

Skirmishing on the Line of Control

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Vol. 48, Issue No. 04, 26 Jan, 2013

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The ceasefire agreed upon by India and Pakistan at the Line of Control in November 2003 was the single biggest confidence building measure between these countries. It would be in the larger national interest of both countries to disengage from a face to face situation on the LoC by resolving issues such as Kashmir, Siachen and the Sir Creek.

The 740 kilometer long Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir starts from Grid Point NJ9842 overlooking the Siachen Glacier in the north and crosses several mountain ranges including the Ladakh and Pir Panjal Range and joins the International Boundary (IB) with Pakistan in the plains of Jammu. Over a hundred thousand regular soldiers on each side are involved in manning defences as also handling the logistics involved in supporting operations in mountainous terrain. This is the largest deployment of combatants anywhere in the world. The stretch of the LoC in the Ladakh Sector is unpopulated except in depth areas. However, west of Zojila, several hamlets and villages are scattered all along the line on both sides. The forward troops are deployed in an eyeball to eyeball situation as close as 500 yards, the minimum distance specified in the Karachi Agreement of 1949. The Karachi Agreement, a UN sponsored document, has not been abrogated by either party and remains in force even though the Suchetgarh Agreement (a set of signed maps) came into effect post the 1971 war. A small UN contingent (United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan, UNMOGIP) has been positioned in Srinagar and Muzaffarabad to monitor the ceasefire since the early fifties. Post the Simla Agreement of 1972, the UNMOGIP has been largely ignored by India since Kashmir is considered a purely bilateral issue with Pakistan.

Till the late eighties, the LoC was mostly quiet. Militancy in the Valley with covert support from Pakistan changed the situation overnight. Shelling and exchange of fire became the order of the day. Infiltration by militants was covered by artillery, mortar and small arms fire from the Pakistani side. A few odd casualties of soldiers as well as civilians were a daily occurrence on both sides of the line. The number of civilian casualties both in terms of dead and wounded was far more since troops were mostly sheltered in bunkers and trenches. It is difficult to estimate the total casualties over a period of nearly 14 years till a ceasefire came into effect in November 2003, but it would be in the thousands killed and maimed on each side. Surprisingly, the media hardly covered this and an odd report was tucked away in

inside columns or a ticker report would sometimes show up on television screens. An entire generation of Kashmiri children living in the vicinity of the LoC grew up traumatised by the firing which could start at anytime of the day or night. It is in this context that the importance of the ceasefire which came into effect in November 2003 must be viewed. The ceasefire is the biggest confidence building measure and changed the life of thousands of Kashmiris on both sides of the line. The entire line could come alive again if a single punitive raid being recommended by hawkish TV commentators is launched by either side. Not only would soldiers' lives be lost but we need to gauge whether the collateral damage to citizens' lives would be acceptable. Any government must ensure the safety of its citizens before any kind of retaliation.

By the end of the nineties, India commenced the construction of a fence which would check infiltration by militants being trained in camps on the Pakistan side of the line. The fence was completed in 2004 after the ceasefire came into effect and runs continuously for 540 kilometers in the Pir Panjal range within a few hundred yards on the Indian side. It consists of two rows of barbed wire with concertina coils in between. Sensors and alarms have been incorporated to warn troops of any movement. On account of the configuration of the terrain, several slivers and enclaves including hamlets and villages were left on the other side of the fence with gates for granting access to both civilians and soldiers patrolling the area. Over the years, in spite of severe damage due to heavy snowfall in winters, the fencing has by and large achieved its purpose of reducing infiltration as also exfiltration to the Pakistani side.

The series of incidents which have occurred recently starting with the killing of a Pakistani soldier in the Haji Pir Sector is a continuation of several violations committed by both sides. In spite of the violations, the ceasefire has held and the number of casualties is negligible. The firing from the Indian side is often to foil infiltration bids under cover of darkness or fog. In a situation where Indian patrols have to cross the fencing to patrol Indian territory, the Pakistani posts can take the movement as hostile even if it is not intended to be so. Patrols routinely lay ambushes for militants. Civilians living across the fence can sometimes be mistaken for militants. The situation can get out of hand and a trigger happy post commander on either side, often a young officer can start firing with immediate retaliation from the other side. The incident in the Mendhar Sector occurred when a patrol of 13 Rajputana Rifles crossed the fencing and was confronted or ambushed by a small force reportedly belonging to 29 Baluch Regiment. The Pakistanis had earlier objected to the construction of observation towers along the fencing in the area which violates the ceasefire agreement of 2003. The two leading scouts of the Indian patrol took the first burst of fire and were killed. The Indian patrol which was under intense fire could not retrieve the bodies of their comrades. It is possible that they realised they were missing only after they withdrew. Had the beheading of one soldier and mutilation of the other not taken place, the incident would not have attracted so much attention. 29 Baluch Regiment has done great disservice to the Pakistan army and nation besides enraging civil society in India and the mutilation must be strongly condemned. Having said that, to call for punitive raids, drone

Economic & Political WEEKLY

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

strikes or air attacks is irresponsible. This was a local incident and a mechanism is in place to handle such incidents. The government and army have reacted in a mature and measured manner. The situation seems to be under control. The opposition needs to back the government on such issues.

A linear positional deployment of troops facing each other over hundreds of kilometers is bound to create situations where violations of the ceasefire will continue. The forward deployment of troops in the Kargil sector after the infiltration by Pakistan is actually a strategic failure and reveals a positional mindset. The Kargil Review Committee has said this, though not in so many words. India and Pakistan are both laggards in human development and ultimately the leadership on both sides has to get down to resolving outstanding issues. It would be in the larger national interest of both countries to disengage from a face to face situation on the LoC by resolving Kashmir, Siachen and the Sir Creek . Otherwise incidents like Mendhar will continue to happen.