ship, a 38,000-tonne aircraft carrier, had begun and steel for the ship would be cut in "months if not weeks", Prakash said.

Prakash made it clear that the navy would prefer to go the indigenous route in future warship acquisitions, noting that this would cut the cost of maintenance and spares and reduce dependence on foreign suppliers.

Prakash refused to answer questions on the top-secret programme to build an indigenous nuclear-powered submarine.

Pentagon favours resuming training Pak officers in US

A top Pentagon official said he favours resuming training Pakistani officers in US military academies as a way of increasing US influence in the country's armed forces and reducing that of Islamic radicals.

"You don't promote military reform in a country like Pakistan by cutting off education for Pakistani military officers here and pushing them into the one alternative, which is the Islamic extremists," Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz told the House Armed Services Committee. The United States cut off military assistance to Pakistan in 1990 following the discovery of its program to develop nuclear weapons. Sanctions were further tightened after Pakistan's nuclear tests in May 1998 and the military coup of 1999 that brought President Pervez Musharraf to power.

The sanctions were waived to enable the United States to resume its military assistance program to provide spare parts and equipment to enhance Pakistan's capacity to police its western border.

In 2003, Bush announced his intention to provide Pakistan three billion dollars in economic and military aid over the next five years. But training of Pakistani cadets in US military academies has not resumed.

Source: AFP, Internet