

The Daring Diplomat

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Syeda Sultana Rizvi meets Pakistan's first female astronaut, Namira Salim, as she pursues unconventional methods of diplomacy and peace promotion. Currently serving as Pakistan's first Consul General in **Monaco**, Namira Salim has taken on some of the world's most extraordinary physical challenges. Having been to both poles, skydived over Everest, and trained as **Pakistan's** first female astronaut, Salim has now turned her attention to using these achievements as innovative approaches to diplomacy.

International relations has always been at the core of Salim's physical accomplishments. At the North and South Poles, she raised a specially designed 'Peace Flag' in freezing temperatures. The action of raising the flag serves as an important symbol on behalf of Pakistan. When she reached the North Pole as Pakistan's Ambassador for Tourism in 2007, Salim broadcast the following message through satellite phone: 'It is a great honour to represent my country as the first Pakistani citizen at the Geographic North Pole. As I hoist the Pakistani flag at the pinnacle of our planet, I convey a universal message of peace and assert to the global community that Pakistan is a peace loving and tolerant nation.'

After also visiting the South Pole in 2008, Salim then decided to conquer the Earth's 'Third Pole' – Mount Everest. She became the first Asian to skydive over the world's tallest mountain, and describes her memory of it with exhilaration: 'I jumped from 29,480 feet, with oxygen, just over Mount

Everest. During the free fall, I was descending at 158 miles an hour, but I felt as if I was totally suspended in the air. There was no relative distance to feel the speed of the free fall.'

These successes led her to be recognised by the Pakistani Government for excellence in the area of sports. Salim was honoured with one of the highest civil awards of Pakistan, the *Tamgha-i-Imtiaz* (Medal of Excellence) in March 2011. There is a photograph of her hoisting the national flag in the entrance of the Presidency building in Islamabad.

With these astonishing accomplishments complete, Salim has returned to her long-held dream of space travel. Salim had wanted to study space sciences as a child, before she even knew such a discipline existed. Although the course wasn't offered in Pakistan, Salim found other ways to explore her interest. 'My family bought me my first telescope when I was 14. They encouraged me to attend the first conference of the Astronomy Society of Pakistan (Amastropak) and I became its first female member during high school,' she remembers.

Her hopes for going into space were rekindled with the launch of Virgin Galactic in 2004. In January 2006, she was selected from 44,000 applicants as the first Pakistani astronaut. 'My parents were in for a shock when Virgin made it a reality,' said Salim. 'I have successfully cleared my suborbital spaceflight training, which entailed a complete simulation of our actual spaceflight.'

In the past five years, she has actively taken part in the development of Virgin Galactic's private spaceflights, which she believes will make space accessible to all. 'Private space travel is not a joyride for the wealthy elite only; it is rather about opening up new vistas of research and development'.

Salim believes that one day the cooperative act of travelling to space might be used as a means of diplomacy. She suggests going beyond time-tested methods, and aspires to go over the physical boundaries of nations. Space travel, Salim suggests, could be the next frontier in collaborative acts of diplomacy. It's certainly another channel through which the extraordinary physical achievements of humankind can be imbued with a symbolic resonance of international collaboration.

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