

# Oropolitics

## A dissertation on the political overtones of mountaineering in the East-Central Karakoram, 1975-82

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*Oros (Gr): Mountain*

*Politikos (Gr): relating to a citizen*

**OROPOLITICS:** The political aspect and use of mountains and mountaineering

### Beyond the Khardung La

Sport as an instrument of diplomacy is no longer news: we have grown used to it since the days of ping-pong.

Sport as an international pitfall is still a rare spectacle: why else would the Sino-US bickering over Hu Na still provide grist for media mills?

But Karakoram-watchers are examining the wild surmise of 1978 and the facts on record as of 1982 and are coming up with an incredible but logical answer: we are witnessing possibly the pioneering use of sport as a tool for establishment of territorial rights.

Mountaineering has been and is being used to progressively readjust that line you will not find on any ordinary map, the all-important 'line of control' in Northern Kashmir lying athwart the Karakoram range. Beyond the Khardung La, a great game has become part of the new Great Game.<sup>1</sup>

### Historical Perspective

In the Kashmir War that broke out in late 1947, the action of the British officer commanding the Gilgit garrison in going over to the Pakistani side opened the door for Pak forces to move into Baltistan. Gilgit is the gateway to the Western Karakoram, and Pakistani troops moving East up the Indus had little trouble in occupying Skardu, the key to the Central Karakoram. An astonishing feat of endurance and courage by a small Indian column prevented the fall of Leh<sup>2</sup>, the gateway to the Eastern Karakoram, and by the end of that war India was in control of the Nubra and upper Shyok valleys. This enabled India to push forward up the Shyok to the Karakoram Pass.

The Saser and Rimo Muztaghs lay in the Indian sphere of control, and the former, the easternmost major mountain group of the Karakoram, drew attention as early as 1956, when N. D. Jayal led a team from the fledgeling HMI to the 'yellow mountain', Saser Kangri (7672m). Prior to the annexation of Sikkim, Saser Kangri was the highest virgin summit in territory under Indian control, as distinct from Indian territory occupied by foreign powers. Although on Saser Kangri they made little headway from the South Phukpoche glacier, Jayal and others climbed Sakhang (6943m) (shown consistently as 7315m in certain Indian

records). This was the first major Karakoram success by Indian climbers.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately it was also the last for a long time; the next Indian expedition to the Karakoram was thirteen years away.

Activity was far more brisk on the Pakistan-controlled portion of the Karakoram, which is much larger and contains the cluster of 8000-metre peaks flanking the Baltoro glacier. K2 (8611m) dominates this gigantic group, and K2 was one of the first Karakoram summits to be climbed, in 1954. The others were all claimed by eager expeditions within 1958, but there was no dearth of giant 7000-metre peaks to be climbed, and the rush of expeditions continued unabated.

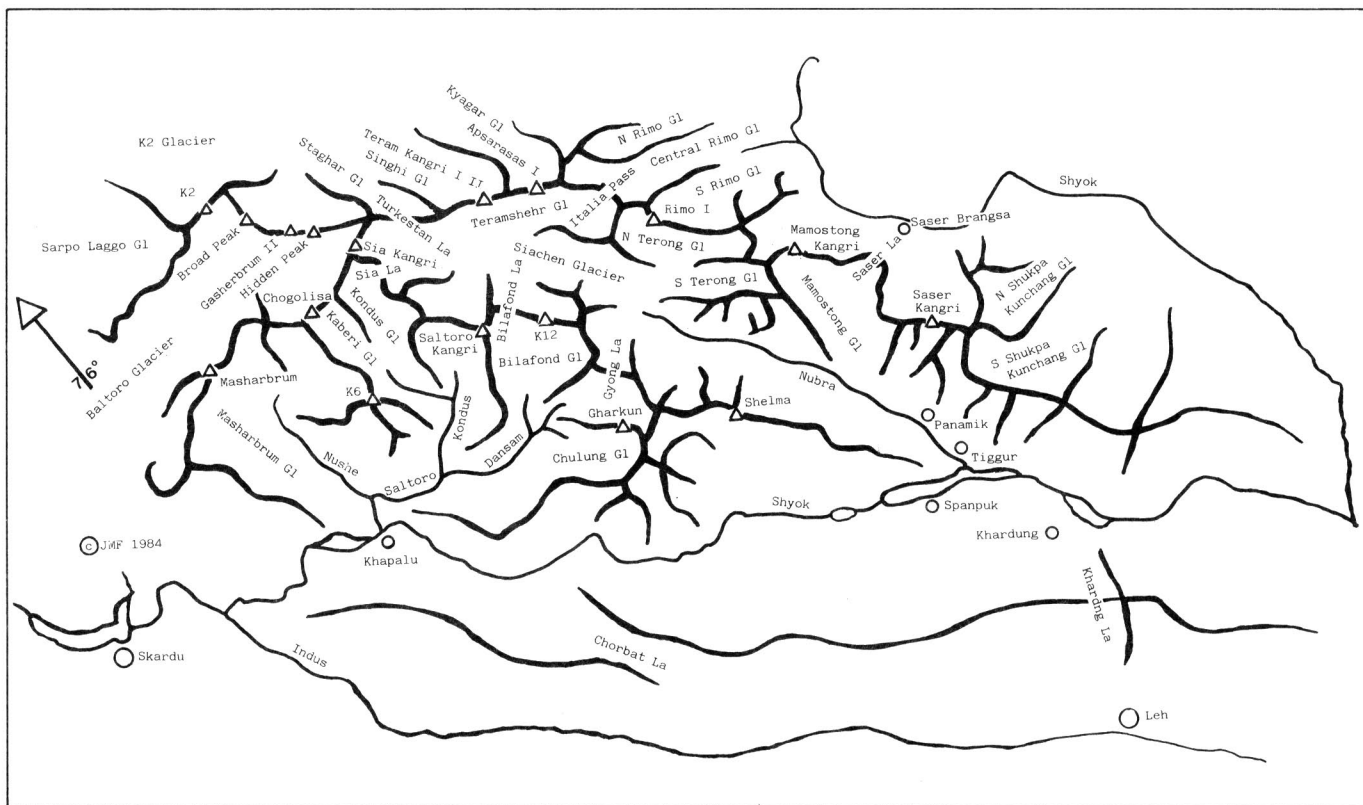
Not all these expeditions had purely mountaineering objectives: some, like the Imperial College expedition of 1957, led by the incomparable mountain-explorer Eric Earle Shipton, were predominantly scientific. This venture was of a piece with Shipton's ventures, in another day and age, aimed at filling in blanks on the map; and it was possibly the first post-war team to have visited the Siachen glacier, travelling across the Bilafond La. Apart from scientific work, some minor ascents were carried out, but reconnaissance of Saltoro Kangri (7742m) convinced Shipton that an attempt would not be worthwhile.<sup>4</sup>

Pakistan, lacking a strong climbing fraternity and not impelled to seek high glory, mounted few expeditions on its own; instead, some foreign expeditions had a few Pak climbers attached to them, converting them to joint expeditions. Such 'piggyback' successes include Masherbrum in 1960, and the ascent through the SE face of Saltoro Kangri on 24 July 1962 by A. Saito, Y. Takamura, and Pak climber R. A. Bashir.<sup>5</sup>

'India's China War' broke out a few months later the same year, and was short, sanguinary and decisive. To paraphrase the masterly Guedalla, the dreams of an Aghil frontier dissolved in the smoke of China's relentless volleys on the Galwan. When the smoke cleared, the Chinese were sitting tight on their claim-line, and India was holding a wedge-shaped territory with its apex at the Karakoram Pass.<sup>6</sup> The Eastern side of the wedge, the Chinese claim-line, has nothing to do with the Karakoram, and may be dropped from our consideration; but the Western side of the triangle still ran undefined across a No Man's Land of snow, ice and rock, and is the villain of this piece.

For the next thirteen years, little of mountaineering interest happened in the Indian Karakoram, except the ascent of Saser Kangri in 1973 through the Shukpa Kunchang glacier. An earlier Saser attempt in 1969 under H. V. Bahuguna failed again on the Phukpoche approach<sup>8</sup> and in 1970 an Army team under R. C. Naidu climbed Phunangma (6788m). No efforts to venture further afield, such as to Mamostong Kangri (7526m), appears to have been made. The inescapable conclusion is that the Army, convalescing as it was from the shock of 1962, was still feeling its way about gingerly, and did not think it prudent to launch expeditions to distant areas.

In the Pakistani portion of the Karakoram, the frenzied activity of foreign teams had depleted the number of unclimbed peaks so drastically that those wishing for a major first ascent were perforce reduced to looking for obscure and remote giants. The Karakoram Highway, anathema to India, was doggedly being built: and a Sino-Pakistani border convention had agreed to pitch the border along the Northern crestline of the Karakoram range, notwithstanding



Indian protests that they were partitioning an area which they were illegally occupying. This put, among other things, the entire N face of K2 under Chinese control — surely an excessive reaction to the fanciful Johnson-Ardagh alignment that proposed the Kun Luns as a possible boundary for British India!

### **Into the Siachen: Presence**

Even a cursory examination of the accompanying map will show how far and how difficult it is to go from Skardu to the Siachen: for the Siachen runs NW-SE, and the river originating from it, the Nubra, is under Indian control. So, instead of a long though comparatively easy valley approach, the visitor from Pakistan must ascend the Bilafond Glacier, cross the Bilafond La and descend the Lolofond Glacier to reach the Siachen.

But it takes much more than that to stop determined climbers — an assertion amply proven by the incredible adventures of Woodrow Wilson Sayre and his team on their illegal N face attempt on Everest in 1962.<sup>9</sup> So it was inevitable that aspiring teams would one day turn their eyes towards the virgin 7000-metre summits of the Teram Kangri, Apsarasas and Rimo groups on and beyond the Siachen. That day came eighteen years after Shipton's 1957 expedition. In 1975, a Shizuoka University team led by Professor H. Katayama and consisting of ten climbers, one doctor and Captain Shaukat Nazir Hamdani (Liaison Officer) set out on the long route from Skardu with the intention of climbing Teram Kangri I (7465m). Marching out of Khapalu on 31st May, they established BC at last on 10 July just north of the Siachen, an approach remarkable even by Karakoram standards (which are again immense by Indian Himalaya standards). Moving up the SW ridge of Teram Kangri II, they established camp 5 at c.7040m, from where Teram Kangri was climbed on 10 August through its E ridge by Y. Kobayashi and K. Odaka. A. Ohishi, H. Kato, K. Ohta, K. Hamaji, S. Ohba and T. Yokoi climbed Teram Kangri II (7406m) from the same camp on Aug. 12/13; the LO, Capt. Hamdani, could not climb TK II due to cold feet.<sup>10</sup>

In 1976, another Japanese party under H. Misawa departed from Khapalu in May for the little-known and remote Apsarasas I (7245m), lying east of the Teram Kangris. Thirty-four days later they pitched their base-camp on the Teram Shehr glacier, and their target was climbed through the S flank and the W ridge on 7 August by K. Yabuta, Y. Inagaki and T. Miyamoto from camp 4 (c.7010m).<sup>11</sup>

### **Counter-Presence**

While these ascents may not have made mountaineering headlines (reserved for big-name peaks and climbers), it is impossible to believe that nobody at New Delhi noticed what was going on. I have no doubt that these ascents were viewed with gravity, insofar as they revealed an insidious Pakistani attempt to display to Western observers their control over the Siachen basin. It was time and more for an unequivocal and highly visible demonstration of Indian control and sovereignty over areas of the Eastern Karakoram contiguous to and accessible from permanent Indian outposts; otherwise there was a real risk that the Siachen, and later possibly the Rimo as well, two of the Big Six of the Karakoram glaciers, would slip out of India's hands by default.

The first report of an adventurous Indian expedition into the depths of the Siachen came to my ears in early 1979, followed a little later by a badly-written and garishly illustrated article in the Illustrated Weekly by Col. N. Kumar, announcing the maiden (*sic!*) ascent of Teram Kangri II on 13 October 1978. The subsequent report in the Himalayan Journal gave the route of ascent as the right-hand rib on the icy S face. The summit party of the High-Altitude Warfare School expedition consisted of Hav. Puran Chand, Awtar Singh and Kalam Singh, and the assault camp, camp 3 was at c.6900m.<sup>12</sup>

1979 saw another ascent of Saser Kangri by an Army Team led by Brig. Jagjit Singh, marred by a number of severe frostbite cases. Then, in 1980, another Army Team under Brig. K. N. Thadani set off for the Siachen. On 18 September, a group of seven climbers reached the top of Apsarasas I around 11am, and another eight made it to the top at about 3.30pm the same day. The route was from the SE, which may make it different from the 1976 route. As usual, this was also claimed as a first ascent.<sup>13</sup>

Then came 1981, and another feat by Col. N. Kumar's Army team; the Illustrated Weekly article confirmed the ascent of Sia Kangri (7422m) on 14 July and that of Saltoro Kangri (7742m) on 22 August. The full report of the expedition has been printed in the Himalayan Journal.<sup>14</sup>

## Results and a Heavenly Parallel

One should not lose sight of the basically politico-military objective of these expeditions in scrutinising the mountaineering results: the climbers were as handy with Ichapore automatics as they were with iceaxes. But the signals to both Pakistan and China — as I firmly believe these expeditions were — have worked; and no enterprising Japanese team has been heard of around the Siachen after 1976. Certainly the Pakistanis have much more cause than us to dread a Siachen encounter between an Indian ski patrol and a foreign expedition equipped with a Pakistani L/O and a 'poaching permit'.

I cannot resist detailing a recent personal discovery about a Tien Shan ('Heavenly Mountains') peak, which seems to be a piquant parallel involving China and the USSR.

In one issue of Mountain World (1956/57 or so) there is an article by the Russian climber Vitaly Abalakov of the second ascent of Pik Pobeda (7439m) in the Tien Shan, the second highest peak in the USSR. Abalakov climbed it with eleven other Russians on 30 August 1956, after unsuccessful Russian attempts in 1949 and 1955. The story goes that the first ascent was actually made in 1938 by the joint leaders A. Letawet and L. Gutman together with Ivanov and Sidorenko; but the summiteers were unaware (why?) that their conquest, named Pik 20 Jahre Komsomol after the 20th anniversary of the Communist Youth Movement, was higher than anything else around. When the true magnitude of the mountain was detected in 1946 lowly Pik 20 was hurriedly elevated to Pik Pobeda ('Victory'): the Russians have the amusing but bewildering habit of ringing changes on names to suit the climate of political opinion.

That was all I knew until the day in the Calcutta Book Fair 1983 when I came across a well-produced and pricey volume called 'Planting the Five Star Flag on Mount Tomur' published in Beijing. It was the account of the ascents on 25 and

30 July 1977 of Mount Tomur (7435.3m) in the Tien Shan by 27 Chinese men and women.

*Tomur? Over 24000'?* Never heard of it?!!

Suddenly the penny dropped, and a lot of things became clear — why the Chinese book refers rather pointedly to the fact that even the last Sino-Russian border agreement ('Unequal!' was a silent shout) puts Tomur well within Chinese territory; why Western climbers go to Kommunizma and Lenina only ... *Mount Tomur was none other than (the erstwhile?) Pik Pobeda!*

The similarity between the Chinese reaction (no first ascent claim, but no acknowledgement of the Russian ascents either) and the Indian one (first ascent claims which I initially put down to mere ignorance) may be because they both arise out of a shared sense of outraged national vanity!

### Dreaming

To mountain-dreamers in India, the possibilities opened up by the consolidation of Indian control over the Siachen area and easing of restrictions are immense. If one could dream like Sayre . . . the Baltoro and the Siachen practically abut on each other, and what's a few passes between close neighbours? And at the head of the Baltoro. . .

The Abruzzi<sup>15</sup> in winter '84, anyone?

### References

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2. *Slender was the Thread* by Lt. Gen. L. P. Sen.
3. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 25, p. 136.
4. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 21, p. 33.
5. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 25, p. 143.
6. *India's China War* by Neville Maxwell.
7. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 30, p. 243.
8. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 33, p. 119.
9. *Four Against Everest* by W. W. Sayre.
10. *Sangaku*, Vol. 71 p. 13.
11. *American Alpine Journal* 1977, p. 271.
12. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 37, p. 107.
13. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 38, p. 124.
14. *Himalayan Journal*, Vol. 39, p. 104.
15. The Abruzzi — The SE spur of K2, the traditional ascent route pioneered by the Duke of Abruzzi's 1909 expedition. See *Sivalaya* by L. Baume, or *To the Third Pole* by G. O. Dyhrenfurth.