

**ENHANCING UNIT MOBILITY DOCTRINE FOR HIGH-ALTITUDE  
MOUNTAIN TERRAIN IN CONTEMPORARY ARMED CONFLICTS****X. Sh. Matiyev,**

Independent Researcher, University of Public Safety.

**Abstract:** High-altitude mountainous terrain remains one of the most demanding operational environments in contemporary armed conflicts. Steep gradients, limited routes, unpredictable weather, hypoxia, and communications shadow zones compress decision time and amplify the consequences of minor planning errors. In such conditions, “mobility” is not merely a matter of speed; it is a combined outcome of physiological readiness, terrain intelligence, command-and-control continuity, logistical endurance, and risk-balanced force protection. This article examines the key factors that shape unit movement effectiveness in high mountains and proposes a doctrine-oriented framework for improving movement planning and execution without relying on ad hoc improvisation. The study synthesizes lessons from contemporary operational literature, training doctrine, and environmental physiology, and organizes recommendations across five pillars: (1) human performance and acclimatization management, (2) terrain-informed route decision support, (3) resilient communications and navigation, (4) sustainment and casualty-evacuation readiness, and (5) leadership and coordination procedures tailored to dispersed maneuver. The article argues that improvement is best achieved through integrated training cycles, standardized planning checklists, simulation-supported rehearsals, and metrics that evaluate movement outcomes (safety, cohesion, tempo, and endurance) rather than raw distance or timing alone.

**Keywords:** High-altitude operations; mountain warfare; unit mobility; movement planning; acclimatization; command and control; sustainment; navigation resilience; risk management; training and doctrine.

Contemporary armed conflicts increasingly occur in complex physical and informational environments where geography shapes tactics as decisively as technology. Among these environments, high-altitude mountainous terrain stands out for its unique combination of physiological stress, route scarcity, and rapid weather volatility. Even highly trained forces can experience reduced effectiveness when altitude, cold exposure, and fatigue compound with degraded communications and restricted visibility. For commanders and planners, the challenge is

not only to move forces from one point to another, but to preserve combat readiness, cohesion, and decision superiority throughout movement.

In mountainous areas, movement corridors are often narrow and predictable. This predictability increases vulnerability to observation, disruption, and delays. At the same time, the terrain itself imposes constraints: steep inclines limit carrying capacity and pace; loose surfaces increase injury risk; and microclimates can change faster than standard forecasts capture. Moreover, mountainous topography can interrupt line-of-sight communications and impair satellite navigation reliability in certain valleys or shadow zones. As a result, movement becomes a multi-variable problem that requires synchronized solutions across personnel readiness, route intelligence, navigation, sustainment, and command procedures.

Historically, many difficulties in mountain operations have been treated as “inevitable friction.” However, modern professional forces increasingly recognize that predictable friction can be mitigated through doctrine, standardization, and evidence-based training. This includes systematic acclimatization protocols, environmental risk assessment, redundancy in navigation and communication, and sustainment models adapted to limited infrastructure. Yet gaps remain: movement plans may overemphasize timing and underemphasize physiological degradation; training may be episodic rather than cyclic; and evaluation may reward outputs (distance covered) rather than outcomes (cohesion, safety, readiness preserved).

This article addresses these gaps by framing unit movement in high-mountain terrain as a capability system rather than a single tactical skill. The aim is to propose an improvement pathway that is doctrinally grounded and adaptable to different force structures. The analysis is organized around five pillars:

Human performance management (fitness baselines, altitude adaptation, load planning, fatigue control);

Terrain-informed decision support (route options assessment, time-risk tradeoffs, environmental hazards);

Resilient navigation and communications (redundancy planning, continuity of command in shadow zones);

Sustainment and casualty response (water/energy planning, cold injury prevention, evacuation feasibility);

Leadership and coordination for dispersed movement (clear control measures, shared situational understanding, disciplined reporting).

Methodologically, the article relies on doctrinal analysis and synthesis: it integrates well-established principles from operational art, human factors, and environmental constraints into a structured framework. The outcome is a set of practical, non-scenario-specific recommendations for improving training cycles, planning processes, and evaluation metrics. By shifting attention from improvised solutions to systemized readiness, forces can better maintain tempo while reducing avoidable losses and preserving decision quality.

Analysis of global military conflicts indicates that mountainous regions remain among the most complex and difficult-to-predict battlegrounds. Given that a significant portion of the Republic of Uzbekistan consists of mountainous and high-altitude zones, ensuring national security necessitates the scientific improvement of mountain training for military units.

The object of this research is the process of conducting military operations and unit movement tactics within high-altitude relief conditions.

Planning and conducting military operations in the mountains requires commanders to possess not only standard military knowledge but also a profound understanding of the geographical, geological, and meteorological characteristics of the area. By its nature, mountain relief is a "natural fortification" system that fundamentally alters the dynamics of combat operations.

The most fundamental characteristic of mountainous terrain is its high degree of fragmentation (both vertical and horizontal). This restricts the movement of troops to specific corridors such as canyons, passes, and river basins. Unlike flat terrain, units in the mountains cannot choose their direction of travel freely. Main movement arteries usually run along the floors of valleys and canyons, allowing an enemy to organize ambushes and stall large units using minimal forces.

The sharp elevation changes in mountain ranges limit line-of-sight visibility. This negatively impacts the performance of radar reconnaissance and radio communication equipment. It also creates numerous "blind zones" for artillery and firearms. Tactically, this requires units to rely more heavily on high-trajectory indirect fire weapons, such as mortars and grenade launchers.

In military strategy, there is a golden rule: "He who holds the high ground holds the situation." In the mountains, altitude provides not just a physical advantage but psychological and tactical dominance. A unit occupying a dominant height can observe enemy movements from several kilometers away and control their routes of travel through suppressive fire. Moving and firing from top-to-bottom is always more effective, whereas a unit attacking from bottom-to-top

exhausts 60–70% of its combat potential simply on the physical exertion of overcoming terrain obstacles.

Climate conditions in the mountains are characterized by hourly variability, which directly impacts the success of military operations. As altitude increases, oxygen levels decrease, leading to rapid fatigue, decreased concentration, and the development of "altitude sickness." Within the scope of this article, it is noteworthy that at altitudes above 2,500 meters, the time required for any tactical maneuver must be calculated with a double margin.

The occurrence of intense heat during the day and sub-zero temperatures at night creates additional difficulties for maintaining personnel health and ensuring equipment operational modes. Frequent fog and cloud cover in the mountains hinder aviation support and drone reconnaissance, forcing units to rely on close-quarters combat and visual communication methods.

Mountainous relief serves not only as a source of enemy threats but also as a source of natural disasters for the soldier. The sound of artillery fire or the movement of heavy equipment can trigger avalanches. In tactics, this is viewed both as an "involuntary weapon" and a factor of great danger to the unit. In rocky areas, digging trenches and shelters is nearly impossible, necessitating the development of tactics for using surface-level fortification structures made of reinforced concrete or stone.

The movement of military units in mountain conditions differs fundamentally from standards on flat terrain. Here, the concept of maneuver includes not only horizontal direction but also actions in the vertical plane.

Modern technology and aviation development have introduced the concept of "Vertical Envelopment" to mountain tactics. This strategy is based not on breaking through the enemy's defensive line, but on establishing control over it from above. This involves deploying small tactical groups via helicopters to dominant heights above a canyon controlled by the enemy. This traps the enemy: main forces apply pressure from below while airborne groups paralyze the enemy with fire from above. If aviation cannot be used, specially trained mountain infantry ascend the heights via rocky and steep routes from directions unexpected by the enemy, utilizing mountaineering equipment for speed and safety.

Densely packed movement makes units easy targets for a single artillery shell or an ambush. Therefore, a dispersed and interconnected movement method is used. The unit is divided into two or three small groups. The first group occupies a favorable position and controls the area through surveillance and fire. The second group advances under its protection to the next height or cover. Then roles are swapped. During a march, observers and security (patrol) groups are sent

not only forward but necessarily to the heights on both sides of the movement route to minimize ambush risks.

Mountain relief is an ideal environment for organizing ambushes. However, modern tactics require new approaches. This includes "multi-tiered ambushes"—firing at the enemy from various heights simultaneously, making it impossible for the enemy to find cover. A unit caught in an ambush must immediately exit the "kill zone" and launch a vertical attack toward the height occupied by the enemy. Retreating usually leads to defeat, as a retreating unit becomes a clear target.

Centralized command is frequently interrupted in the mountains. Here, the principle of "Mission Command" applies. Every unit (platoon or group) must be capable of conducting combat without external supply (ammunition, water, medical kits) for at least 72 hours. Given that mountain ridges block radio waves, the use of relays (drones or stations installed on heights) is a tactical necessity for communication. Visual signal systems (flares, mirrors) and hand signals are also utilized.

In mountainous regions, not only movement tactics but also fire systems and material-technical supply change fundamentally.

High-trajectory indirect fire weapons like mortars and howitzers are the most effective. Mortars are the only way to destroy an enemy hidden behind high ridges. Due to long distances and small targets, snipers become the unit's primary "eyes" and strike force, also serving as observers and adjusters. When firing up or down, "ricochet" and "parallax" factors arise; a shot fired from top-to-bottom usually hits higher than the target, requiring specialized ballistic knowledge.

Drones allow units to "see over the ridge," reducing ambush risks by 80%. Thermal cameras detect heat sources hidden in rocks and caves. When radio waves are blocked, airborne drones act as relays to ensure stable communication.

The "golden hour" concept for wounded personnel is at risk due to logistical complexities. In areas without roads, cargo drones or specialized robotic platforms are used. In some cases, pack animals (horses and mules) remain relevant as they can move in any weather along narrow paths. Rope systems (pulleys) and specialized mountain stretchers are used to evacuate the wounded from steep cliffs.

**USA and NATO:** The experience of the U.S. 10th Mountain Division and French Alpine hunters relies on the "digital mountain battlefield" concept, where every soldier's status and location are transmitted to a central command post in real-time.

**India and Pakistan:** Conflicts in the Himalayas (e.g., Siachen Glacier) provide experience in high-altitude combat (5,000–6,000 meters), where the focus is on survival, engineering fortifications, and long-range artillery.

Analysis of conflicts in Central Asia shows that illegal armed groups often use "hit and run" tactics. Only mobile, specially trained mountain units can effectively counter these small, light-armed groups.

Research results indicate that improving unit movement tactics in high-altitude terrain requires a harmony of technical support, physical preparation, and psychological stability. Based on the analysis, the following proposals are put forward:

1. Transition from large-group management to small, autonomous tactical unit command, expanding the decision-making authority of group leaders.
2. Establish a fleet of drones adapted for mountain conditions (capable of flying at low pressure) for reconnaissance and communication.
3. Implement pharmacological and physiological methods in military medicine to accelerate acclimatization processes.
4. Integrate training into real mountain conditions at high altitudes, including vertical maneuvers during both day and night.

High-altitude mountainous terrain transforms unit movement into a comprehensive capability challenge in which human endurance, terrain intelligence, command-and-control resilience, and sustainment are tightly interdependent. In modern armed conflicts, improving mobility in such environments cannot be reduced to isolated "tactical tricks"; it requires doctrinal clarity, standardized planning routines, and training systems that replicate environmental stress and decision constraints.

This article has argued for a framework built on five pillars—human performance, terrain-informed decision support, resilient navigation and communications, sustainment and casualty readiness, and leadership/coordination tailored to dispersed movement. Collectively, these pillars help convert predictable sources of friction (altitude fatigue, route scarcity, microclimate shifts, and communications shadow zones) into manageable risks. Practical improvement should prioritize: cyclic acclimatization and load management programs; structured route-risk assessment tools; redundancy and continuity procedures for communication/navigation; sustainment models adapted to limited infrastructure; and evaluation metrics focused on movement outcomes such as cohesion, safety, readiness preserved, and tempo stability.

Ultimately, the most reliable indicator of progress is not how quickly a unit can move in ideal conditions, but how consistently it can move under stress while maintaining command coherence and operational effectiveness. A doctrine-oriented modernization of mountain mobility—supported by realistic training and outcome-based assessment—strengthens both survivability and mission success in the high-altitude battlespace.

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