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# The Siachin round

AS THE COMPOSITE DIALOGUE PROCESS between India and Pakistan moves along, the next round of talks between the defence secretaries of the two countries is scheduled to focus on the conflict high up on the icy wastes of the Siachin glacier, in early August—after the foreign ministers meet on the sidelines of the SAARC foreign ministers' meeting in Islamabad later this month. More than twenty years have passed since this battle began in April 1984 when Indian forces moved to occupy the glacier that till then had effectively been no man's land. In the two decades of fighting many have perished on both sides; mostly not as a result of enemy fire but due to the intolerable cold. Frostbite, respiratory problems, disorientation, avalanches, etc can quickly lead to death or disability. And all this merely feeds a stalemate that has more or less held since the shooting started.

While successive governments in Pakistan have shown themselves to be fairly willing to resolve the issue, there are those who contend that the war costs India far more in men and money than Pakistan. Therefore, they argue, the latter should not be in a hurry to bring it to a close. While that is entirely true the fact remains that India has demonstrated its ability to sustain this mindless war over the years and, as the recently announced sharp increase in the Indian defence budget indicates, will continue to expend huge resources on such 'security' concerns. And, therefore, so will we. But, to what end?

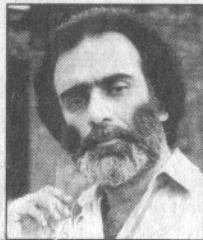
Certainly, in Pakistan there is no significant con-

stituency at the popular level that supports the continuation of the war in Siachin and the continued loss and suffering of our soldiers for no particularly good reason. It cannot be very different in India. The meeting on Siachin next month comes at a time when there is considerable goodwill on both sides and a willingness to switch from a confrontationist mode. To that extent, the Siachin round represents a huge opportunity to finally bring this conflict to a close and to create for the peace process a milestone that will be perceived most positively by the people on both sides and thereby provide a spur for movement on other tracks, generating a stronger momentum for peace. There are few things, among the doable, that will serve the cause of confidence building between the two countries as well as the resolution of the Siachin issue.

One can only hope that the opportunity will not be frittered away as in the past. It would be useful to recall that as far back as June 1989 Humayun Khan and SK Singh, respectively the foreign secretaries of Pakistan and India, had come to the rather sensible arrangement that the troops of the two countries be withdrawn to the positions they occupied at the time of the Simla Agreement. Obviously, such an agreement could be arrived at only with the consent of the Indian prime minister at the time Mr Rajiv Gandhi and Pakistan's prime minister, Benazir Bhutto.

In a review article AG Noorani observed that the "last three rounds of talks between the Defence Secretaries — the fifth (June 1989), sixth (November

## COMMENT



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1992) and the seventh (November 1998)—reflected poorly on India's leaders. The joint statement issued on June 17, 1989, recorded: 'There was agreement by both sides to work towards a comprehensive settlement, based on redeployment of forces to reduce the chances of conflict, avoidance of the use of force and determination of future positions on the ground so as to conform with the Simla Agreement and to ensure durable peace in the Siachin area. The army authorities of both sides will determine these positions' (emphasis added, throughout). The fact of an 'agreement' was explicitly mentioned. So were also the two basic principles on which it was based — 'redployment of forces' (that is, withdrawal) and 'determination of future positions on the ground so as to conform with the Simla Agreement'. In sum, return to positions held by the parties at the time of the Simla Agreement."

As cited by Brian Cloughley in his book on the history of the Pakistan army, the BBC reported that the foreign secretaries "had been meeting for two days and their discussion set the seal on the earlier meetings ...between the defence secretaries. At a joint news conference Mr Khan announced that both sides have now decided to withdraw to the positions that they held at the time of the Simla Accord." A similar report was broadcast by the all India Radio. But this was followed by a 'clarification' by the Indian Ministry of External Affairs the very next day indicating that there had been some confusion and that such an agreement had not been

arrived at. Presumably, the Indian military establishment prevailed on Rajiv Gandhi to put the agreement on hold. Similarly, in 1992, it reportedly undermined the dialogue process aimed at reaching an agreement over Siachin.

A key issue for the Indian military seems to be that they would be at a relative disadvantage in the envisaged redeployment agreement, for Pakistani troops in positions that would be in closer proximity to the vacated areas would have the option of taking these over if they so chose. Of course, the technological means for putting Indian concerns at rest on this issue should be fully explored. It would help build confidence if each side knows that it will have an early warning of any attempt at significant mobilisation by the other. But, beyond this the matter should also be seen in context. It is highly unlikely that Pakistan would risk wrecking the multi-dimensional peace process with its huge potential for mutual gain, to secure strategic advantage of somewhat dubious merit.

Before winter comes round again and casualties mount amidst the white-outs of Siachin, it is time to finalise the accord and put an end to this conflict, which even in these dismal times stands out for its sheer futility, wastefulness of much-needed resources and callous disregard of soldiers' lives and well-being.

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