

War at the Top of the World: The Struggle for Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Tibet

Eric Margolis

New York: Routledge, 2000. 250 pages.

Recently, South Asia has become the focus of world attention due to the American attack on Afghanistan and the subsequent increased tension in Asia. This book attempts to explain the various power dynamics behind the political tensions between nuclear powers India, China, Pakistan, and Russia. Eric Margolis, a Canadian journalist who has traveled extensively in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Tibet, tells many great war stories of his visits to the front line. Friendships with local personalities and his background as a military officer provide a reasonably balanced analysis for those who are interested in the region's geopolitics.

The book is comprised of four sections. Part One, "The Great Jihad," consists of five chapters on Afghanistan. In chapter 1, "Soldiers Of Allah," the author describes the jihad against the Soviet Union with poignant details of the noble, self-sacrificing mujahideen who "would walk to battle barefoot, through deep snow, sometimes for two days and nights, carrying 90 pounds (40 kg) of mortar shells or rockets on their backs." Chapter 2, "The Bravest Men on Earth," details Afghanistan's tribal divisions, warrior code of honor, and history. Chapter 3, "Dodge City Meets the Arabian Nights," describes that Muslim faith and courage which the author considers utterly incomprehensible to Westerners:

They feared no man, and certainly not death. Each man believed that Allah stood at his right shoulder; Allah who was all-merciful, in spite of the cruel world that He had inexplicably created; Allah who would carry him to his final rest as a parent would wrap a sleepy child in his arms and take him off to bed.

Chapter 4, "Fadil the Kurd," discusses the covert CIA-sponsored training and arming of guerilla fighters to destabilize Asia. Margolis explains that after these honorable and courageous soldiers defeated the mighty Soviet Union, they were no longer needed. America cut off aid, changing their status to "Islamic terrorists" overnight. Chapter 5, "The Secret War," discusses Zia ul-Haq, the former president of Pakistan, whose aid to Afghanistan was instrumental in defeating the Soviets. The United States State Department's official explanation of his fatal helicopter crash was "technical failure," but

Margolis believes that Zia ul-Haq was assassinated cooperatively by Washington and Moscow. This chapter also discusses the Taliban's rise. The author's nonjudgmental understanding of their medievalist version of Islam is that, in reaction to communism, they desired to return to their old tribal culture. Regarding the infamous Bin Ladin, as Margolis calls him, "one must be cautious about Washington's demonizations." This chapter ends with grief and disgust at the civil wars between the Afghans following their well-earned victory over the USSR, and the mujahideens' departure to Pakistan and Kashmir.

Part Two, "Kashmir – War in Paradise," discusses the Muslim uprising against the Indian occupation of Kashmir. Chapter 6, "The Kingdom of Sikander," details Kashmir's Aryan culture, precarious mountain landscape, the region's history, and disputed borders. India, Pakistan, China, and Tibet all have claims on Kashmir. In Chapter 7, "Revolt in the Mountains," Margolis describes the Indian forces' savage human rights abuses against the Kashmiri Muslims. Chapter 8, "The Afghani," describes the author's meeting with an Egyptian soldier trained in Afghanistan who lamented the Muslim world's abandonment of the Kashmiri cause.

In Chapter 9, "Deconstructing South Asia," India worries that Kashmiri independence would inspire other secessions, a fate which both Pakistan and China wish to see happen, according to Margolis, who believes that each state's survival strategy is to expand its power at the others' expense. Hindu fascists wishing to eradicate the Islamic identity of Indian Muslims and reabsorb Pakistan into a "Greater India" reveal India's secret fear that their nation's ethnic diversity will cause the young nation-state to splinter, just like the former Soviet Union. Chapter 10, "The World's Most Dangerous Border," describes the futile and endless tension along the Line of Control between Pakistan and India-occupied Kashmir, as well as their strategic advantages and vulnerabilities. An India-Pakistan nuclear exchange would cause over 100 million casualties. In Chapter 11, "Paradise Lost," the author suggests that India would be better off without Kashmir but worries that India could use Kashmiri refugees to destabilize Pakistan.

Part Three is entitled "War in the Death Zone." Chapter 12, "The Road to Siachen," details the Chinese invasion of the Indian territory of Aksai Chin, border disputes, and road-building competitions between China and India, which draw Pakistan (China's ally) into the fight. Chapter 13, "Musa the Warrior," is a travel journal, describing the icy climate, the mountain dwellers' miserable poverty, and a visit with Pakistani military commandos. Margolis details the complexity and dangers of war at such high altitudes,

where oxygen is scarce. For example, soldiers must be transported to the front line by helicopter, one at a time. Chapter 14, "The Hatred of Brothers" explores the cultural, historical, and psychological roots of Hindu-Muslim rivalry and the collective madness of spending vast amounts of money on arms technology while the majority of citizens are malnourished and illiterate. The author spells out the necessity of ending this long-standing feud.

"The Forbidden Kingdom," chapter 15 of Part Four, "The Roof of the World," begins with the author's voyage to Tibet, "a great island in a sea of high mountains," part of which has been annexed by China. The people are under constant watch by Chinese agents. Lacking foreign arms or support, the Tibetans seem condemned to passive resistance. Margolis describes the Dalai Lama (the Buddhist leader) as a well-informed political spokesman for Tibet, not the unworldly mystic he is reputed to be.

In Chapter 16, "India Awakes," Chinese police provoke a riot by arresting a man for possessing a Dalai Lama portrait, then beat and tear-gas the demonstrators. The author discusses the CIA's covert training and financing of Tibetan exiles in India as anti-Chinese guerrillas in the 1960s. After American desires to open doors with China resulted in the betrayal of Tibet, Tibet became a nuclear testing center and military base for China.

Chapter 17, "The Clash of Titans," further discusses military tensions between India and China, as well as the political instability in neighboring Myanmar. The Chinese presence in Tibet worries India, since India's main rivers flow down from the Tibetan plateau. Meanwhile, India has become ever more aggressive with its expanding military and nuclear testing, much to China's dismay. This chapter discusses the related strategic and tactical problems of the India-China conflict over Tibet.

Chapter 18, "China under Siege," discusses Uighur ethnic resistance against Chinese occupation since the 1930s of Turkestan (now Xinjiang). Despite China's policy of torture and execution, "there is no Hollywood to publicize and romanticize the plight of Turkestani Muslims, and no Muslim version of the Dalai Lama to champion and personify their obscure cause." The chapter goes on to discuss the anti-Islamic alliance of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (Central Asia's communist states), plus China and Russia. India is hesitant to support either side of that conflict, according to Margolis.

Chapter 19, "The Fate of Asia," concludes this book with a historical military analysis of China's relationships with its neighbors and ponders the future form of China's government. The author believes that China poses no threat to the United States, although it is regionally forceful. However,

American power in Asia is destined to recede, as the United States suffers from shrinking budgets and military forces spread around the globe that are plagued with “troop exhaustion, falling morale, and deterioration of equipment.” The United States eventually will have to concede China’s legitimacy of influence in Asia, while India and China will continue to compete for regional domination.

What is missing in the book, however, is any discussion of American oil interests in Afghanistan. A subtle, condescending attitude toward Asian countries prevails in the author’s analysis, which blames every conflict primarily on such emotional factors as envy, hatred, and “fear of dismemberment,” while neglecting to mention what role American interference might play in his nuclear scenarios. The issue of Israeli influence on India is only touched upon very briefly.

Although this book is useful, it feels incomplete. Afghanistan and Pakistan are dismissed as the topic turns to India and China. No ensuing unity between the Islamic struggles in various regions is anticipated. The Islamic struggle against the Soviet Union was noble and holy, but when those same soldiers threaten India, they are blamed for endangering the life of the planet. In the beginning, the author’s thoughts on Islam and Muslims were very positive, whereas toward the end, when discussing India and China, he uses the negative term *Islamic fundamentalism* on the same level as *Hindu fundamentalism*, seeming to prefer overall the friendly charms of Tibetan Buddhism. The author’s belief in God seems to have been shattered by the ugly display of Afghani Muslims against each other after they had won their freedom. Nevertheless, Muslims can and should take note of his warnings and insights in order to proceed more wisely in their political endeavors.

Maria Hussain, Research Assistant
Whyislam.org
Piscataway, New Jersey