

Geographers analyse causes for the continued Siachen Conflict in Northern Kashmir

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The highest and coldest battleground in the world lies on the Siachen Glacier in Northern Kashmir, where Indian and Pakistani military outposts face off at an altitude over 6,500 metres. This extremely high mountainous region, with its constant threat of avalanches, crevasse falls, and frostbite, is a logistical nightmare to supply and imposes tremendous expenses. Until now, the location of the disputed area was seen solely as a symbol for the conflict's absurdity. Based on a detailed conflict analysis, geographers from Heidelberg University have uncovered heretofore neglected aspects of the lengthy war. Among other things, they came to the conclusion that it is precisely the extreme topography that continues to fuel the coldest war on the roof of the world. It seems the parties to the conflict are using the high mountains as training grounds for future high altitude warfare. The results of the research were published in the journal *Political Geography*.

Surrounded by the over 7,000-metre-high massifs, the 73-kilometre Siachen Glacier is the longest glacier in the Karakoram range, whose high average altitude earns it the designation as the world's highest mountain range. At these elevations temperatures can drop below minus 40 degrees. "For the last 31 years, this spectacular mountain theatre at the extreme edge of human endurance has borne witness to an extremely difficult and cost-intensive war of position characterized as absurd at many levels. It is motivated by geostrategic considerations, concerns about national prestige, and the desire for access to certain resources", explains Prof. Dr. Marcus Nüsser of the South Asia Institute. Together with Dr. Ravi Baghel, a researcher with the "Asia and Europe in a Global

Context" Cluster of Excellence at Ruperto Carola, Dr. Nüsser analysed the interrelationships of the [armed conflict](#), which began on 13 April 1984 and is part of the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. A major avalanche hit a Pakistani military base in April 2012 and buried over 100 victims, renewing media interest in the nearly forgotten conflict.

"Our analysis uncovered unexpected connections between the extraordinary environment, the historical geopolitical constellation, mountaineering ambitions, and nationally charged heroism on both sides", says Prof. Nüsser. The researchers see a connection between the battleground's special topography and the conflict's duration. "Because the region lends itself to practicing high-altitude warfare, the Siachen Conflict should be seen less as a quaint military holdover of a bygone era, but as a training ground for future war in the mountainous region along the southern border of the Tibetan Plateau", explains Ravi Baghel. The researchers cite the conflict over the borderline between India and Pakistan as one example. According to the Heidelberg researchers, the deployment of new technologies such as drones will also help sustain the conflict. "In spite of the briefly hoped for troop withdrawals, the catastrophic avalanche of 2012 served only to entrench the status quo", states Prof. Nüsser.

In their analysis of numerous scholarly publications and international media reports on the Siachen Conflict, Marcus Nüsser and Ravi Baghel also point to universal leitmotifs that keep the conflict alive, including heroism and territoriality. Based on a comparative cartographic analysis for which the researchers also drew on historical data and satellite images, they were able to identify the genesis and some elements specific to the [conflict](#), among them "cartographic aggression". In this case, it refers to India disputing any boundary that does not follow the watershed principle. "Oropolitics" also plays a role. The term refers to the issuance of climbing expedition permits to international

mountaineers in order to document national jurisdiction over the territory.

More information: "Securing the heights: The vertical dimension of the Siachen conflict between India and Pakistan in the Eastern Karakoram." *Political Geography*, 48, 24–36. [DOI: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.05.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.05.001)

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