4

Urban Areas Near the LoC (II): The ‘Kashmir Issue’ in Skardu and Kargil

Not all the places that are involved in the Kashmir dispute have the same importance for the states of India and Pakistan and for an eventual agreement on a territorial settlement. As has been described in the previous chapter, the Kashmir Valley plays a central role and AJK is tightly linked to the conflict, but other areas such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Ladakh can be considered marginal.[[1]](#endnote-1) This does not mean that they are not affected by the conflict dynamics—they are, though in a different way—but the people living in these territories do not feel attached to the political problems in the Kashmir Valley and AJK. Residents of Skardu and Kargil are aware that the dispute is ‘because of the Valley’ and generally see themselves as having a marginal role in the whole question despite suffering from it.

There are cultural and social differences that explain this situation, apart from the incapacity of Kashmiri nationalism to mobilize people in these areas to undertake a united political project. For those in Baltistan and Ladakh, the link with Kashmir is their conquest by the Dogra chiefs of Jammu and then, after the formation of the princely state, their incorporation as part of that political entity. Nation-building after Partition was marked by the dynamics of the confrontation between India and Pakistan, which contributed to sentiments of disenfranchisement among these populations. However, while in Baltistan (and Gilgit-Baltistan) a sense of exclusion from the Pakistani state has prevailed over time, in Kargil (Ladakh’s border district) incorporation has been the norm. While Kargilis decide their representatives in the state and national elections, in Baltistan they are able to choose representatives for a regional assembly with very limited power, but are banned from representation in Pakistan’s national assembly.[[2]](#endnote-2) Despite these differences, border populations on both sides of the LoC are largely co-opted by their respective authorities through an economy of dependence based on compensations, including subsidies on basic products and jobs in the administration.

Geography has also contributed to the differentiation of access to these sparsely populated areas because of poor communication links with other parts of India and Pakistan. This is exemplified by Kargil town, which is partially cut off from the Kashmir Valley in winter. The closest civilian airport, accessible by a relatively well-paved road, is across the LoC in Skardu, but people cannot go there. In addition to these features, the huge military presence in Kargil compared with the small number of civilians makes it difficult to express dissent in public. Skardu and Kargil are considered peripheral locations in the Kashmir dispute, but they are places very much inscribed into the politics of the conflict, as indicated by the Kargil War that took place in this northern part of the LoC in 1999. Pakistan used Skardu to train the militants who were later deployed along the mountain peaks in Kargil to simulate a guerrilla attack in 1999. The conflict lasted for several months during the summer and received wide international attention until it ended after unofficial US mediation.

Conflict in this border area is essentially about fighting between the Indian and Pakistani armies. In contrast to the situation in the Kashmir Valley and AJK, civilians in this area have not been involved in violent or anti-state activities and do not generally sympathize with the nationalist cause, although they do tend to disagree with the present border regime because it separates families and groups sharing various ties. Indeed, it is in this area where the dividing character of the LoC is most strongly felt. The majority of the population of Skardu and Kargil share the same language, a dialect of western Tibetan, and belong to the Twelver Shia sect of Islam. Historically, Skardu was the main centre of religious learning for Kargili Muslims but Kargil was economically more important due to its location along the trading routes to Central Asia, which extended to Skardu through a secondary network via Parkuta (a Buddhist name, later renamed Mehdiabad).

The conflict dynamics in Skardu and Kargil must be understood in the context of being part of the Kashmir dispute and the position of the area at the margins of two large states. Despite the absence of open violence, conflict manifests at a latent level, as a fluid barrier between what can and cannot be expressed and done in public. An analysis of these urban places means acknowledging a set of historically created interdependencies, but also being aware that events in one place have the potential to have an impact on the other.

As in the previous chapter, I provide a brief description of these two small cities within the legal-administrative regimes of the territories in which they are located. I then discuss the social diversity of these places despite their remote and marginal location and the mobility/immobility of urban dwellers. In the analysis, I include opinions about the Kashmir dispute expressed by urban residents that reflect on the status of their territories as part of the dispute.

**The specific position of Skardu as a non-Kashmiri and non-Pakistani location**

*The city*

Skardu, the district headquarters of the Baltistan Division, one of the two Divisions of Gilgit-Baltistan, has a population of 131,290 according to the census of 2017.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is located in a deep valley some 130 kilometres from the LoC, well outside the restricted military zone, and is surrounded by mountains that are more than 5000 metres high. Before 1948, when Skardu became part of the liberated areas controlled by Pakistan, it was a garrison town defended by a battalion of the maharaja.[[4]](#endnote-4) Its military character as a ‘fort’ has not changed much since then; the two existing army cantonments that occupy an important part of the city are a reminder of this condition. Although physically separated from civilians by the walls of their camps, the army presence has a significant impact on urban social and economic relations. Along with the government administration, the army is an important source of employment (as masons, bearers, and porters; through the recruitment of local soldiers, etc.), is the main group contracting specific services (food supplies, transport, road infrastructures), and also provides facilities for civilians.[[5]](#endnote-5) Moreover, a significant number of locals have been enrolled in the institution over the decades and there is a Cadet College in the city which has a role as a potential recruiter.



Image 4.1: Skardu, August 2009. Photograph by Antía Mato Bouzas

As the capital of Baltistan, Skardu is considered the cultural centre of the Balti identity, which is framed in terms of a perceived disadvantage vis-à-vis Gilgit in regional affairs (because high positions in the Baltistani administration tend to be occupied by Gilgitis or Punjabis) and also in relation to Kashmir and to Pakistan. This Balti identity is a cross-LoC phenomenon, since it is claimed on both sides of the border on the grounds of shared ties.[[6]](#endnote-6) Cultural elements and shared traditions form part of this identity. Interestingly, Shia Islam, which is espoused by people on both sides of the LoC, does not play a major role in this shared identity.[[7]](#endnote-7) Balti cultural groups make broader transregional claims on the basis of the region’s former ties with Tibet.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, across the border in Kargil, Tibetan elements are problematic and links to Baltistan are expressed on the basis of former ties (when there was no border) and surrounding the question of forced separation. Baltistan identity has also developed out of a sense of deprivation and as a socio-economic response challenging the marginal position of this territory in Pakistan.[[9]](#endnote-9)

These identity claims must be contextualized as a reaction to Baltistan’s landlocked condition. They certainly involve elements of ‘awareness’ and the imagination of a community in the terms discussed by Benedict Anderson, although they are articulated as a way to underscore an element of connectivity and multiple belonging. This is not only a case of claiming past ties with Tibet, but also a display of symbolic attachments in the public space that demonstrate Baltistan’s linkages with other territories. The latter can be seen in shop signs written in the Tibetan and Arab-Persian alphabets; images of the Iranian politicians Ruhollah Khomeini, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani in the streets and shops which show the importance of the Iranian revolution and the shared Shia religious tradition, and graffiti containing slogans about ongoing issues in world politics. Cultural activists, development organizations, religious groups, tour operators, and businessmen are involved in this spatial production that attempts to challenge the landlocked position of Baltistan district by demanding more communication and economic links across the surrounding borders. However, past ties with the Kashmir Valley are silenced in this urban landscape.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Skardu qualifies as a border city in the sense that it is very much affected by the ‘politics of the LoC’, but not all residents agree with this definition. During my first visit in 2009, one of my interviewees, a local poet in his mid-thirties involved in cultural programmes, objected to my terming of Skardu as a border urban area in the following way: ‘when there is conflict, fighting does not reach here. We are safe. It is our soldiers who are stationed there [at the border] and we are preoccupied for them, as it happened during the conflict [the Kargil war]. At that time, our people got involved preparing food, helping with supplies. The army was defending us and there were many local soldiers among them. But direct conflict never reached us.’[[11]](#endnote-11) However, this view contradicts other experiences of proximity to the border, such as a man working in the healthcare sector who made reference to a local episode during our meeting: ‘The border is just two hours away and then Kargil is just there, whereas Gilgit is at a six hours distance by road. Our relatives [he meant divided families] are just on the other side and we cannot meet. Do you think is this normal? What they [India and Pakistan] have done to us?’[[12]](#endnote-12) Although it is not strictly located at the border, these comments illustrate how border dynamics in Skardu play an ambivalent role in local discourse: the border is seen both as protection from an enemy, which is framed as the Other, and as a barrier impeding ‘us’ from reuniting. People from Skardu emphasize a sense of proximity to the border when they refer to the separation of divided families and the sharing of cultural ties, while also stressing that the town is located at a safe distance when discussing the potential of border fighting.

The existence of a provisional border, whose status is yet to be ascertained, creates a context of legal ambiguity for those living ‘within the borders’ of the former princely state. In other words, the blurred character of the LoC reinforces the mental map of the borders of the Jammu and Kashmir princely state by providing them with an entity that no longer exists at the material level. This can be seen in the way the Pakistani state approaches the fate of AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan, keeping these territories constitutionally separate from the state while de facto exercising strict control over them. However, unlike AJK, where the Kashmir issue is officially sanctioned by the existence of a government that acts ‘in exile’, in Gilgit-Baltistan ‘Kashmir’ has been the obstacle preventing the integration of the region into Pakistan and allowing the continuation of a form of colonial administration there for decades.[[13]](#endnote-13) While in places like Skardu there is a shared agreement that a decision has to be taken on the resolution of the dispute, the mental maps of those I interviewed reflect more of a preoccupation with the present and the future than with the past.

*The conflict*

As in the case of Gilgit (and AJK), Baltistan became a ‘liberated’ area during the events surrounding the disintegration of the former princely state.[[14]](#endnote-14) The maharaja’s troops stationed in Skardu at the time suffered a siege by the rebel guerrillas and were later murdered along with Sikh civilians who had sought their protection. During the siege, the city was divided in two along the former water channel, which is still in existence.[[15]](#endnote-15) The events surrounding this episode have left a strong impression in the local memory and are still a sensitive topic. People with some knowledge of the developments are reluctant to talk about them, because this exercise implies addressing the involvement of local families which, in some cases, can be their own relatives. During a conversation with a well-educated man in his sixties, he reflected on the past with a strong sense of embarrassment, telling me about the fate of two Sikh women, one of them married to an officer of the maharaja’s troops stationed in Skardu and whose only child was brutally killed. Both women were then abducted and forcefully married to local men and converted to Islam.[[16]](#endnote-16)

These critical views of the past are, however, anecdotal, and the accounts of older people—a few of whom lived through that period—tend to exaggerate the agency of local guerrillas and platoons in support of liberation. In their stories they used the term ‘Kashmiri’ (that is, the administration dominated by Sikhs and Hindu officers at the time) to define the enemy and indicate that they saw themselves as victims. They did not share good memories of Baltistan’s condition as part of the princely state. In fact, the use of the term ‘liberation’ to refer to getting rid of the maharaja’s rule indicates that the purpose of the fighting was to break away from the princely state. These accounts may be the reason the cultural manifestations of claims to transregional connections mentioned above do not include Kashmir.

In the course of my visits to Skardu over the period 2009–2013, I noticed in my interactions that locals’ views on Baltistan’s relationship with Kashmir were being redefined.[[17]](#endnote-17) These modifications were probably related to the building of trust and friendship between me and the interlocutors, since a few of them expressed more critical views in our later interactions than they did the first time we met. However, their opinions also had to do with ongoing developments at the time, such as the granting to Gilgit-Baltistan of a new ‘autonomy package’ under the 2009 Empowerment and Self-Governance Order, incidents of sectarian violence against the Shia along the Karakoram Highway (KKH) in 2012, the evolution of cross-LoC initiatives on Kashmir, and economic transformations associated with the widening of the KKH and the building of major infrastructures. The Kashmir question was strategically used by my interlocutors to reflect on issues of belonging and statehood regarding their territory’s relationship with Pakistan.

Instead of ‘looking for Kashmir’ in Baltistan, I shifted my attention to understanding how eventual political developments in the Kashmir Valley could affect the mood in Baltistan. Many in Baltistan would identify first with Pakistan, although their ambivalent status as citizens of that state put them in an awkward position. Some of my interlocutors pointed out that integration into Pakistan was only a matter of time, and referred to the 2009 Order as a step towards this integration. Others, however, were displeased with Pakistan’s treatment of the area as a disputed territory. During meetings in 2013, I noticed that criticism of Pakistan was becoming more openly articulated in public, and was expressed in public speeches during cultural and sports events. Still, the matter continues to be sensitive for ordinary urban dwellers.

In Skardu, youth and adults framed the Kashmir question in terms of deprivation, the impossibility of inducing changes in the situation, and uncertainty regarding the future. The sense of deprivation unfolded from the confusing legal status of the region within Pakistan and the overall instability of the state, the different treatment that Baltistan and Ladakh receive within the India–Pakistan dialogue process as compared with AJK and the Valley, and the knowledge that things ‘on the other side’ (in Kargil and in India in general) are better. In this regard, the ‘Kashmir issue’ is imposed on them from above, as one of my interviewees, a doctor, narrated when he referred to the Kargil episode:

Everything can happen here. We do not know who you are. A little bit before the Kargil War happened, we got to know that some outsiders [members of militant groups fighting in the Kashmir Valley, who can be Kashmiris or Pakistanis] came to Skardu. Some of them stayed in the cantonment [that is, with the protection of the army] while others lived in rented apartments in the town. People did not like it. They were outsiders, Kashmiris, probably. One day, an incident occurred when the owner of a house, an old woman, refused to keep one of these men any longer. They were not polite. He threatened her and when people got to know about it, the youth demonstrated demanding these outsiders to leave the town. Some youth were arrested and taken to the cantonment. Then, the religious leaders mediated with the military to release the detainees, while these outsiders left.[[18]](#endnote-18)

When I asked where those outsiders had left for, he answered: ‘We do not know. Probably they went to other military camps. Then, the Kargil War broke out.’ This account, as well as others relating the sectarian incidents in Skardu, reiterate that conflict there is orchestrated from outside. In other words, the ‘Kashmir’ dispute is imposed on people from this territory by the state (and mainly by the military), not only by keeping Baltistan formally attached to the dispute but by using the territory and its people for continuing the conflict with the aim of snatching the Kashmir Valley from India.[[19]](#endnote-19) In this context, local inhabitants have so far reacted by embracing an image of unity, and the Shia religious leaders have played an important role as mediators with the military and the leaders of other sects.

Interviewees in Skardu, with a few exceptions, saw the merger of Gilgit-Baltistan with Pakistan as normal. One of my acquaintances, with whom I met over the years, admitted in one of our conversations: ‘Pakistan does not want us.’ When I asked him why, he said: ‘What do you think?’ This happened in July 2013 and reflected the tense climate at the time. On 28 February 2012, an attack on a bus on the KKH in Kohistan killed eighteen passengers from Gilgit-Baltistan, including seven from Skardu.[[20]](#endnote-20) The incident was considered a case of sectarian violence because passengers were previously segregated and their identities verified. Those killed belonged to the Shia faith of Islam. Rage spread among the population, and Section 144 of the Pakistan Code of Criminal Procedure of 1898 was imposed in order to prevent the spill over of sectarian violence.[[21]](#endnote-21) The situation became worse in Gilgit and lasted for several months. In Baltistan, people from Kharmang, a location close to the LoC, threatened to march toward the LoC, arguing, as someone recalled to me when narrating that incident, ‘if Pakistan does not protect us, India will.’ They demanded that the LoC and the road to Kargil be opened, a request also made by a few thousand families living in Skardu.[[22]](#endnote-22) Eventually, both the army and local leadership called a halt to the march, although the situation remained tense for a while. Religious identity came to the fore as an element uniting both sides, and was therefore mentioned to me in private. Although religious identity per se was not mobilized publicly on this occasion by the main religious leaders in Baltistan, religion was the main reason behind the march because the intended demand for protection from India was articulated on the basis that the Shia of Gilgit-Baltistan were under threat.

Sectarian violence is endemic in most parts of Pakistan, but the disputed situation of Gilgit-Baltistan creates a differentiated sense of alienation from the rest of the country. The inhabitants of the area feel powerless, based on their condition as potentially part of the Pakistani nation and their location in a landlocked territory where they are unable to develop ties across the border. Those marching toward the LoC turned to the other side for a solution, even though there was a risk that this action could be interpreted as ‘anti-national’ by the Pakistani authorities. What could be seen as a logical demand—to open a land route that would be beneficial for those living in the area—has become a highly political and contentious issue. The mention of ‘opening the road’ by a resident can be interpreted as a sign of disloyalty by the authorities. In this sense, the border area seems to be a place where a regime of silence reigns, and where locals do not have any agency.

Those living in Skardu have views on the Kashmir dispute that digress from the way the latter is represented (as an affair between India and Pakistan and as a nationalist project). For them, the main problem is the border, that is, how this construct impacts their lives. Borderlanders are aware of their limited ability to change things. Understanding the conflict from places such as Skardu and Kargil demonstrates how conflicts are framed elsewhere, in distant centres of power, and imposed on a place. The securitization in Baltistan, insofar as it is ‘part of the Kashmir dispute’, deprives those living there of a normal context for politics. Securitization, as Ole Wæver points out, has to specify the securitizing actor that is claiming an existential threat, which in this case is the state.[[23]](#endnote-23) As a security provider the state creates insecurity for the people it attempts to protect, because securitization implies a form of militarization.[[24]](#endnote-24) This can be seen in the powerful role of the military and the Pakistani intelligence agencies in suppressing dissent and discouraging democratic processes in these territories.

In this context, manifestations of conflict are found in the private sphere rather than in the open urban landscape. These manifestations especially concern forced separation and victimhood. This is the case for thousands of inhabitants who have been separated from their relatives across the LoC and those who could not choose sides during the course of events in 1947–1949. In Skardu there is also a population displaced from villages near the LoC who fled their homes because of the constant skirmishes and eventual fighting. Families whose villages were seized by the Indian army during the 1971 war also live in the city. Unlike those displaced in AJK, who have received compensation, these groups always note that they have had to fend for themselves to make a living.[[25]](#endnote-25) They live in the less fertile areas of the city, some building their basic mudbrick houses in the desert.

Victims of border fighting are seen by other urban residents as the product of casual fatalities, but they do not link it to the conflict. The manager of the Marafie Foundation (a Kuwaiti-funded NGO working in Baltistan) objected, during my interview with him, to my expression of surprise at the existence of a significant number of orphaned children in Baltistan. He saw it as normal. In fact, Skardu hosts several institutions run as NGOs with support from the Gulf countries to aid people in need, such as orphans, widows, and other socially vulnerable people.[[26]](#endnote-26) During my visit to one of these compounds, Madina Colony, I found a number of widows and orphans whose husbands and fathers had been killed by crossfire while working as porters for the army. These centres (the one I visited hosted around 800 people) provided them with training, education, and support for remarriage in the case of widows. Apparently, these residents do not count as victims because they are not part of a specific group, nor are they recognized in public as such. Therefore, rather than manifestations in the public urban space, the scars of the ‘Kashmir issue’ have to be found in private spaces in Skardu.

*The borders of the conflict*

Owing to Gilgit-Baltistan’s constitutional limbo and its ties to the Kashmir dispute, people in Skardu are wary about their future because there is great potential for the current political situation to change. This context of uncertainty is also shared with other places such as Srinagar, Muzaffarabad, and Kargil. This uncertainty does not generally manifest in the possibility of another war between India and Pakistan, which many perceive as improbable, but in the question of ‘taking sides’ if an opportunity arises to take a political decision. A change in the political setting of the Kashmir Valley may also affect the context in Baltistan. Although the conflict in Baltistan and Ladakh is different from that of AJK and the Kashmir Valley, interventions in one location might impact other places as a sort of regional game of chess. Pakistan’s continuation of the policy of linking the future of Baltistan (and Gilgit-Baltistan in general) to that of the Kashmir dispute has caused these areas to seek alternative forms of representation.

In this scenario, cultural manifestations emphasizing Baltistan’s ties with other regions, such as those mentioned earlier, cannot be treated as simple geopolitical discourses. These images, activities, and interventions contain a degree of materiality and intention (by those involved) which can be observed in both objects and relationships. They can be seen as an articulation of forms of resistance. The movement for the revival of the Tibetan heritage of Baltistan, which according to those promoting the initiative began in the late 1990s, includes the preservation of Buddhist sites, the revival of indigenous arts such as old patterns of lattice work, and a renewed interest in the Balti language (in both Tibetan and Arab-Persian alphabets).[[27]](#endnote-27) Behind this initiative there are several local actors, both individuals and NGOs, who intend to promote a certain image of Baltistan, and who undoubtedly ask themselves ‘who we are’ and ‘to which place do we belong’. In doing so, they locate Baltistan as connected with the less politically controversial Tibetan influences rather than the more problematic ones of Kashmir and Pakistan. Practical motives also apply, such as the need to revive the flagging tourism industry. By claiming ties with Tibet, these actors and groups are attempting to highlight the peaceful character of Baltistan (through the indirect associations of Tibet, Buddhism, and peace), which is contrasted to the conflict-prone nature of Kashmir and the insecurity in Pakistan. The resultant spatial figuration of Baltistan as part of a Tibetan cultural milieu challenges the existing borders and counters the dominant narrative of Baltistan’s ambivalent position between Pakistan and Kashmir. Not surprisingly, it has echoes on the other side of the LoC, in Kargil. The need to expand borders in the urban landscape of Skardu is a response to a space that is shrinking, and it represents a language, a discourse, of those who cannot openly express their political views.

**Kargil and the borders of the nation**

*The town*

Kargil is the largest urban settlement near the LoC in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India, located some 10 kilometres away from the LoC. It has 16,338 inhabitants, according to the 2011 census of India. Part of the less populated Ladakh Administrative Division, Kargil district is divided into two sub-districts: Kargil, where the town is located, and Zangskar. Kargil is a Shia-majority area in the predominantly Buddhist Ladakh, a religious marker which is often mentioned to illustrate the cultural and religious diversity of ‘Kashmir’, highlight the increasing religious schism within the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and underline its religious connections with Baltistan. Above all of these interpretations, however, Kargil is a crossroads of influences.[[28]](#endnote-28) This can be seen in its condition as an essential passing-by nodal point that connects Skardu (at present, in 2018, closed), Srinagar, and Leh. The numerous Indian (and some foreign) tourists who travel along the Srinagar–Leh road, or alternatively want to visit Zangskar, must pass through Kargil. This position as an intersection defines Kargil’s part in the Kashmir issue: it does not fully side with any regional demands. Kargil’s position can only be described in relation to other parts: the Kashmir Valley, Ladakh, and Baltistan.

As in the other cities, the presence of large army camps in Kargil has resulted in continuous interactions between the civilian population and the military.[[29]](#endnote-29) The relations between them can sometimes be tense—on issues of land-grabbing by the military, as happens in Skardu—but is also beneficial for locals—people are occasionally transported in military planes to other places in India for medical treatment and for other reasons. Unlike in Skardu, where locals objected to my labelling it a ‘border city’ because they were not within range of cross-border fire, Kargil’s condition as a border town is openly accepted. Locals express fear about the possibility of a confrontation between the two armies because in that case they would be targeted. The military presence puts the civilian area of the town in danger, as was also noted in Skardu, but at the same time people see the presence of the army as a sign of protection, that India is taking care of them.



Image 4.2: Kargil, June 2011. Photograph by Antía Mato Bouzas

Because it is a relatively remote town, owing to its distance from the main centres of Leh and Srinagar and the isolation it experiences in the winter season, the urban landscape of Kargil is probably the one that most evokes the sense of a lost world. There, it is possible to have a sense of the immediate severing of interaction caused by the closure of the border in the mid-twentieth century. A few Sikh families still live in the town and maintain their temple. In the main market, at the time of my fieldwork in 2012, there was still one shop run by a local Hindu and others by the descendants of former Yarkandi traders (a term that generally refers to those from the former oases in today’s Xinjiang). This social diversity is mainly testimonial, in the sense that there is no engagement with this pluralism at the level of society, although it has been duly included in the representations of cultural activists and entrepreneurs promoting Kargil for tourism purposes.[[30]](#endnote-30) However, this social diversity shows the dynamic character of the town and challenges the position of Kargil as an end point, the limit of India’s sovereignty—as expressed in the popular motto, ‘from Kanyakumari to Kargil, India is one’.[[31]](#endnote-31)

*The conflict*

Kargil is the main urban site of military confrontation between India and Pakistan. Confrontation is often referred to by urban dwellers as a tactical issue, with elders indicating with their fingers the mountain peaks controlled by India or Pakistan in one or another period. Violence manifests in a crude battle for territory which becomes more aggressive as it moves further east, in the direction of the Siachen. Kargil became internationally known in the spring and summer of 1999 during an episode of war between India and Pakistan. The fighting drew international concern because it occurred one year after the two countries had defied the existing international nuclear consensus by testing several devices. Fighting developed along the LoC, both west (toward the largest village of Dras) and east (toward Batalik) of Kargil. The town was severely affected, and the population felt insecure and was evacuated because of its proximity to the fighting.[[32]](#endnote-32) They were caught in the crossfire.

While narrating the tragic incident at the start of the Kargil War in which a bomb fell on the main Kargil bazaar, killing 23 people, my interlocutor, a retired schoolteacher, could not avoid excusing the Pakistani army to some extent, conceding: ‘We know that they [the Pakistani soldiers] are also Muslims, some might even have relatives here. What can they do? It is not easy for them also.’[[33]](#endnote-33) Similar views have been expressed by others, underlining the shared ties across the LoC but also the religious character of the Pakistani army and the fact that they are targeting Muslims. Indeed, the latter aspect creates an ambivalence that seems to be absent among those with whom I spoke in Baltistan, for whom the ‘Indian army’ is seen as Hindu—thereby constituting an element of difference and separation. The fact that the ‘enemy’ is of the same religion is perceived in Kargil as an unfortunate situation and a complex reality with which they live. Because of this, they are seen as suspicious in the eyes of the state despite the fact that the fighting is between the armies and is not directed at them.

Conflict in Kargil is about the border and the consequences of a potential military confrontation between the two armies. However, as part of the Kashmir dispute, there has been much speculation over what Kargilis think about the conflict in the Valley. Since bringing up this topic is potentially problematic in Kargil, I avoided addressing it directly in interviews. I mention this because whereas the works of scholars focusing on developments in Zangskar and Ladakh show how in Buddhist-majority areas there is a distance from the conflict in the Kashmir Valley, the case is more problematic in Kargil. Academics and businessmen I interviewed during fieldwork in Srinagar said that people in Kargil ‘are turning toward’ the Valley because of the discrimination they face from Leh in terms of resources and also because of their different religious identity. Three local politicians I met in Kargil, however, demonstrated their distance from the Valley by underscoring that locals had never been involved in violence. This is because, on the one hand, they need to negotiate a share of the resources of the state government, and on the other hand, they are aware of the area’s importance for India’s security because India will not voluntarily give up Kargil, and Buddhist political leadership in Leh has been struggling for Ladakh—to which Kargil belongs—to be ruled directly from Delhi.

In the Kargil main bazaar, placards marking the offices of the NC and the PDP,[[34]](#endnote-34) the main Kashmiri parties from the Valley, indicate that they have some local support. In the latest state elections of 2014, however, the local seat in the Jammu and Kashmir legislative assembly was won by the popular politician Asgar Ali Karbalai, at the time competing for the INC. While there certainly is an orientation towards the Kashmir Valley, it is unclear whether this has to do with the gradual identity formation and economic schism occurring in Ladakh, economic deprivation, or simply that, as the capital of the state, Srinagar offers a number of job and educational opportunities for Kargilis that cannot be found in Leh.[[35]](#endnote-35)

As in the case of Skardu, conflict in Kargil does not have an explicit ‘Kashmir’ focus in terms of a relationship with the political demands of the Valley and the violence there. Unlike the case of Gilgit-Baltistan’s status as part of Pakistan, the Indian state sees Kargil as an indisputable part of India. This contrasts with perceptions from the other side of the border. Some interlocutors from Kargil pointed out to me, regarding the case of a village near this town and now on the Indian side that was part of Pakistan until 1971, that ‘no Pakistani official had ever visited the village since Partition’. Whether this is true or not, the idea conveyed by my interlocutors was that the presence of the state is more strongly felt in Kargil than in Skardu. In Kargil, the term ‘Kashmir’ is connected to the border dispute and the desire of Pakistan to take control of the area, but it also has an eye on the Kashmir Valley. Unlike in Skardu (and in Gilgit-Baltistan in general), where criticism of the Kashmir dispute has been articulated publicly, in Kargil this is absent.[[36]](#endnote-36)

*The borders of the dispute*

People in Kargil are conscious that the image of India is a powerful one. As the politician Mr. Karbalai pointed out: ‘We are happy in India, we do not want to be part of Pakistan. We know they have issues there [Baltis in Pakistan; he points his finger towards his back].’ He acknowledges, however, that sometimes people’s loyalty is questioned. The issue of divided families, of which he estimates there are some 3000 on the Indian side, raises suspicions, particularly regarding the demand of opening the Skardu–Kargil road (which he supports). He also blames Pakistan for opposing the measure. Interviews in Kargil also showed that sympathies for India are framed in terms of economic advantages and more freedom than is available in Pakistan. People do receive information about the other side through various channels—migration from both sides to the Gulf and pre-arranged meetings in third countries such as Kuwait, Iran, and Iraq during pilgrimages, telephone calls from the Pakistani side, internet, exchange of videos, simple observations of life in the nearby border villages, and information provided by the army—and they see themselves as being in a better position than those in Pakistan. At the same time, since the Kargil War the whole region has been experiencing a boom in Indian tourism. Kargil is close to the location of the battle scenario of 1999, as seen in a memorial built near Dras and other sites that attract mainly Indian visitors. Indeed, it is this narrative of Indianness, the Indian soldiers who gave their lives in this territory, which emotively connects this remote area with the heart of the nation.

Despite the fact that places such as Kargil are formally incorporated as part of the state and there has not been a militarization of civilian areas as in Srinagar, life there is determined by the security constraints derived from proximity to the LoC. This means the army interferes in many aspects of the civilian space because of its own needs as an institution and as a group, as well as to monitor the population and socialize it to a certain idea of the state. Significantly, in places such as Kargil (and the border areas across the LoC in Baltistan) the military becomes what Mona Bhan terms ‘armed humanitarians’—that is, the reinvention of the military as ‘a partner rather than a threat to the region’s social and economic development.’[[37]](#endnote-37) In this context, borderlanders are trapped between their ‘loyalty’ to the Indian state and their sentiments of sharing close ties across the border.

**Conclusion**

Manifestations of the ‘Kashmir dispute’ in Srinagar, Muzaffarabad, Skardu, and Kargil underscore the interwoven dynamics of the conflict. These urban border areas cannot be understood simply as static places near a border; they are always ‘on the move’, criss-crossed by various phenomena connected with the dispute that impacts them in various ways, ongoing state-making processes in these peripheries, and interventions that can be contextualized as part of globalization processes. Conflict has created a context in which developments in one location along the LoC invariably affect events in others. This follows two opposing trends: how the dispute is described and dealt with by the respective states and imposed on the place, and the modes in which groups in the affected areas challenge dominant views, which constitutes forms of resistance. The conflict’s interwoven dynamics constitute a figuration, in the sense of the figurational sociology developed by Norbert Elias, in which, on the one hand, these urban areas are bound together by the dynamics of conflict, but on the other, by seeking alternative ties to other places ‘outside’ the stated figuration (through cross-LoC economic relations and symbolic representations), they attempt to challenge that very representation of the dispute.

First, the Kashmir urban border areas are militarized spaces where the military, though physically separated in camps, interferes in civilian life at many levels (surveillance, economic dependence, drawing soldiers from the local societies, etc.). This militarization has been more intense in the Kashmir Valley, and in Srinagar, where paramilitary forces are stationed in civilian areas to monitor the activities of civilians and enter into the intimate sphere. The military presence, and the militarization of Srinagar in particular, does not impede mobility, and these urban areas are being economically transformed through various investment programmes and their promotion as tourism sites (which in the case of Muzaffarabad is mainly aimed at Pakistani tourists, since foreigners are not welcome). But militarization creates a specific context, a consciousness in which further dissection of the urban space is carried out. This can be seen in the existence of a variety of enclosed spaces in these towns and cities—‘refugee’ camps in Muzaffarabad, training camps, orphanages in Skardu, gated communities, limited access to specific sites, and so on.

Second, the border towns are culturally heterogeneous spaces, despite the conflict’s reinforcement of social borders between various groups and the mobilization of identity during Partition, which by distinguishing between Muslims and others has accentuated the religious divide of these places, particularly in Skardu and Muzaffarabad. However, conflict has not affected the other dimension of the border city as a place of refuge, a safe place for those who have fled other conflicts, as the case of Srinagar illustrates, and for those displaced out of fear and by cross-border fighting. Conflict permeates all spheres of urban life but does not affect all urban dwellers equally. The city’s diversity distinguishes between those who have a direct interest in the conflict (as victims, for political and economic reasons, etc.) and those who do not, as is the case for some groups in Muzaffarabad. From this perspective, place, framed in terms of relations with other locations, becomes an important element in the understanding of the Kashmir dispute. It is place (as part of a territory), and not religion, that is the source of the violence. Violence is exercised in places and is part of a struggle of place-making. The latter can be seen in the ‘normalization’ in Srinagar, which operates as an indicator that the state of Jammu and Kashmir is a ‘normal’ state of the Indian Republic; in the shaping of Muzaffarabad as a political link with Kashmir while also being accommodated into Pakistan (‘Kashmir vs. Pakistan’ in Muzaffarabad); in the cultural marketing of Baltistan as having links to Tibet (instead of to Kashmir and Pakistan) in Skardu; and in the emphasis on the crossroads character of Kargil as a response to Indianness or Kashmiriness.

Third, an element of uncertainty permeates life in all of these locations because of the realistic possibility that the current status may be altered by transformations in the territorial and constitutional status of some of these areas or due to an unexpected violent development. Although expressions of uncertainty vary from place to place and cannot be considered interconnected, they can certainly have a spill over effect, in the sense that events occurring in one place can mobilize people in other locations. An overarching expression of this uncertainty that was shared in all the four locations in which research was carried out is that the current situation is not definitive and ‘a decision has to happen’. Meanwhile, or precisely because of it, interventions are already happening.

1. Only those defending the ‘sanctity’ of the boundaries of the former princely state as of October 1947 can give them equal importance. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bhan, *Counterinsurgency,* 11. On Baltistan, see Mato Bouzas, ‘Mixed legacies’. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. At the time of writing at the end of 2018, the 2017 Census reports for Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK have not been published, but this figure was provided informally during an interview in Skardu (28 June 2018) with an NGO. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mahajan, *Debacle in Baltistan*, 16–20*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In interviews held in Skardu I came to know, for example, that young single working men from villages or towns without proper arrangements in town frequently eat at the army mess because it is more convenient for them. Similarly, I often heard that in border areas the army usually supplies kerosene and food, either free or at low prices, as a goodwill gesture to the population. This also occurs on the Indian side of the border, where the army takes an ‘activist’ role, Mona Bhan, *Counterinsurgency,* 159–163. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. As the Pahari identity of those living in the mountain areas to the west of the Kashmir Valley. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. There are religious ties among families on both sides of the border, especially among clerical families, but religion per se is not publicly articulated in this revival of Balti identity. In fact, although they do not conceal their religious identity, some of the cultural activists I interviewed in Baltistan are concerned with the development of the Tibetan alphabet for the Balti language and popular traditions which are pre-Islamic. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mato Bouzas, ‘Territorialisation’; MacDonald, ‘Memories of Tibet’. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Mato Bouzas, ‘Space(s) and place(s)’. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Baltis were a significant labour force (as coolies) in the building of major infrastructures such as the Baglihar dam, near Srinagar, and there was a significant past economic interaction connected to the Kashmir Valley. As of summer 2012, there were still remains of a Sikh temple and a building remembered as the place where the maharaja’s officers stayed during their military campaigns toward the north, as locals described them. A few narrow lanes where Sikhs used to live and have their shops are the only remains of a once more plural space. On the history of Baltis as a labour force, see MacDonald, ‘Push and shove’. In Skardu there are also families identified by their Kashmir ancestors. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Interview, Skardu, 27 August 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Interview, Skardu, 25 March 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. By ‘colonial’ I refer to the preservation of pre-1947 legal and representative forms in the administration; I do not mean, as some Indian scholars or nationalists in Gilgit-Baltistan have claimed, that Gilgit-Baltistan is ‘the last colony’ of Pakistan in the sense of economic exploitation of the area. It is perhaps with the developments of the Karakoram highway in the last decade that the exploitation of resources in Gilgit-Baltistan has become more attractive for Pakistan and other major international players, such as the Chinese. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hussain Abadi, *T­­­­­­­­­­ārīkh-i Baltistān*. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For an account of the events, see Mahajan, *Debacle in Baltistan.* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This is the only account I came across about abduction of women in the area, but it is probably not the only one. On the case of abducted women during Partition, see the very interesting account of Butalia, *The Other Side*, 125–171. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In late April and early May 2012 I interviewed Baltis in Islamabad, as I could not access the area. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Interview, Skardu, 25 March 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The territory is used by the military to launch operations such as the one that led to the Kargil war, but local people are also involved in these operations through recruitment. A number of locals have been recruited into the army over decades and this makes things more complicated because families come to depend on this income. During fieldwork, I once tried to interview a few men in their fifties and sixties from border areas living in Skardu on an issue which was connected to historical events in 1948. They were friendly to me all the time—I used to meet them while walking in the city and they always greeted me—but they refused to be interviewed. When I explained this to a trusted friend, he said that probably this was because their sons were enrolled in the army. I had previously interviewed a few men whom I knew had sons in the army, but they never mentioned, nor did I ask, more about this aspect. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Uzairakhan, ‘Passengers hauled off buses’. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Mir, ‘Sectarian violence’. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Pamir Times,* ‘Kharmang: people march’. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Wæver, ‘Politics, Security’, 469. See also, ‘Securitization and desecuritization’, 46–86. This scholar initially maintained in an article published in 1995 that security had ‘to be read through the lens of *national* security’, (p. 49) but has later elaborated on the fact that other actors and sectors can be the object of securitization. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Here, I understand militarization in the broad sense of the concept provided by Cynthia Enloe: ‘To become militarised is to adopt militaristic values (e.g., a belief in hierarchy, obedience, and the use of force) and priorities as one’s own, to see military solutions as particularly effective, to see the world as a dangerous place best approached with militaristic attitudes’. *Globalization and Militarism,* 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. This situation is different from those displaced in AJK, who have received economic support, mainly because the AJK Government deals with their situation. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Interview in Skardu, 28 June 2018. Mato Bouzas, ‘Karakoram mountains’. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Mato Bouzas, ‘Territorialisation’. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Aggarwal, *Beyond Lines*, 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Bhan, *Counterinsurgency*, 171–176. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Owing to philanthropic, but also economic and political, aims. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Aggarwal, *Beyond Lines*, see illustration in page 3. On the representations of the slogan as part of the national imaginary, see Sarmal, ‘Kargil to Kanyakumari’. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For experiences along this tract, see Bhagat, ‘Reclaiming lives’. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Interview in Kargil, 6 June 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. The NC is a historical party and has broader support in the state. It has been the hegemonic party in Kashmir in the same manner as the Indian National Congress in India. The People’s Democratic Party was only formed in 1998 and draws support mainly from the Kashmir Valley. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Aggarwal, *Beyond Lines*, 42–43; Bhan, *Counterinsurgency,* 15. During my fieldwork I observed that there were a number of students from Kargil in the public and private universities in the Valley, but there were hardly any Buddhist students from other parts of Ladakh. At the same time, Srinagar offers working opportunities for Kargilis. Owing to the extreme weather conditions in winter in the area, a number of locals also increasingly spend the winter in the capital of the Valley, mainly those who cannot afford to travel to the Indian plains of Jammu or elsewhere. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Apart from groups in Gilgit-Baltistan, former Chief Minister Mehdi Shah has openly distanced Gilgit-Baltistan from the Kashmir issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Bhan, *Counterinsurgency*, 188–189. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)