



# Securing the heights: The vertical dimension of the Siachen conflict between India and Pakistan in the Eastern Karakoram



Ravi Baghel <sup>a, b, \*</sup>, Marcus Nüsser <sup>a, b, 1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography, South Asia Institute, Universität Heidelberg, Im Neuenheimer Feld 330, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany

<sup>b</sup> Cluster of Excellence: Asia and Europe in a Global Context, Heidelberg, Germany

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online xxx

### Keywords:

High altitude warfare  
Oropolitics  
Verticality  
Banal geopolitics  
Himalayan glaciers  
India  
Pakistan  
Karakoram

## ABSTRACT

The Siachen conflict between India and Pakistan is often referred to as the coldest war, or, the endless war atop the roof of the world. The high altitude and extreme climate create a hostile environment that has caused by far the most casualties and imposed tremendous costs on both sides. This environmental setting is usually only cited to underline the absurdity of this more than 30 year old conflict. We, however, argue that rather than being a constraint upon the conflict, the terrain itself is central to the genesis and continuation of the conflict. Further, the vertical dimension is the focus of contestation and the site where mountaineering practices, cartographic imagination and military logic intersect. The inaccessibility imposed by the terrain also implies that far from being a frozen conflict there is a temporal dynamism, as improvements in technology and logistics alter the possibility of maintaining the *status quo*.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

## Introduction

The military conflict between India and Pakistan in the vicinity of the Siachen glacier is now more than thirty years old. In 1984, Operation Meghdoot launched by India used helicopters to drop soldiers onto the Siachen glacier to preempt its occupation by Pakistan. Given that India and Pakistan have fought several wars, this particular conflict would not be unusual, if it wasn't for its location. In the wider geopolitical context, this area lies at the world's only nuclear trijunction, where the overlapping boundary claims of three nuclear powers, China, India and Pakistan, converge. The positions occupied by the soldiers are at heights of up to 6700 m (Tahir-Kheli & Biringer, 1998) and in temperatures that can reach minus 50 °C. It is a logistical challenge to supply the soldiers, which in India's case can only be done using helicopters. Pakistani positions are closer to the road heads, but the final stretch can only be covered using porters and mules.

In spite of the horrifying cost in terms of human lives and logistics, this conflict has remained in a stalemate even after numerous diplomatic efforts, including thirteen rounds of bilateral negotiations over the last three decades. It has become a permanent war, taking on the character of what Sidaway (2001, 2008) calls a “banal geopolitics”. This term describes the state of general popular acceptance that the Siachen conflict has entered, where this war has become unremarkable and everyday, and only rarely forces its way back into public awareness.

In April 2012, the conflict regained attention when a huge avalanche hit a Pakistani army camp at Gayari (also spelled Gyari or Ghyari), killing around 140 people, mostly soldiers (Shaheen, 2012; Walsh, 2012). There were impassioned pleas for peace and a withdrawal from the area, even from key actors like the Pakistani Army Chief and Prime Minister (Walsh, 2012). The hope of progress on negotiations did not last long in spite of public support, (Khan, 2012) mostly because of the strong opposition of the Indian Army to any peace moves (Swami, 2014).

Media coverage of this conflict has often tended to focus on the futility of fighting in the extreme environment where the soldiers are stationed (Bearak, 1999; Fedarko, 2003; McGirk & Adiga, 2005; Moore, 1993). Natural conditions are deadlier for soldiers than enemy action, and cause their physiology to progressively deteriorate, so that they must be rotated periodically. Even then, they

\* Corresponding author. Department of Geography, South Asia Institute, Universität Heidelberg, Im Neuenheimer Feld 330, 69120 Heidelberg, Germany. Tel.: +49 6221 548928.

E-mail addresses: [baghel@uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:baghel@uni-heidelberg.de) (R. Baghel), [marcus.nuesser@uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:marcus.nuesser@uni-heidelberg.de) (M. Nüsser).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +49 6221 548922.

often end up spending as long as six months at a time at these altitudes. Additionally, attention has been drawn to the uselessness of the territory whose control is ostensibly the rationale of this conflict. For instance, India and Pakistan have been compared to “two bald men fighting over a comb” (Cohen, 1999). Hyperbole about the senselessness of this conflict, trivialises a three decades old conflict that continues to have very real effects on the lives, bodies and security of people in two nations. Secondly, it makes implicit assumptions about the correct, presumably western forms of geopolitics in which militarised conflicts are about acquisition of (useful) territory.

“What else but burning hatred could drive men to battle over an alien, airless wilderness, so high and forbidding that even skilled mountain climbers spoke of it with awe and fear? Yet the Indians and Pakistanis had been fighting over this icy massif for a decade, and showed no sign of relenting. It was madness on a grand, militarized scale”

Margolis, 2000, p. 119.

This example (see also Bearak, 1999; Cohen, 1999; MacDonald, 2007) neatly fits the trope in which the rationality of peace, so obvious to the Western mind, is always belied by the emotional irrationality of the Oriental (Said, 1979, p. 48). As Tuathail and Agnew (1992) have argued, actors within powerful institutions of the hegemon state, define the “central drama of international politics in particularistic ways” (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992, p. 195), which then become the lens through which even localised regional conflicts are seen.

In recognition of these problems with many analyses of the Siachen conflict, we have tried to avoid the most obvious lines of inquiry. We eschew an examination of the relative rationality of India and Pakistan as geopolitical actors, and dispute the idea that the people of either country are especially passionate about war. We also believe that the case for peace has been made very well, and there is a broad recognition of the necessity to end the conflict, though the means to achieve this are contested. In an attempt to engage more meaningfully with this case, we call into question the idea that this conflict would “make sense” in a more hospitable environmental setting.

We instead place it in its political and equally importantly, topographical context to identify why this dispute exists *where* it does. We proceed by offering a short chronological overview (Fig. 1) to identify important elements in the development of the conflict. We also bring in a discussion of the Dolomites front during World War I as an example of a conflict in similar extreme topography, but in a European (“western”) setting. The specific elements of high altitude warfare, also called *Gebirgskrieg*, developed at this time, are a forerunner of contemporary military tactics. Our use of this term is intended to historically situate the emergence of a particular kind of warfare; identify the strategies that emerged in this particular kind of terrain and thereby point to the strategic and tactical continuity with Siachen. After identifying important and overlooked aspects of the conflict we place it alongside recent discussions of the vertical dimension in political geography. The present article complements those by discussing a high altitude war where air-power and the human body are at their vertical limits.

This article is based upon a critical analysis of publicly available documents, news reports and secondary literature, with an emphasis on primary accounts of direct participants in the Siachen conflict. As the source material is at times highly biased, we have endeavoured to offer a balanced reading. We used satellite imagery and historical maps to illustrate the spatial dimension and to uncover the contribution of cartography to the conflict. A major

limitation we faced was the lack of access to classified and restricted documents. We were also unable to visit the area for direct observation. Despite the lack of access to previously unknown primary data, we believe a new theoretical framework can produce a deeper understanding of this conflict.

## Verticality, war and geopolitics

The historical development of the Siachen conflict shows that verticality has been an intimate element at all stages. In a discussion of military landscapes that is especially relevant to the present case, Woodward (2014, p. 41) identifies three conceptualisations of landscape as being material, representational and experiential. The material aspect of the area relates to the patterning and morphology of the terrain; the representational aspect relates to the landscape as text or image and the third experiential aspect relates to the way we engage with landscapes physically and emotionally. Siachen as a material landscape affects military strategy, the emplacement of soldiers, and constrains actions. The representational aspect of landscape can be seen most directly when it comes to cartography and the imaginary lines that stand for the reality of power exercised over space. But, there are numerous other ways in which this landscape is read as a pristine wilderness, a strategic gateway or a military prize, and as Forsyth (2014) point out it is also a space for camouflage and militarized disappearance. The experiential aspects include the actual physical experience of presence on the glacier, but equally the vicarious emotional experience of this landscape as a national symbol, or an environmental disaster (Nüsser & Baghel, 2014).

Verticality modulates these properties of the landscape in four specific ways. First by making it attractive to mountaineers; second by complicating its cartographic representation; third, by making the heights key to military success; and fourth, due to the physiological effects of such high altitudes which lead to the notion of heroism *against* nature. These aspects however are not separate but shape each other. For mountaineers, a difference of a few meters in height might have a disproportionate effect on the perceived accomplishment as it might differentiate a “seven-thousander” from an “eight-thousander”. For the army it might mean an altitudinal limit on supply chains. Experientially high altitude imposes a loss of oxygen, low temperature and new threats to the human body.

The Siachen conflict contains many elements like territoriality (Raffestin & Butler, 2012), boundary claims (Paasi, 1999, 2009), border disputes (Newman, 2006; Toft, 2014) and borderlands (van Schendel, 2002) that are prominent research topics in political geography. Recently, the role of the vertical dimension has received increasing attention (Adey, 2013; Bridge, 2013; Elden, 2013a, 2013b) which can be extended to the present discussion. This attention has emerged from a focus on the military role of the air and the sea in geopolitics, thus leading to the idea of volume, which also includes sub-surface structures like tunnels (Elden, 2013b). One important aspect these discussions overlook is the human experience of these volumes, instead projecting a kind of empty space inhabited by machines, sometimes occupied by humans. The Siachen conflict materialises this volume by focusing on embodied human presence in the vertical, where oxygen availability decreases with altitude, where the human body reaches its limits, and where helicopters exceed their flight envelope. One of the most explicit examinations of the vertical terrain of warfare, including its strategic and symbolic aspects comes in the work of Eyal Weizman (2002; 2007). However, the groundedness and materiality of military presence in the vertical dimension, that he describes, is something that has not been appreciated enough, perhaps because much of the discussion of volume and

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7493141>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7493141>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)