

The History of Siachen Glacier

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What is the issue?

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- The inhospitable Siachen glacier stands at a height of 5,400 m and is regarded as the world's highest battlefield.

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- It's now 35 years since India took control over the territory, but the extreme weather and terrain has subjected the troops to severe hardship.

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What is Siachen's story?

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- **Boundary** - After the war of 1947-48, the UN-brokered peace and a Ceasefire Line (CFL) was demarcated as per the Karachi Agreement of 1949.

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- The easternmost point of the CFL was "NJ9842", and the territory beyond that was high-peaks and inhospitable - which wasn't demarcated.

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- The agreement simply said that the CFL would run north of the three glaciers in the region - Siachen glacier (western most), the Rimo and the Baltoro.

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- Notably, CFL itself was to be just a temporary arrangement and was supposed to become irrelevant after the proposed plebiscite in Kashmir in 1950.

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- But the plebiscite never took place and CFL was eventually revalidated as the Line of Control (LoC) in the Simla Agreement of 1972.

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- While the wars of 1947, 1965 and 1971 saw both militaries crossing across

the CFL on multiple occasions, the region north of NJ9842 was never touched.

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- This was because the rigour of the terrain and weather made it impossible for both the militaries to intrude into the sector.

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- **Intrusion** - In the 1960's, Pakistan had begun making certain cartographic changes to the CFL beyond the NJ9842, to symbolise its claim.

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- The line was visibly being pushed eastward (almost reaching Karakoram Pass), in contrary to the intention of 1949 agreement on the region beyond NJ9842.

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- Global mountaineering maps soon started portraying this as the authentic and internationally accepted CFL-LoC, backed by mountaineering legends.

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- Pakistan used this change in perception to start permitting foreign expeditions in the area of the Siachen glacier to reinforce its claim on the area.

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- By 1978, alerted by these expeditions, Indian Army too began undertaking mountaineering expeditions as a counter measure.

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- **Escalation** - Treks were getting increasingly frequent on both sides, but Pakistan had the world's perception on its side.

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- Heated diplomatic exchanges of territorial violation were sounded by both sides with regard to the Siachen sector and tensions mounted.

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- Increased Pakistani presence led some in Indian Army to demand a permanent summer post at Siachen, but the idea was dropped due to the harsh weather.

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- Instead, it was decided that besides mountaineering expeditions, Siachen glacier would be patrolled by the Army during the summer months.

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- As tensions over the patrolling arrangement escalated in 1983, intelligence reports suggested that Pakistan was planning to physically occupy Siachen.

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- **Occupation** - To avert a possible Pakistani takeover of the strategic Siachen heights, Indian army decided to take the summit pre-emptively.

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- On Baisakhi Day (a major religious festival) in 1983, when the enemy would've least expected the commencement of a major operation, India made

its move.

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- The mission was to occupy Salto Ridge, and the operation was codenamed “Meghdoot”, and the platoon advanced to brave the harsh weather.

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- The Siachen was soon secured and the two passes from the Pakistani side were sealed off in a comprehensively well executed operation.

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- The glacier continues to be occupied by the Indian forces till date, but the financial and human cost of the occupation is indeed massive.

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How does the future look?

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- The 110 Km stretch north of NJ9842 is presently under Indian patrol and about 5000 soldiers are employed for the duty.

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- In the past 35 years, the army has had 900 casualties in the sector due to the hostile weather and avalanches (without even a single bullet being fired).

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- Also, the costs of maintaining the operations at such a height cost about 6 crores per day, which is a major pinch on the defence budget.

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- The ecological impact of the occupation is also immense and many organisations have called for scaling down military operations at Siachen.

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- Hence, it would be prudent to work out a negotiated agreement with Pakistan to keep these pristine non-habitable zones free of conflict.

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- Such a move might help in demilitarising the zone and also reduce the burden on our armed forces.

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Source: Indian Express

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