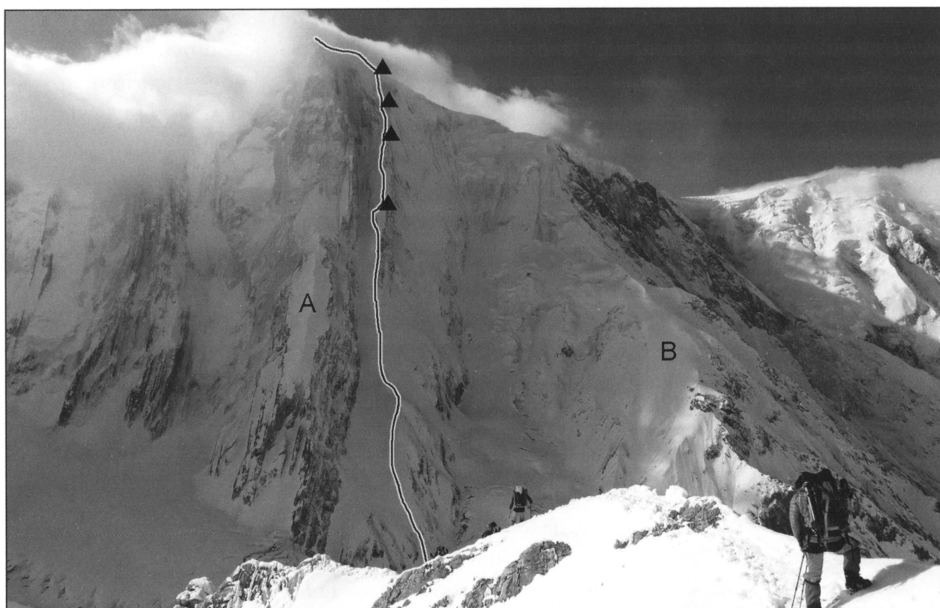


# THE GOLDEN PEAK

*A new route on Pakistan's Spantik raises the bar for Korean alpinism.*

KIM HYUNG-IL



The Korean Route on the northwest face of Spantik (7,027m). The Korean climbers spent two nights at their second bivouac and two nights at their high camp, for a total of seven days on the mountain. (A) The Golden Pillar, first climbed in 1987 by Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders. (B) The "Descent Route" followed by Fowler and Saunders, as well as various teams since. This line was first ascended in 2004 by a Japanese expedition. *Kim Hyung-il Collection*

I can't remember when I first saw a picture of Spantik, the Golden Peak, in Pakistan, but it's easy to recall the strong impression I felt. I couldn't imagine how one would climb that lofty pillar on the northwest face, and I was humbled by the achievement of Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders, who did it first in 1987. Over the years I've experienced much joy and discouragement on my climbing journey, and always I dreamed of that golden summit in the photo. Finally, in 2008, I visited beautiful Spantik and spotted the line for a new route. As for tactics, there was no doubt: alpine style.

Korean climbers have a strong history of ascents on Himalayan big walls. The Korean Baintha Brakk expedition of 1983 was probably the first of these, and it led to other important high-altitude ascents, such as the Shining Wall (northwest face) of Gasherbrum IV, Thalay Sagar's north face, Trango Tower, the southwest face of Everest, the north face of Annapurna,

and Shishapangma's south face. These days, perhaps one third of the expeditions that depart from Korea attempt to climb high-altitude walls.

However, I would guess that 90 percent of the significant Himalayan climbing done by Koreans is with the help of high-altitude porters and fixed lines. Most is not lightweight alpine-style climbing. I believe we Korean climbers should re-examine ourselves and how expedition style has come to prevail among us. For one thing, the large majority of big-name expedition leaders in Korea employ these methods. Because of their influence, other expedition leaders have followed suit. Also, because these tactics have proven successful and are judged to be safe, this has remained the popular way to climb high-altitude walls. Moreover, the Korean mentality, from early in our climbing history, has fixated on the summit as the sole objective of mountaineering. These are the root causes of our ongoing focus on heavy, siege-style tactics.

But there always has been a small number of climbers who believe differently. For about 10 years, this small community of climbers has done a fair share of alpine-style climbing, putting up new routes in this style in the Himalaya and Karakoram. A few of us eventually decided to try a new route on Spantik in pure alpine style, despite the uncertainty of such an attempt. We wanted to do our best to leave a strong impression on young Korean climbers, showing that we could climb without harming the environment or leaving any trace of our passage.

In 2009 I returned to Pakistan with two other climbers, Kim Pal-bong and Min Jun-young, plus a cameraman, Rim Il-jin, and a friend, Seo Jung-hwan, for support. Due to the threat of terrorism in the Swat area, we gave up on taking a bus along the Karakoram Highway and flew to Skardu instead.

After arriving at base camp in early June, we acclimatized on several unnamed 6,000-meter peaks and planned our tactics for Spantik. We decided to simul-solo the lower parts of the mountain, and then in the middle we would lead in blocks. On the highest, most difficult section, the Black Tower, the lead climber would fix the ropes once he had finished a pitch, and the two others could climb the fixed line, jugging where necessary for speed.

We planned to spend six days on the route—five on the wall and one on the upper snowfields to reach the summit. Beginning on June 15 it snowed for several days, and we had to wait. We read and worried, trapped in our tents. After a long, anxious wait, we finally started climbing on June 28.

Toward the end of our third day, we reached the bottom of the Black Tower. There we were caught in a fierce snowstorm. We couldn't decide whether to continue or head down. We returned to the previous bivy site, and the next day, July 1, descended to base camp.

After a week of rest, we started up again on July 8. For the first 1,000 meters above the glacier, we soloed steep snow, up to 60°. By 11 the next morning, we had reached our previous high point near the base of the Black Tower. For another 200 meters, we continued to solo and then began belaying on difficult mixed ground. We climbed five pitches on snow-covered rock, with sections of very thin ice. Good anchors were difficult to find. At 7 p.m. we found a ridge of snow where we were able to chop a ledge and set up the tent.

That night it snowed hard, and we didn't get much sleep. On July 10 the snowfall eased but then got heavier again, off and on all day. We spent an uneasy day in the tent, wondering if we would go up or down. The snow stopped early in the morning of July 11, and we began climbing loose, vertical rock covered with snow. Ice runnels only 10 centimeters wide led through some of the rock, and on these we might as well have been soloing because we could not get any good gear. This day brought the steepest climbing of the route, and also the coldest. The sun didn't reach the face until after 11 a.m., and I struggled with the pain of frostbite injuries I'd suffered a

decade earlier. After three pitches, Kim Pal-bong took over and faced a new problem. As the sun hit the face, his anchors quickly melted out of the ice, leaving us vulnerable to the slightest slip. We had no choice but to stay calm and take extreme care with each move.

We chopped a bivy ledge out of another snow ridge and got into the tent around 9 p.m. The next morning two pitches up rocky gullies brought us to the final snow wall. The serac on top of the mountain was so close that it looked like we could grab it with our hands. But the snow was up to chest-deep, and soon snow began to fall again. The storm seemed never-ending, and the longer we waited for it to stop the more desperate we felt. At last, by the grace of God, the snow stopped, and after 30 minutes of climbing we reached the gentle slopes above the northwest face. As we set up our final bivy, I contacted base camp and shouted, "We've made it!" In a flush of emotions, we all burst into tears.

On July 13, at 4 a.m., after sipping a cup of tea, we started toward the summit; however, we soon had to return to the tent because it was too dark to deal with an ice wall and several hidden crevasses. We waited two hours for the sun to rise before heading out again. We climbed up and up, and our nerves tightened in the faint light of dawn, but finally, at around 10:45, we were on top. After a moment of joy, we all felt exhausted. Our energy had been burned down by whiteout and snowstorm.

We decided to spend one more night on the ridge before descending. Kim Pal-bong and I were showing symptoms of snow blindness, and with the pain in our eyes we weren't able to sleep at all that night. Moreover, an overnight storm brought wind and snow. But at 2 p.m. the next day, the wind suddenly stopped, and we immediately packed up and began the descent. Hours later, after many rappels in the dark, we downclimbed the steep snow at the base of the wall and arrived on the glacier around midnight. Our friends Jin Rim-il and Seo Jung-hwan stood in the darkness to welcome us. How can we forget the bright light of their headlamps and the cold water we sipped!

#### SUMMARY:

Area: Rakaposhi Range, Karakoram, Pakistan

Ascent: Alpine-style new route on the northwest face of Spantik (7,027m), by Kim Hyung-il, Kim Pal-bong, and Min Jun-young, July 8–14, 2009. The Koreans called the 2,300m route Dream 2009 and graded it VI WI4 M8. They descended by the snow and ice buttress to the right (west) of their ascent route.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Born in 1967, Kim Hyung-il has led or joined expeditions to Nepal, India, and Pakistan, including teams that climbed a new route on Trango Tower (2005) and attempted the south face of Lhotse in winter (2006).*

*Translated from the Korean by Peter Jensen-Choi.*



Min Jun-young, Kim Pal-bong, and Kim Hyung-il (left to right) on Spantik's summit.  
Kim Hyung-il Collection