

INDIA AND PAKISTAN: FROZEN IN FURY ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

For a soldier, this is where hell freezes over...

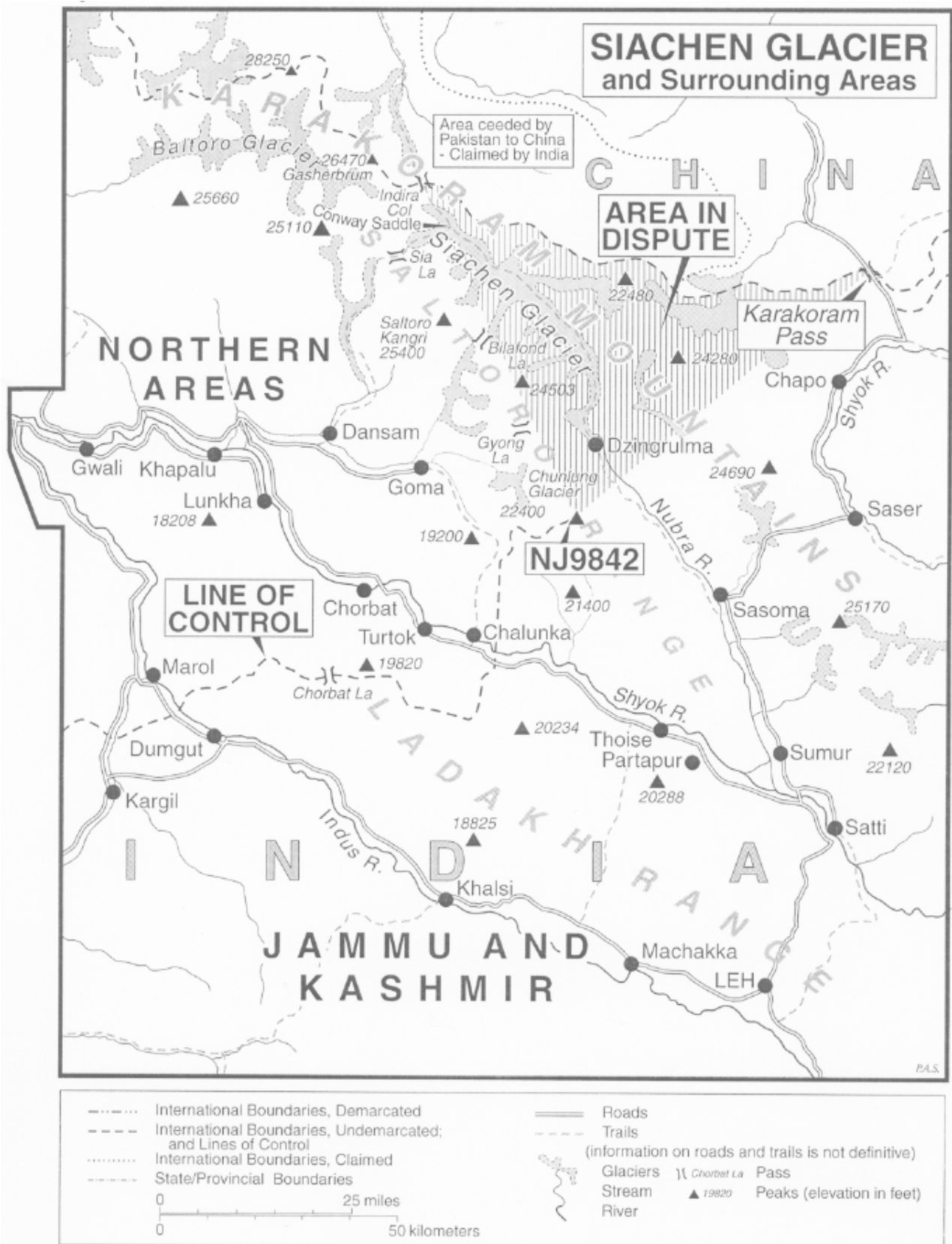
For 15 blustery, shivering years, the Indian and Pakistani armies have been fighting a war along the frigid peaks of the western Himalayas – in an area named for the Siachen Glacier and known as the ‘battleground on the roof of the world.’ For a soldier, this is where hell freezes over, a 46-mile river of slow-moving ice surrounded by stupendous towers of snow. Temperatures swoon to 50 below, and sudden blizzards can bury field artillery in minutes. Men sleep in ice caves or igloos and breathe air so spare of oxygen that it sends their hearts into a mad gallop. Fainting spells and pounding headaches are frequent. Frostbite chews its way through digits and limbs. The enemy is hard to see in the crags and craters in the vast whiteness – and harder to hit. Rifles must be thawed repeatedly over kerosene stoves, and machine guns need to be primed with boiling water. At altitudes of 18,000 feet, mortar shells fly unpredictable and extraordinary distances, swerving erratically when met by sledgehammer gusts. While some troops fall to hostile fire, far more perish from avalanches and missteps into crevasses that nature has camouflaged with snow. This is especially so now in springtime, as the sun licks away several feet of ice and opens new underground cracks and seams.

But for all these logistical peculiarities, the Siachen conflict might be thought of as just another low-intensity border war – were it not being fought between the world’s two newest nuclear powers. Their combat over a barren, uninhabited nether world of questionable strategic value is a forbidding symbol of their lingering irreconcilability. “*This is like a struggle of two bald men over a comb,*” said Stephen P. Cohen, an authority on the Indian subcontinent at the Brookings Institution. “*Siachen is the epitome of the worst aspects of the relationship. These are two countries that are paired on a road to Oslo or Hiroshima, and at this point they could go either way.*”

Since gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan, which is overwhelmingly Muslim, and India, which is predominantly Hindu, have been enemies with a bent toward military confrontation. In 1949, after the first of three wars, the nations agreed to a cease-fire line that unfortunately stopped short of the remote massifs of north-central Kashmir – a disputed area on the map where India, Pakistan and China rub shoulders. The wording in the agreement merely said the line was to continue “*north to the glaciers.*” For two decades, this vague phrasing was of more concern to map makers than soldiers, but then in the 1970s several groups of mountaineers in down outerwear began trekking through the region. If they could survive the cold and elevation, so might an army. Siachen became another reason for two nervous neighbours to be reflexively suspicious.

THE HIGHEST GROUND: FROZEN FIREARMS, MAGNIFICENT VISTAS

On 13 April 1984, the Indian Army made a “*pre-emptive*” move into the glacier and the peaks and passes around it. Within weeks, Pakistani forces swept in to oppose them, but the Indians have been able to hold on to the tactical advantage of the high ground. Most of India’s many outposts are west of the glacier along the Saltoro Range of the Karakoram Mountains. These pickets are reachable to an enemy only after a strenuous climb and then a frontal assault, a near-hopeless task in such thin air. After 50 strides, even a well-conditioned man is gasping for breath with his muscles in a tremble.



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Fifteen years of refrigerated combat have brought only fifteen years of hardened stalemate. The Pakistanis cannot get up to the glacier; the Indians cannot come down. *"Nobody can win, no matter how long we fight,"* said Maj. Gen. V. S. Budhwar, the Indian commander in Leh, whose region includes Siachen. *"But this is our land. It is a portion of our nation-state, and we will not cede it."* Occasionally, some vital strategic importance is assigned to the Siachen area, with hypothetical aggressors flooding across mountain highways. More often, the conflict is described as a simple matter of principle. Imagine, people say, how America would respond if the Russians overran even a small, barren chunk of Alaska. *"Siachen is an awful place where you can step on a thin layer of snow and, poof, down you go 200 feet,"* said Gen. Khalid Mehmood Arif, the retired former vice chief of Pakistan's military. *"But no nation ever wants to lose a single inch of territory, so Siachen has psychological and political importance. Its value is in ego and prestige."*

Arduous to live in, the Siachen area is beautiful to look at. Some of the world's tallest mountains fill the landscape, their snowy tops giving way to rivulets of white that glitter against the black and purple rock. It is a moonscape of mesmerising pinnacles and ridges and drops. Ice formations rise a mile high. Clouds seem at arm's reach. The Indian base camp is at the very start of the glacier, which gently curves upward like a giant white tongue. Barracks, helipads, supply sheds, satellite dishes, a hospital and Hindu shrines are spread across several acres. It is clear the Indians have been here awhile and are ready to stay. The command post is carpeted. Curtains hang along the windows. *"We have the heights,"* said Brig. P. C. Katoch, who runs the operation. In contrast with the superior vista those heights afford, he said, the Pakistani soldier sees nothing: *"He hears a helicopter and shoots. He hears artillery and shoots. It's stupid. He doesn't know where he's shooting."*

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But being king of the hill is costly. The Pakistanis can resupply most of their posts by road and pack mule. At their forward positions, some as high as 21,000 feet, the Indians must rely on helicopters. The whirlybirds strain against the altitude like oversized bumblebees. Many an airdrop is swallowed by the snow. Both sides deploy about 3,000 soldiers. While the Pakistanis refuse to divulge how much they spend in Siachen, the Indians estimate the cost at about US\$350,000 to \$500,000 a day, said Lieut. Gen. R. K. Sawhney, the army's director general of military intelligence. Transporting kerosene is one major expense. Some Indian soldiers live in igloos made of fibreglass panels. Six soldiers can sleep in jigsaw configurations, crowded into a room the size of a king-size bed. Others live in ice tunnels gouged out with a pickaxe. Either way, small kerosene stoves are the hearths they huddle around. The hissing competes with the howling of the wind. Black smoke seems to colour everything, including a man's spit.

The highest perches are occupied by only a handful of soldiers, and sleeping is rarely done at night, for this is the most likely time for the enemy to sneak up. Sentry duty is bleak work. Hot water bottles do not stay hot for long. A relay must be set up to exchange frozen rifles for defrosted ones. During storms, the heavy snowfall seems as thick as long, white drapery. The wind does pinwheels, and the basics of a hard life get that much harder. *"At my post, you have to use a crawl trench to get to the toilet,"* said Cpl. Joginder Sirigh. *"When it snows, the trench fills up and you have to stand. The enemy can see you and that's how you die."*

A QUESTION OF CONTROL: DISPUTING BORDERS, ARMED WITH SCORN

It is difficult to know how many men have been killed. Some local news reports put casualty totals for both sides in the thousands, but this seems based on conjecture. The Pakistanis do not release such details, and the Indians say they have lost only the 616 soldiers whose names appear on a stone memorial at the base camp. The inscription reads: *"Quartered in snow, silent to remain. When the bugle calls, they shall rise and march again."*

Since they were separated at birth, India and Pakistan have fought over the territory of Jammu and Kashmir, a stunningly lush area that touches both of their borders. In the complicated and emotional give-and-take that accompanied Partition in 1947, Kashmir, a state with a large Muslim majority, ended up within India. To Pakistan, this seemed unreasonable. The infant nations were drawn into combat. To this day, Kashmir is the issue that most heats the blood. The Indians claim the area, while the Pakistanis argue that the Kashmiris must decide their own future through a plebiscite. Both countries maintain formidable armies near the cease-fire line that splits the territory in two. The killing may slow but it never stops.

Ownership of the mountainous and sparsely-populated northeast is a particular conundrum. From the Indian point of view, the language of the 1949 agreement is eminently clear: "*north to the glaciers*" means a line going slightly northwest along the natural watershed of the Saltoro peaks. The Pakistanis are equally sure: the phrasing intends for the line to continue northeasterly as it does through the rest of Kashmir. "*The roots of the Kashmir problem are very tangled, but as far as the glacier goes, this is simply a matter of Pakistanis sneaking their way into a place that doesn't belong to them,*" said India's Lieut. Gen. M. L. Chibber, retired, who is central to the Siachen saga. An amiable man who left the army in 1985, General Chibber now follows the guru Sai Baba and speaks easily about the futility of war. In 1978, however, he was a commander with responsibility for Siachen. He was alarmed to learn that the Pakistanis were accompanying mountaineers to the glacier. Just as troubling were maps printed in the West. They showed Siachen as part of Pakistan. By the early 80s, both armies were sending expeditions into the area, and suspicions accumulated like fresh snow. In late 1983, the Indians became convinced the Pakistanis were about to seize the glacier, General Chibber said. This was inferred from intercepted communiqués. If further evidence was needed, he said, it came when India sent procurers to Europe to buy cold-weather gear. They ran into Pakistanis doing the same shopping.

**A MILITARY
NOVELTY:
FIGHTING
FROSTBITE AND
ALTITUDE**

India's "*pre-emptive*" take-over of Siachen was called Operation *Meghdoot* after the divine cloud messenger in a Sanskrit play. It soon came to seem a burdensome success. Like over-eager chess players, the Indians had failed to plan several moves ahead. "*No one had ever carried out military operations at these altitudes and temperatures, so we figured after the summer ended, we'd have to pull out,*" General Chibber said. "*But with the first snows, we realised it was possible to stay up there all winter. If we left, the Pakistanis would take the glacier and then we'd never get it back.*"

In the conflict's first years, with the armies inexperienced at such a cold war, the number of casualties mounted quickly. Valiant, if foolhardy, assaults were attempted. Frostbite, snow blindness and pulmonary and cerebral oedema took a huge toll. Daring raids are now rare, the Pakistanis say, though the Indians often boast of victorious defensive skirmishes, killing three here and a dozen there. Each side makes claims the other vigorously denies. These days, the blasts of artillery and mortar shells are the war's steady cadence. "*We fire at them and they fire at us, but this is not a place where the usual calculations of trajectory and distance apply,*" said Capt. Hamid Mukhtar, a Pakistani artillery officer. Captain Mukhtar was serving at a forward post at 18,000 feet, near a ridge line known as the Conway Saddle. "*There are crevasses on either side of these paths,*" he cautioned as he walked. "*Step into the wrong place and you will go to meet God beneath the snow.*"

Daily patrolling is necessary, if for no other reason than to tread on a marked trail so it will not disappear. In February, in a typical catastrophe, an avalanche crushed 13 Pakistani soldiers tethered together with rope. A single survivor led the search that later recovered the pristine dead, their bodies preserved as if locked in cold storage.

An orange freezes to the hardness of a baseball; a potato cannot be dented with a hammer...

**THE OPTIONS:
PEACE BY ROCKET
OR BY BUS RIDE**

“This is my country’s soil, and whether something grows here or not, I would gladly die to protect it.”

...negotiators have agreed that the conflict is futile – and some have even called it lunatic...[but] any compromise involving Kashmir looms like a lit fuse, especially to unstable governments.

Melting leads to snow slides. The noontime temperature in early spring was 10 below, but the sun was bright enough to rapidly turn an exposed nose the colour of a radish. Sweat is a problem because it becomes ice in a soldier’s gloves and socks. Frostbite is then quick with its work. Even after a day’s exertion, most soldiers have little appetite at these heights. Rations come out of tin cans. Fresh produce is rare. An orange freezes to the hardness of a baseball; a potato cannot be dented with a hammer. Despite the hardships, both sides report an oversupply of volunteers. Stints in Siachen usually last three months or less. *“This is my country’s soil, and whether something grows here or not, I would gladly die to protect it,”* said Cpl. Mohammad Shafique, a Pakistani.

Few soldiers know much about the other side’s territorial claims, but they seem untroubled by doubt of the enemy’s murderous skulduggery. While many people in India and Pakistan hope for rapprochement, others merely heap fresh animosity upon the old. Evil is presumed. General Budhwar, the Indian regional commander, said Pakistanis suffer from a *“deformed growth,”* becoming brainwashed in school *“with all the dos and don’ts”* of Islamic fundamentalism. *“Their very existence depends on being inimical to India,”* he said. One of his counterparts is Brig. Nusrat Khan Sial, who commands Pakistan’s Siachen operation from the city of Skardu. He called the Indians *“cowards”* whose Hindu beliefs lack reverence for human life. He said he suspects they have used chemical weapons in Siachen, which the Indians vehemently deny. *“It will be the Indians, not us, who will trigger this situation up to the level where both sides resort to nuclear weapons,”* he said.

In April 1999, both nations tested ballistic missiles as they develop enough tit-for-tat firepower to give an adversary pause. Following the example of superpowers, they are pursuing peace through nuclear deterrence, their leaders say: Smaller disputes are less likely to provoke all-out wars when the possible outcome includes annihilation. At the same time, a less costly path toward peace is being undertaken. Earlier this year, with brass bands and polite embraces, India’s Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, made a heralded bus trip to Pakistan and met with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. More talks are in the offing, but optimism is in irregular supply.

Over the years, Siachen itself has been the subject of seven *“major rounds of talks,”* said Robert G. Wirsing, a scholar at the University of South Carolina. Under various Governments ruled by various parties, negotiators have agreed that the conflict is futile – and some have even called it lunatic. But one side or the other has always been too afraid of a double-cross to complete a deal. Domestic politics are also a hitch. Any compromise involving Kashmir looms like a lit fuse, especially to unstable governments. So the two armies fight on, proud of conquering the elements if not each other. Their doctors have become experts at high-altitude medicine, their helicopter pilots adroit at skirting the cliffs. Solar panels are affixed to some igloos. On the Indian side, a kerosene pipeline is being completed. A ski lift will ferry soldiers across the canyons. A pulley system has begun to hoist supplies up the mountainsides. Bacteria are eating human waste in machines called biodigesters. *“We have become specialists at high-altitude fighting – probably the best in the world,”* boasted General Sawhney, sounding as self-congratulatory as his Pakistani counterparts. *“We can tolerate the harsh elements. We have made liveable conditions.”* We are prepared, both sides say, to battle on the roof of the world forever.

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