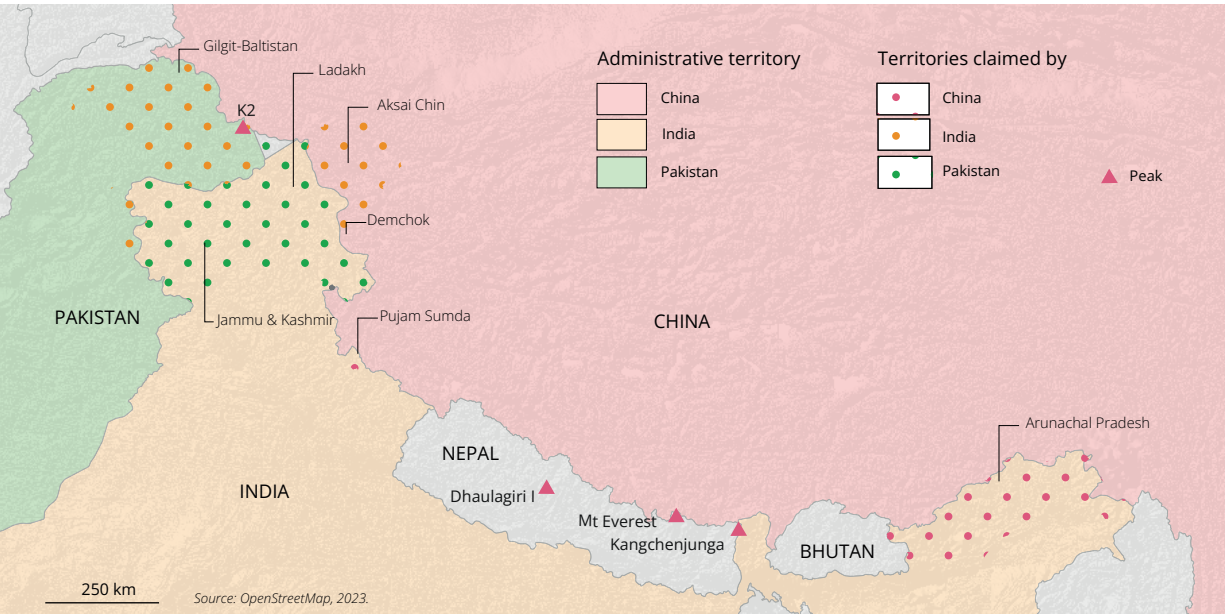


## Mountains: a theatre of territorial claims



Mountains are highly strategic areas with many geopolitical stakes. The altitude and topography can give a tactical advantage and towns and fortresses were built high up in the mountain over history to insure impregnability, resisting enemy attacks and to monitor border-areas. It is also historically a place where many ethnicities and cultures meet, especially as mountains often constitute border-areas. Although some populations moved down to the plains over time, the mountains have always been places of conflict. Maps show two examples: first the territorial disputes between China, India and Pakistan over Kashmir and Pradesh and second the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

These three continental Asian powers lay claim to several Himalayan territories belonging to their respective neighbours. The presence of ethnic minorities, cultural and religious differences, as well as previous historical affiliations of these territories are part of the reasons for these tensions. The fossil fuels and mineral resources in the disputed areas also play an important part in the conflict, as the economic stakes are high. Sovereignty over the mountains is also a key issue in asserting

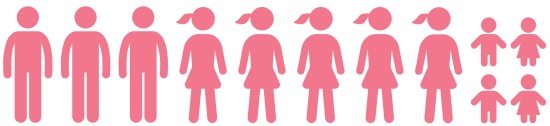
regional authority. In the case of armed conflicts between two states, mountains are strategic places where population movements can be limited and controlled.

Nagorno-Karabakh has been a disputed region in the Caucasus for over thirty years. Despite being mainly populated by Christians Armenians, it was annexed to Azerbaijan by the Soviet authorities in 1921. After the fall of the USSR, it unilaterally proclaimed its independence, which led to a bloody war that caused more than 30,000 deaths. In 2020, a new conflict erupted, causing 7,000 deaths and increasing the hatred on both sides. On September 19, 2023, the Azerbaijani army led a military offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh. Within 24 hours the local authorities had capitulated, without any action from the Russian corps, less active in the region since the war in Ukraine started. This operation came after the blockade of the Lachin Corridor by the Azerbaijani army for 10 months, which had left the people of Nagorno-Karabakh without any support from Armenia or NGOs, causing a shortage of food, water, electricity, gas and medical help.

## Armenian exodus statistics following Azerbaijan attacks since september 2023

About 100 000 refugees on 120 000 residents in Nagorno-Karabakh

Most of the refugees are women and children. They are in a precarious situation. In many cases, emergency care is necessary.



Since the blockade of the Lachin corridor in december 2022, residents of the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave suffered food shortages and were no longer able to receive hospital care

Five days later, the Lachin Corridor was reopened to allow passage for the tens of thousands of Armenians fleeing to Armenia. Reminiscent of the Armenian genocide carried out by the Turkish government between 1915 and 1918, most of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh fled by fear of an ethnic cleansing after months of starvation and violence. For the past decades, their cultural and religious freedom had already been restricted by the Azerbaijani authorities.

## Geopolitical conflict in the mountains: the case of Nagorno-Karabakh

