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1 Manifestations and mechanisms of the Karakoram glacier 2 Anomaly

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12 **Global-scale glacier shrinkage is one of the most prominent signs of ongoing climatic change.**
13 **However, important differences in glacier response exist at the regional scale, and evidence**
14 **has accumulated that one particular region stands out: the Karakoram. In the past two**
15 **decades, the region has shown balanced to slightly positive glacier budgets, an increase in**
16 **glacier ice-flow speeds, stable to partially advancing glacier termini, and widespread glacier**
17 **surge activity. This is in stark contrast to the rest of High Mountain Asia, where glacier**
18 **retreat and slowdown dominate, and glacier surging is largely absent. Termed the *Karakoram***
19 ***Anomaly*, recent observations show that the anomalous glacier behaviour partially extends**
20 **to the nearby Western Kun Lun and Pamir. Several complementary explanations have now**
21 **been presented for explaining the Anomaly's deeper causes, but the understanding is far from**
22 **being complete. Whether the Anomaly will continue to exist in the coming decades remains**
23 **unclear, but its long-term persistence seems unlikely in light of the considerable warming**
24 **anticipated by current projections of future climate.**

25 The Karakoram is the mountain range spanning the borders of Pakistan, India, and China,
26 with extremities reaching into Afghanistan and Tajikistan (Figure 1a). The region is geomorpho-
27 logically very dynamic¹, with intense interactions between tectonic, fluvial, and mass movement
28 processes. The extremely steep and high topography, characteristic of the region, hosts some of the

29 tallest mountains on Earth, and very dynamic glaciers (Box 1). According to current inventories²,
30 the region features roughly 13,700 glaciers, covering an area of about 22,800 km². The total glacier
31 ice volume is estimated to be in the order of 2,200 km³, or about 30% of the total for High Mountain
32 Asia³.

33 Together with snowmelt, runoff from glaciers is the primary water source for the region's
34 rivers⁴, which include tributaries of both the Tarim and the Indus (Figure 1a). This makes the
35 Karakoram's glaciers of utmost importance in supplying water to millions of people downstream⁵⁻⁷.
36 Glacier melt has been shown⁸ to be of particular importance during periods of drought stress, and
37 hence to contribute to social stability in an otherwise conflict-prone region. Against this back-
38 ground, characterizing the region's glacier evolution is of great relevance.

39 A peculiar behaviour of Karakoram glaciers was already suspected in early reports⁹⁻¹² of
40 19th century explorers. It is difficult to ascertain, however, whether or not the reports were not
41 biased by the perception of an unusually dramatic landscape. Modern observations, instead, are
42 more conclusive, and indeed indicate that – at least for the past decades – Karakoram's glaciers
43 experienced a different evolution when compared to other regions on Earth. The most important
44 difference is the regional glacier mass budget. At the worldwide scale, glaciers outside the Green-
45 land and Antarctic ice sheets have lost an estimated¹³ 9,625±7,975 Gt (1 Gt = 10¹² kg) between
46 1961 and 2016, or 480±200 kg m⁻² per year. This is in direct contrast to what is reported for the
47 central parts of the Karakoram, where most recent estimates¹⁴ indicate a mass gain in the order of
48 120±140 kg m⁻² per year. This slight glacier mass gain has likely contributed to an increase in ice
49 flow velocities observable at the regional scale¹⁵.

50 The frequent occurrence of glacier surges¹⁶ is a second distinguishing characteristic of the
51 Karakoram. Glacier surges are irregular phases of ten- to hundredfold acceleration in glacier flow,
52 typically lasting between a few months to years¹⁷. Although surges occur in other regions on Earth
53 as well (including Alaska and Svalbard, for example), they are absent for most other parts of High
54 Mountain Asia¹⁸. In an overview from the 1930s¹⁹, such behaviour was attributed to “accidental
55 changes”, and was thought to be responsible for the high number of river-floods caused by the
56 outburst of glacier-dammed lakes. Today, various mechanisms have been proposed to explain
57 glacier surges initiation and clustering (Box 2) but the understanding is far from being complete.
58 Similarly, it remains unclear whether the frequency of Karakoram glacier surges has changed over

59 time, although indications exist²⁰ that surge-activity might have increased after 1990.

60 The above peculiarities in glacier behaviour are often referred to as the *Karakoram Anomaly*,
61 a term coined in the mid-2000s (ref. ²¹) when indications for anomalous glacier behaviour started to
62 emerge (see Supplementary Section S1 for a brief history on how the idea of a Karakoram Anomaly
63 developed). In the following, we detail the ways in which this Anomaly expresses itself, and review
64 the mechanisms that have been proposed to explain it. We distinguish between early, partially
65 speculative explanations, and more recent, holistic interpretations. We highlight the remaining
66 gaps in the explanation chains, speculate about the Anomaly's implications and future evolution,
67 and suggest avenues for future research.

68 **Manifestations of the Karakoram Anomaly**

69 Slight glacier mass gains and widespread surging activity are the two most prominent features of
70 the Karakoram region. Evidence for the former has accumulated since satellite-based, regional-
71 estimates of glacier surface elevation changes have become available^{22–26}. Although patterns of
72 glacier changes are spatially variable (Figure 2), there is now general agreement that the Karako-
73 ram experienced balanced glacier budgets, or even marginal glacier mass gains in the early 21th
74 century^{13,14,27}. The most recent studies^{14,26,28}, however, indicate that the signal of positive glacier
75 budgets is not centred over the Karakoram itself, but rather over its eastern part and the Western
76 Kun Lun (circles in Figure 2; uncertainties shown in Supplementary Fig. S1). The western part of
77 the Karakoram, showing balanced mass budgets, is thus to be understood as a region of transition
78 between negative mass balances in the Pamir and slightly positive mass balances in Western Kun
79 Lun. Interestingly, regional-scale surface-elevation changes neither show significant differences
80 between debris-covered and clean-ice glaciers^{22,29} nor between surge-type glaciers and glaciers
81 that do not surge²⁴.

82 The slightly positive mass budgets in parts of the Karakoram and Western Kun Lun are
83 also indirectly confirmed by long-term trends in glacier ice-flow velocities (arrows in Figure 2;
84 uncertainties shown in Supplementary Figure S1). Even if glacier-specific velocity changes can
85 be difficult to interpret because of large seasonal and interannual variability^{16,30}, analyses over the
86 period 2000-2016 show^{15,31} velocity changes in the order of 0 to +20% per decade. Regional-
87 wide averages for the Karakoram and the Western Kun Lun are of $+3.6\pm 1.2\%$ and $+4.0\pm 2.1\%$

88 per decade, respectively¹⁵. This trend in ice flow velocities was shown to be unrelated to the
89 region's surging glaciers¹⁵, and thus interpreted as an indication of increased ice deformation and
90 sliding due to glacier thickening. The thickening is in turn consistent with the positive glacier
91 mass budgets. The findings of accelerating glacier flow are in contrast to what has been observed
92 in other parts of High Mountain Asia, where ice-flow slowdown dominates^{15,32}.

93 The dynamic adjustments to positive mass budgets are also manifested in the majority of
94 the region's glaciers showing stable or advancing termini^{33,34}. Albeit not resulting in significant
95 net change in glacier area³⁵, these changes are again in contrast to the rest of High Mountain
96 Asia, where glacier-terminus retreat and area loss largely prevails^{36,37}. It must be noted, however,
97 that the detection and interpretation of changes in the region's glacier extents are complicated by
98 the widespread debris-coverage³³. The debris-covered area itself remained virtually unchanged
99 in the central part of the Karakoram over the last four decades³⁸, and increased by about 11%
100 over a larger extent and the shorter 2001-2010 period². This further corroborates the balanced
101 (slightly negative) mass budgets reported for the central (eastern) part of the Karakoram¹⁴, given
102 that positive and negative mass budgets would be expected to result in a reduction and an extension
103 of the debris-covered area, respectively.

104 Many terminus advances and changes in velocity may also be ascribed to glacier surges. The
105 phenomenon is uncommon elsewhere in High Mountain Asia but is widespread in the Karakoram¹⁶
106 and the nearby regions^{31,39,40}. It has been suggested that this clustering of surge-type glaciers
107 might be related to particular climatic and geometric conditions that lead to periodic enthalpy
108 imbalances¹⁸, but the specific controls on surging remain unclear. This is also because data on
109 englacial and subglacial conditions, understood to be pivotal in controlling surge cycles (Box 2),
110 are lacking almost entirely¹⁶. The frequency of surge events seems to have increased in recent
111 decades²⁰, potentially correlating with a period of warming atmospheric temperatures⁴⁰ and in-
112 creasing precipitations²⁰. No definitive connection between surge activity and changes in external
113 forcing has however been established yet⁴¹, and it is still difficult to discern whether the reported
114 increase in surge frequency is related to a real environmental trend, or to an improved ability to
115 detect surges through advances in observational techniques.

116 A further open question is for how long the observed anomalous behaviour might have per-
117 sisted. Early works based on sparse field observations suggest a retreat of the Karakoram glaciers

118 between 1940 and the 1960s (ref. ⁴²), with periods of slight advances in the late 1970s and 1990s
119 (ref. ⁴³). Meta-analysis of reports for glacier changes across High Mountain Asia, however, indi-
120 cates that no significant change occurred since the 1960s³⁷. The only field-based mass balance esti-
121 mate available for the 20th century in the region⁴⁴ (Siachen glacier) is negative but very uncertain⁴⁵.
122 Satellite-based estimates, on the other hand, reach back to 1973, and suggest that nearly-balanced
123 glacier budgets might have persisted since then for the Karakoram^{46,47}, the western Kun Lun^{48,49},
124 and the eastern Pamir^{50,51}. Also in this case, however, uncertainties are large, and the temporal res-
125 olution of such estimates is low – typically only providing information for the period 1973-2000,
126 or for 1973 and later. All of this makes it difficult to establish temporal variations in the Anomaly’s
127 magnitude and extent.

128 **Early explanations of anomalous behaviour**

129 Early explanations^{52,53} for a potentially-anomalous behaviour of Karakoram glaciers often invoked
130 the substantial debris cover that characterize the glaciers of the region, although it was known that
131 debris covered glaciers were widespread in other parts of High Mountain Asia as well. The debris
132 cover was not only suggested to significantly suppress ice melt in the ablation zones, thus pre-
133 venting glacier wastage and retreat, but was also suspected²¹ to make it difficult to detect glacier
134 changes. The morphology of the glaciers in the Karakoram remained one of the main explana-
135 tions when the idea of a Karakoram Anomaly was proposed in the mid-2000s: the confinement
136 of the main glacier trunks by characteristically high and steep headwalls (Box 1) was suggested
137 to cause an “elevation effect”⁴³, i.e. an orographic enhancement of high-altitude precipitation and
138 a related downslope concentration of snowfall driven by avalanches. Combined with an all-year-
139 round accumulation regime, the effect would cause limited sensitivity to warming, since a rise in
140 temperature would only result in a small decrease of the accumulation area.

141 Indications of a climatic control for the Karakoram’s peculiar glacier behaviour emerged in
142 the early 2000s. Archer and Fowler^{54,55} analysed 1961-2000 trends in temperature and precipita-
143 tion for meteorological stations in the region, and identified a significant increases in winter, sum-
144 mer and annual precipitation⁵⁴ as well as a lowering of summer mean and minimum temperatures⁵⁵.
145 These observations were independently supported^{56,57} by data obtained from tree rings, which in-
146 dicated that the western Himalaya saw pre-monsoon (March-May) cooling in the latter part of the

147 20th century⁵⁶. For the Karakoram, the 20th century was even shown⁵⁷ to have been the wettest
148 over the past millennium. Combined, the decrease in summer temperatures and increase in pre-
149 cipitation was suggested to be consistent with positive glacier mass balances in the region, an
150 interpretation further supported by the simultaneous decrease in summer river flows⁵⁴. This line of
151 argument was echoed and amplified by a number of subsequent studies^{20,22,33,58,59}, making it the
152 generally-accepted hypothesis for the Karakoram Anomaly by about 2010.

153 The deeper causes of the observed temperature and precipitation changes, however, remained
154 elusive. A preliminary analysis⁵⁴ identified a significant positive (negative) correlation between
155 winter (summer) precipitation and the North Atlantic Oscillation, whilst later investigations⁶⁰
156 showed that the westerly jet stream over central Asia – a central mechanism for regional moisture
157 transport during winter (Box 3) – had strengthened and shifted to both lower elevations and lower
158 latitudes between 1979 and 2001. These observations remain central to present-day understanding
159 of potential drivers of change (see *Current understanding of the Anomaly's drivers*).

160 Concerning the widespread occurrence of glacier surges, it was recognized very early that
161 substantial basal sliding must be involved to maintain high rates of glacier flow. Based on a set of
162 observations collected during the 1930s, for example, Finsterwalder⁶¹ suggested that the glaciers of
163 the Nanga Parbat area mainly move through “blockschollen-motion”, i.e. sliding-dominated plug-
164 flow, primarily resisted by drag at the glacier margins. The important contribution of basal sliding
165 to the total motion of both surge-type and non-surging glaciers in the Karakoram was confirmed
166 repeatedly through both ground-based^{62–66} and remote-sensing observations⁶⁷. Whether and why
167 such high sliding rates are peculiar to the region, however, remains largely unknown.

168 To explain surge initiation, the literature generally focuses on two main mechanisms, that
169 invoke changes in either thermal or hydrological conditions as the trigger (Box 2). Which of the
170 two is predominant for the Karakoram has been debated⁶⁸. Quincey et al.⁵⁹ argued in favour of
171 thermal control, noticing that surges develop over several years and that no seasonality can be
172 discerned in their initiation. In contrast, Copland et al.²⁰ favoured hydrological control since the
173 active phase of Karakoram surges seems to be short-lived and separated by decades-long phases of
174 quiescence. To explain the increase in surging activity after the 2000s, Hewitt⁶⁸ speculated about
175 the role of changes in climate, stating that “*response to climate change seems the only explanation*
176 *for [the] events at [four tributaries of] Panmah Glacier [Central Karakoram]*”. Demonstrating

177 such a climatic control, however, is difficult, and evidence remains scant.

178 **Current understanding of the Anomaly's drivers**

179 Whilst a climatic control on surging activity is debated, the positive glacier budgets in and around
180 the Karakoram must be associated to the meteorological forcing. Compared to other parts of High
181 Mountain Asia, the latter must either favour more accumulation, less ablation, or a combination
182 of both. Currently, a number of potential explanations are found in the literature, and include
183 increased snowfall in the accumulation zones, or a suite of factors – including increased cloud
184 cover and a higher surface albedo – that reduce the net energy available for the melting of snow
185 and ice.

186 The Karakoram's general meteorological characteristics are well established^{69–71} (Box 3). In
187 winter, when the westerly jet is located south of the Karakoram, mid-latitude cyclones (or *wester-*
188 *lies*) control the region's weather^{72,73}. Their associated fronts interact with the extreme topography
189 and can provide heavy mountain precipitation⁷⁴. An increase in strength and frequency of such
190 westerly-dominated precipitation has been identified⁷⁵ for the period 1979-2010, and seems to
191 have led to a slight increase in the region's winter snowfall⁷⁶. This is in contrast to other regions
192 in High Mountain Asia, where snowfall trends are mostly negative⁶⁹. The contrasting trends in the
193 geopotential height between different parts of High Mountain Asia (Figure 2 in ref. ⁷⁶) have been
194 suggested to be at the origin of the changes in westerlies-driven precipitation events^{70,75,76}, but the
195 underlying mechanisms are still unclear. The precipitation changes, in turn, have been proposed
196 to exert a strong control on regional glacier mass balances^{69,70,77}. It has to be noted, however, that
197 precipitation trends are uncertain and mostly non-significant⁷⁸, and that no increase in Karakoram
198 total precipitation is evident in recent meteorological reanalyses (Figure 3b and Supplementary
199 Figure S2b+d).

200 In summer, the interplay between the monsoon and mid-latitude westerlies is complex, and
201 results in a high inter-annual precipitation variability⁶⁹. This variability has been associated^{70,71} to
202 modulations of the *Karakoram / Western Tibetan Vortex*, an atmospheric structure extending from
203 the near surface to almost the tropopause⁷⁰). Temperatures show variability as well, and for the
204 latter part of the 20th century, an increase in diurnal temperature ranges has been inferred from both
205 weather stations^{55,79} and tree-rings⁵⁶. This increase has been related to large-scale deforestation,

206 which caused a lowering of the soil's thermal inertia due to reduced water infiltration⁵⁶. A cooling
207 of summer temperatures was observed concomitantly. The cooling was particularly pronounced in
208 the 1960-1980 period^{55,79}, occurred despite a general warming trend⁷⁹, and has been attributed to
209 a weakening of the monsoon^{70,71}. It is this summer cooling that has been suggested^{55,70} to be a
210 particularly important driver for the balanced glacier budget of the Karakoram in recent decades.
211 It shall be noted, however, that work from tree-ring chronology at one high-elevation site⁸⁰ did not
212 provide any indication for Karakoram temperatures being out of phase with other regions in High
213 Mountain Asia over centennial timescales.

214 Changes in glacier accumulation and ablation have also been suggested⁸¹ to be linked to
215 increased evaporation in Northwest China during the 20th century. This increased evaporation –
216 caused by a dramatic increase in irrigation after 1960 (ref. ⁸²) – has caused a rise in atmospheric
217 moisture, which in turn seems to have resulted in more frequent summer snowfalls in the Western
218 Kun Lun and the Pamir. The increased atmospheric moisture also increased cloudiness and reduced
219 incoming shortwave radiation⁸¹ (Figure 3c), thus reducing ice and snow ablation. This hypothesis
220 is finding support in both observational records and modelling^{76,83}, but cannot be considered as
221 conclusive yet.

222 Although often assessed independently, the monsoon-weakening and irrigation hypotheses
223 are in fact inherently interconnected. The weakening of the monsoon has been suggested to be
224 a partial consequence of changes in irrigation itself^{84,85}: Increased irrigation causes changes in
225 near-surface heat fluxes, which lead to a cooling of both the surface and the lower troposphere;
226 the troposphere cooling, in turn, decreases the geopotential height over the irrigated regions, thus
227 affecting atmospheric circulation including the westerly jet and the monsoon⁸⁴. Such changes
228 in large-scale circulation would partly explain regional differences in glacier response, and the
229 different glacier budgets in the Karakoram with respect to other regions in High Mountain Asia.

230 Regional differences in glacier response are also affected by spatial variations in climate
231 sensitivity⁸⁶. The response of glacier mass balance to a given change in temperature, for example,
232 was shown to vary⁸⁷, and to correlate well with observed mass budgets itself. These differences
233 can be explained by regional variations in the glaciers' energy balance. Both field-^{88,89} and model-
234 based⁹⁰ investigations, in fact, indicate that net shortwave radiation is more important in driving
235 glacier melt in the Karakoram than it is in other parts of High Mountain Asia. Since the shortwave

236 radiation budget is decisively controlled by surface albedo and cloudiness, this partly explains
237 why glaciers in the Karakoram might be particularly susceptible to changes in albedo-enhancing
238 summer snowfalls. The increase in summer snowfall and the decrease in net shortwave radiation
239 observed in the Karakoram over the last decades (Figure 3c) might thus have favoured positive
240 glacier budgets, whilst the increases in both temperature and net longwave radiation in other parts
241 of High Mountain Asia (Figure 3a+d) favoured glacier mass loss.

242 **Knowledge gaps, implications, and a look into the future**

243 The Karakoram's balanced to slightly-positive glacier mass budgets are the strongest argument
244 for an anomalous behaviour, both at the scale of High Mountain Asia and globally. Moreover,
245 enough evidence now exists to show that these close-to-balance glacier budgets partially extend to
246 the neighbouring Western Kun Lun and Pamir. When calling for an Anomaly, however, qualita-
247 tively different glacier behaviour must be distinguished from regional characteristics. Large, low-
248 elevation and debris-covered glacier termini; strong verticality resulting in pronounced avalanches
249 nourishment; and even the high number of surge-type glaciers might, in fact, rather be considered
250 as a characteristic of the region than an anomaly⁹¹.

251 Figure 4 provides an overview of the process-chain related to the Anomaly, with a focus on
252 the evolution observed during the past decades. In a nutshell, the interplay between land cover,
253 atmospheric processes, and climate change (Figure 4, point 1) is suggested to have led to summer
254 cooling, increased snowfalls, and reduced net energy available for glacier melt (Figure 4.2). In
255 conjunction with specific glacier properties (Figure 4.3), a combination of these effects resulted
256 in glacier advance, constant to slightly-accelerating glacier ice flow, and insignificant changes in
257 both total glacier area and debris cover (Figure 4.4). This, in turn, reduced downstream flows,
258 and affected glacier-related hazards in some occasions (Figure 4.5). The mechanisms that control
259 the region's glacier peculiar behaviour, including glacier surging for example, are however far
260 from being completely understood. Based on our expert judgement and the reviewed literature, we
261 assigned a relative level of confidence to the degree to which individual elements of Figure 4 are
262 characterized or understood.

263 The lack of long-term observations, for instance, causes uncertainties in the trend-estimates
264 for factors that drive glacier change. In the Karakoram and nearby regions, this is particularly true

265 for meteorological parameters (Figure 4.2). Air-temperature trends obtained from high-resolution
266 climate models⁷⁶, for example, show large differences when compared to climate reanalysis products⁹²
267 (Supplementary Figure S2a,c). Precipitation trends show better agreement, although the trends
268 themselves are less certain (Supplementary Figure S2b,d). High-altitude precipitation is particu-
269 larly poorly quantified, both in terms of temporal and spatial variability, as well as in elevation
270 dependency. Together with the difficulty in characterizing snow transport by wind and avalanches,
271 this makes the estimates of glacier accumulation highly uncertain. The identification of trends is
272 also complicated by the region's high inter-annual climate variability. The latter results in low
273 statistical significance (Supplementary Figure S3) and slow trend emergence, which both compli-
274 cate attributive studies. The use of climate model ensembles, rather than individual products, can
275 increase the robustness of such studies, but cannot overcome the lack of ground-truth information.
276 This lack decisively affects the level of confidence with which drivers of the Karakoram's glacier
277 budgets can be identified.

278 The present-day understanding of the mechanisms that control the region's glacier behaviour
279 is often based on model simulations which use simplified parameterisations for representing im-
280 portant glaciological (Figure 4.3) or atmospheric (Figure 4.1) processes⁹³. Both introduce uncer-
281 tainties that are difficult to quantify. The continuous development towards models with higher
282 spatial resolution and complexity is unlikely to resolve this. Whilst some driving processes might
283 be indeed better represented in higher-resolution models, a strong need remains for direct obser-
284 vations that support model calibration and validation. Crucially, such observations need to cover
285 time spans pertinent to glacier changes, and need to be representative in both resolution and spatial
286 coverage. Such observations also hold the key for increasing the understanding of individual pro-
287 cesses and process-chains, which in turn is the prerequisite for improving model parametrisations.
288 Bridging the gap between in-situ observations and model simulations remains one of the major
289 challenges when aiming at gaining further insights in the Anomaly's deeper causes.

290 While surface parameters such as glacier extents, topography, and their temporal evolution
291 (top of Figures 4.3 and 4.4) are observed with increasing accuracy due to advances in remote-
292 sensing techniques, detailed information on subsurface characteristics such as the glaciers' ther-
293 mal regimes, hydrological systems, and subglacial lithology (Figures 4.3 and 4.4, bottom) remain
294 out of reach. This hampers a robust analysis of the physical processes that control local glacier

295 behaviour. For the Karakoram, this is particularly relevant in the context of the region's surging
296 activity. Advances in the conceptual understanding of surge occurrences are being made^{18,94} but
297 a convincing explanation for why surge-type glaciers are clustered in the Karakoram is still miss-
298 ing, and surge behaviour is far from being predictable. Indications that the spatial distribution of
299 surge-type glaciers is importantly controlled by climate now exist¹⁸ but a better characterisation
300 of englacial and subglacial properties would certainly add to the understanding. Better constrain-
301 ing the controls on regional surge activities seem particularly important in light of recent indi-
302 cations that environmental changes may influence catastrophic, surge-like glacier collapses^{95,96}
303 (Figure 4.5).

304 A presently unanswered question is for how long the Anomaly is likely to persist in the
305 future. If the global climate continues to warm as anticipated by current projections⁹⁷, it seems
306 unlikely that it will persist in the longer term – especially not in the form of positive glacier
307 budgets^{7,98}. Changes in precipitation will affect the future evolution as well. Here, a key un-
308 certainty is how the monsoon system and westerly jet will respond to ongoing warming, and to
309 other forcings including land-use changes. At present, irrigation is suggested to influence the re-
310 gion's climate through the control of heat exchanges and moisture fluxes^{84,85}. Irrigated areas, how-
311 ever, cannot continue to expand limitlessly since space is scarce and water resources are limited,
312 and might even shrink if groundwater levels drop beyond economically viable depths. If recent
313 hypotheses on regional-scale mechanisms⁸¹ are accepted, such land-use changes could result in
314 decreased precipitation, possibly affecting the region's glaciers via reduced accumulation.

315 The anomalous glacier behaviour in the Karakoram and its neighbouring regions is not only
316 a curiosity in an epoch dominated by glacier retreat. The glaciers' importance for regional wa-
317 ter supplies^{7,8} (Figure 4.5), and the cultural and religious value attributed to glaciers by the local
318 communities and their traditional practices⁹⁹ make some of the unanswered scientific questions of
319 great societal relevance. Future glacier evolution, and the effect on both water supplies and glacier
320 related hazards, are of particular concern in this geopolitically complex region where communi-
321 ties have limited resilience to environmental stress. Establishing the mechanisms that are driving
322 the Karakoram Anomaly, their relative importance, and how they are likely to evolve in coming
323 decades, therefore remains a key challenge for climatic and cryospheric researchers alike.

324 **Methods**

325 The trend analyses displayed in Figure 3 are based on the ERA5 climate reanalysis dataset⁹². ERA5
326 provides global-scale meteorological information at a horizontal resolution of ≈ 31 km and cover-
327 ing the period 1979 to present. The information stems from an ensemble of ten model members,
328 for which we only consider the ensemble mean (ERA5 standard product). Trends were calculated
329 independently for each grid cell through linear fitting of the accumulated annual or summer values.

330 **Data availability:** The data shown in the individual Figures are available through the original
331 publications (cited).

332 **Code availability:** The code used to produce Figures 2 and 3 is available upon request.

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BOX 1 – Peculiarities of Karakoram glaciers Compared to other regions of High Mountain Asia, glaciers in the Karakoram are unusually large², and have exceptional elevation ranges. The extremely high altitudes, reaching above 8,000 m a.s.l. at times, cause precipitation to occur as snow during most of the year, giving rise to a *year-round accumulation regime*⁴³. The characteristic, steep mountain walls confining the accumulation area of many glaciers cause orographic concentration of snow (*Turkestan-* and *Mustagh-type* glaciers⁴³) and are source of extensive debris¹. The latter covers the ablation zones of many glaciers in the region. The debris cover, in turn, makes the glacier response to external forcing non-linear¹⁰⁰, and results in large glacier portions persisting at lower elevations when compared to debris-free glaciers responding to the same climate forcing¹⁰¹. Widespread surging activity gives rise to some peculiar geomorphic features, such as lobed medial moraines, strandlines, ice foliation, and rugged, strongly-crevassed glacier surfaces²⁰.

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BOX 2 – Classical surging mechanisms Two main mechanisms have been proposed to explain glacier surging¹⁰²: *thermal* and *hydrological* control. Both attribute the ultimate cause of the acceleration in ice motion to an increase in subglacial water pressure and the resulting enhancement of sliding at the glacier base.

- In *thermally controlled surges*, changes in basal temperature promote a positive feedback between ice deformation, basal melt, pore water pressure, and sliding. This mechanism is comparatively slow, and leads to seasonally independent surge initiation- and termination-phases that are several years long.
- In *hydrologically controlled surges*, the increase in sliding velocities are directly caused by a change in the efficiency, and therefore water pressure, of the subglacial drainage system. This mechanism is much faster than the thermal one, and results in phases of winter initiation and summer termination, both of days to weeks duration.

Recent work⁹⁴ proposed a unifying theory that recognises the importance of both heat and water, casting surges as an imbalance in enthalpy. This imbalance occurs only within narrow climatic and geometric envelopes¹⁸, both of which can be found in the Karakoram and neighbouring regions.

BOX 3 – Karakoram climate In contrast to the neighbouring Himalaya, which are under the influence of the Indian monsoon, the Karakoram's climate⁵⁴ is predominantly influenced by westerly weather systems and the Tibetan anticyclone. Most of the annual precipitation falls in spring and winter, during which the westerly influence dominates (Fig. 1b). The Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea are the main moisture sources during such conditions. The monsoon makes sporadic incursions during summer, with amounts of precipitation rapidly decreasing from south-east to north-west. Moisture from the Arabian Sea is brought to the region when low-pressure systems develop over Pakistan. In such cases, precipitation decreases sharply northward due to orographic shielding.

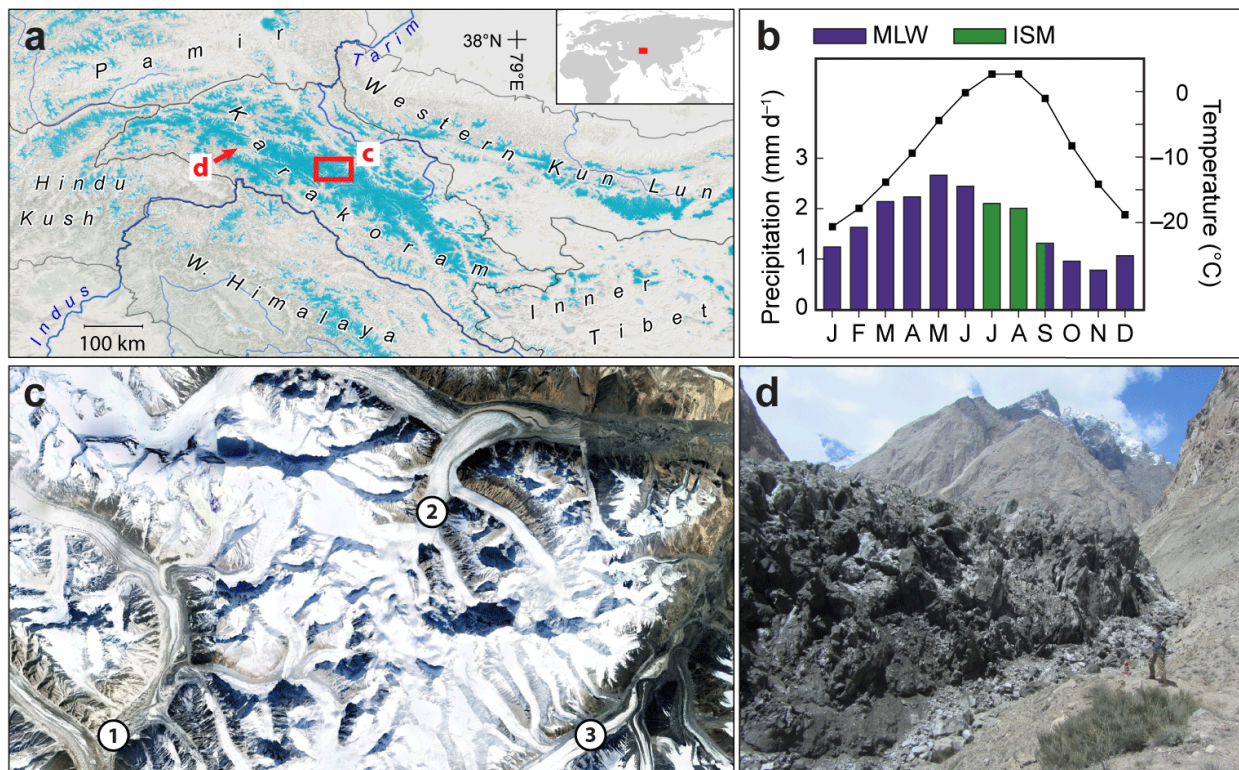


Figure 1: Distribution of Karakoram glaciers and climate characteristic. **a** Glacier coverage and regions as per Randolph Glacier Inventory² version 6. **b** Regional average temperature (connected squares) and precipitation (bars) for the period 1989-2007, re-drawn from ref. ¹⁰³. The influence of Mid-Latitude Westerlies (MLW) and the Indian Summer Monsoon (ISM) is shown based on the classification by ref. ⁹⁰. **c** GoogleEarth image with looped and folded moraines providing indications of past surges at (1) Panmah, (2) South Skamri, and (3) Sarpo Langgo Glacier. **d** Terminus of Shishper Glacier in May 2019, showing clear sign of recent advance (image credit: Rina Seed). Note the person for scale.

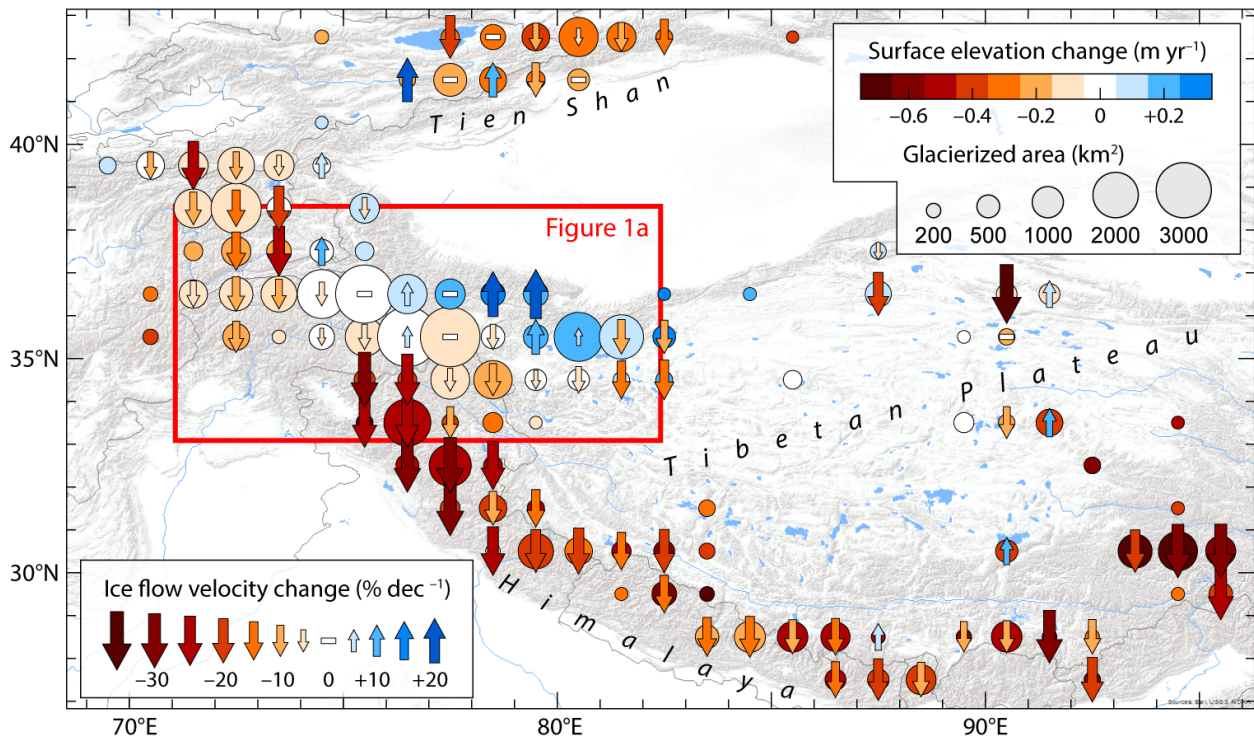


Figure 2: **Recent glacier changes in High Mountain Asia.** The rate of glacier surface elevation change²⁸ is shown together with changes in ice flow velocity¹⁵ for the period 2000-2016. The size of the circles is proportional to the glacier area. Data are aggregated on a $1^\circ \times 1^\circ$ grid, and uncertainties are shown in Supplementary Figure S1. The red box indicates the area shown in Figure 1a and includes the Karakoram.

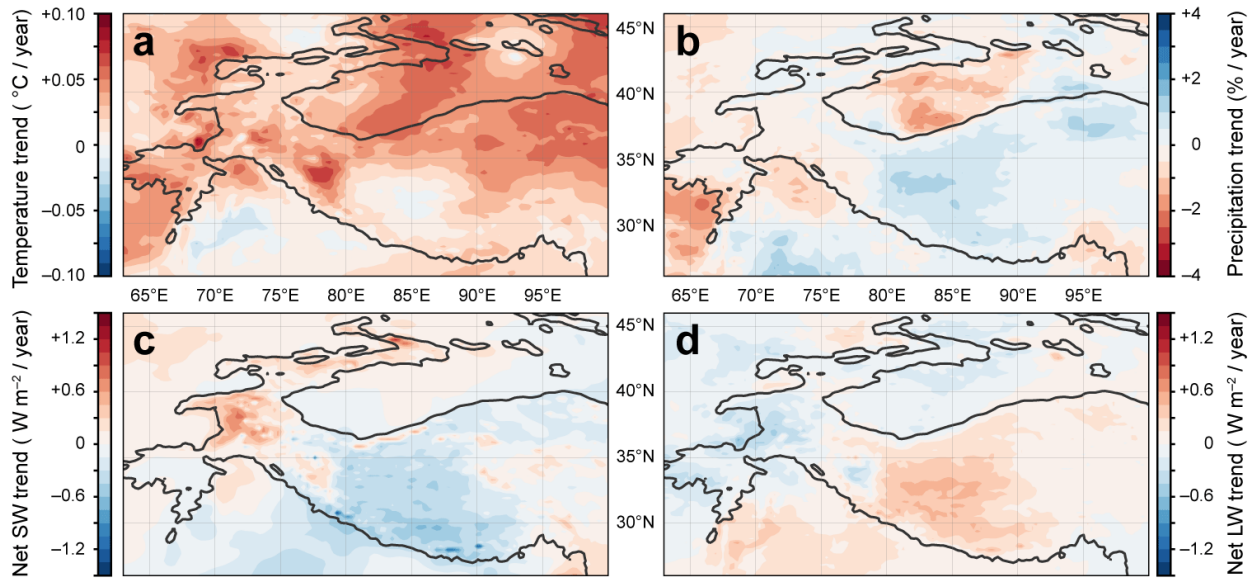


Figure 3: **Potential meteo-climatic drivers of the Karakoram Anomaly.** The spatial distribution of linear trends in (a) summer (JJA) temperature, (b) annual precipitation, (c) summer net short-wave (SW) radiation, and (d) summer net longwave (LW) radiation is shown for the time period 1980-2018. The representations are based on ERA5 data⁹². Trend significances and a comparison to the high-resolution climate model results by ref.⁷⁶ are provided in Supplementary Figures S3 and S2, respectively. A 2,000 m contour line (black) is provided for orientation.

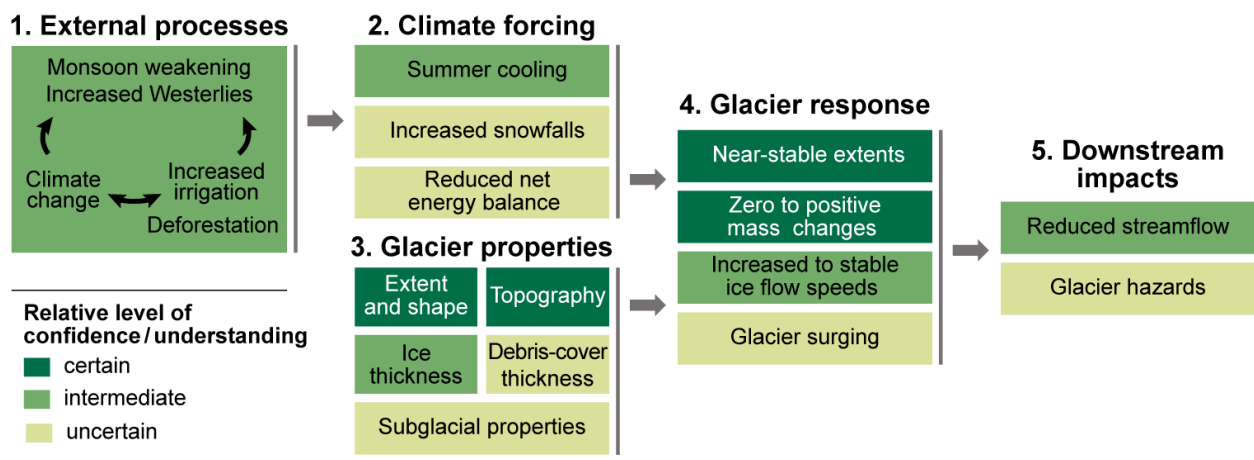


Figure 4: **Schematic of the process-chain leading to anomalous glacier evolution.** For every element, a relative level of confidence in its characterization or understanding is given. The confidence level is based upon the authors' expert judgement and literature review.