



THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BAGRAM AIR BASE

A Geopolitical Power Play

On 8 April 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump, in a speech at the Republican National Committee, criticized the Biden administration for its hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and abandoning the “important” Bagram air base, which had acted as its prime strategic point of power in the region for over two decades. Forgoing this airfield has arguably created a strategic vacuum that is now being filled by the regional giant China. The proximity of China’s newly built and expanding nuclear facility in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region bordering Afghanistan’s Badakhshan province, cannot be considered a co-incidence and further enhances the strategic cruciality of this Air Base, and China’s interest in it thereof. Moreover, Beijing’s geographical closeness to this Airfield has made Trump frequently claim, even during his election speeches last year, that Bagram is under the control of China’s People’s Liberation Army, and therefore, it is paramount for the U.S. to regain control of the base. However, how this will unfold remains to be seen, especially with the Afghan Taliban in power in Kabul, who have fought for Afghanistan’s so-called independence from the U.S.

Bagram’s strategic positioning at the crossroads of Central, West, and South Asia makes it a strategic

asset for different power players who are currently trying to establish or regain their influence on this military base, and subsequently the region. Strategically, this base serves as the ideal focal point to monitor this geographically volatile region. At the beginning of April 2025, many local Afghan media houses reported that a U.S. C-17 military cargo aircraft, carrying top U.S. intelligence officials, had landed at Bagram from Doha’s Al Udeid military base—the largest military installation of the U.S. in West Asia. This has further added to the speculation that Kabul, under the Taliban regime, has finally handed over the control of Bagram to the U.S—an assertion that the current U.S. President has been repeatedly pronouncing for months.

However, Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson for the Afghan Taliban, has outwardly denied these reports and termed those claims to be “misleading” and part of a “propaganda” mechanism. In an interview on his official channel, Mujahid reiterated, “They [U.S.] should refrain from making emotional [emotive] statements based on unsubstantiated information... Bagram is controlled by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [Taliban regime], not China. Chinese troops are not present here, nor do we have any such pact with any country.” Regarding the

report on U.S. forces regaining control over Bagram, he further added, “such an event is impossible” since the Taliban throughout its insurgency period had fought against foreign intervention/interference on Afghan soil. However, recent reports have begun to highlight the geopolitics surrounding the Bagram airbase and the interest of both the regional, such as the Afghan Taliban, and China, and extra-regional players, including the U.S., in this strategic airstrip.

Strategic Significance of the Bagram Military Base: A Historical Overview

Geographically, the Bagram Air Base or the Bagram Airfield, once the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan, is located 11 kilometres southeast of Charikar district, the capital of the Parwan province in Afghanistan. It is strategically placed in proximity to Kabul, offering critical regional routes for the supply of equipment/manpower, while playing a pivotal role in intelligence gathering and counter-terrorism operations across the country. The existing Salang Pass Tunnel in the Parwan province, where the Bagram Air Base is situated, connects Kabul to Northern Afghanistan, but more importantly, serves as a crucial link between Afghanistan and Central Asia, extending to Russia. Originally, the base was constructed by the Soviet Union “against the backdrop of snow-capped mountains” during the Cold War period in the 1950s. However, following the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, it became Moscow’s primary military hub in Afghanistan until the former’s withdrawal in 1989.

During Afghanistan’s Civil War period in the 1990s, this airfield again became the frontline between competing forces eager to control the helm of power in Kabul. However, once the U.S.-led forces entered Afghanistan in 2001 after the 9/11 incident, the airstrip emerged as the U.S.’s main military base in the country, serving as the “principal logistics and operations hub for U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan” for almost two decades. The airbase consisted of a hospital, a passenger lounge, two runways, and over 100 parking spots for fighter jets, with one runway measuring 12,000 ft. The U.S. renovated the air base during its control and expanded it to nearly 30 square miles, covering swimming pools, spas, cinemas, and restaurants

while stationing up to 10,000 troops. However, Bagram also became infamous as “Afghanistan’s Guantanamo,” since the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency of the U.S.) used it as a detention center for interrogating terrorist suspects.

The U.S. finally vacated its troops from Bagram airfield in July 2021, handing it over to the then-Afghan republican government—just a few days before the Taliban finally captured power in Kabul.

The Current Geopolitics

In 2021, Bagram got highlighted in the news as the U.S. forces left behind billions of dollars’ worth of military equipment, which came under the direct authority of the Taliban regime after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. A report by the U.S. Department of Defense critically stated that Washington provided \$18.6 billion of military arms and ammunition to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) from 2005 to 2021. Among these weapons, approximately U.S.\$7 billion worth of hardware remained in the country after the American troops departed by the end of August 2021—reclaiming which has been one of the key goals of the newly elected US President. Trump appears to be pursuing a two-pronged strategy aimed at strengthening America’s economic and military standing—pressuring countries like Ukraine to “repay” for U.S. support, while reclaiming military assets from places like Afghanistan. This approach aligns with his broader vision of ‘Making America Great Again’ (MAGA), emphasizing cost-efficiency and reasserting U.S. dominance on the global stage.

Therefore, Trump has been criticizing the previous Biden administration for not securing its key strategic assets by claiming, “We gave billions to Afghanistan, and yet we left behind all that equipment. This wouldn’t have happened if I were [the] president.” The Taliban de facto authority has also been accused of selling the U.S.-made equipment to different militant groups, including Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Thus, Trump has repeatedly promised to recover those weapons from Kabul as early as possible. However, the Taliban’s Islamic Emirate has clarified that the military hardware left behind by the U.S., which included “aircraft, air-to-ground munitions, military

vehicles, weapons, communications equipment, and other materials," now belongs to the Taliban regime as they are in power in Kabul. Moreover, the Taliban interim administration has reaffirmed that they use it to protect the sovereignty, unity, and integrity of the Afghan state and maintain peace and security of the entire region. Therefore, Trump's idea of reclaiming U.S. military assets from Afghanistan without any conflict with the Taliban is highly unlikely, if not impossible, given the history shared by the two.

Moreover, China's growing interest in the airfield as it shares geographical proximity with the Wakhan corridor—a narrow strip often referred to as Afghanistan's chicken neck—might complicate Trump's plans. Last December, the Taliban Interior Ministry confirmed the meeting between the acting Interior Minister of the Taliban, Serajuddin Haqqani, and Zhao Xing, China's ambassador to Afghanistan, regarding the strategic significance of the Wakhan Corridor. Wakhan corridor borders China's restive Xinjiang province, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and the Pakistan-controlled Kashmir—situated just a few miles away from the Bagram military base.

In addition, Beijing is arguably making huge inroads into Afghanistan, especially since the Taliban regained power in Kabul, with promising massive investments in its resources, mining, and the critical mineral sector, which is not a positive news for Trump. Nevertheless, to make things worse, the Taliban have also demonstrated interest in becoming a part of China's BRI project since 2023, although the feasibility of this initiative will largely depend on Afghanistan's internal security scenario.

All these developments illustrate how Afghanistan seems set to become a stage for another round of global tug of war. In the 1980s, it was caught in the U.S.-U.S.S.R. power struggle, while now, it may face a new one—between the U.S. and China. With China building strong ties with the Taliban and eyeing strategic areas like the Wakhan Corridor, the situation is getting more complex for the West to manoeuvre. Moreover, the Taliban also holds control of the U.S. military equipment left behind. Given these realities, Trump will need to handle his Afghan policy carefully to avoid giving China more ground in the region. Thus, for the US, regaining some foothold

in the Bagram air-base seems to be getting more difficult while also becoming indispensable.

It can be speculated that the U.S. leverage over this base aligns with Washington's broader regional strategic goals. Monitoring over China, Iran, and the Russian-influenced Central Asian region will be easier for the U.S. through this base. It is to be noted that since its withdrawal from the Bagram Air Base in 2021, the U.S. lacks a military presence in or around the region. Therefore, it can be presumed that at present, Washington wants at least a monitoring facility at Bagram, and does not expect full control of the airfield. However, how far the U.S. will be successful in this endeavour remains to be seen. Moreover, considering the distance, U. S's closest military base to China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous province is in the Philippines, which is at a distance of around 3,000 miles, while Bagram is barely 1500 miles from China's under-constructed nuclear testing facility at Hami and Yumen in western China.

To conclude, the exit of the US has opened up Bagram as a new battleground for different players who want to exert their influence in the region. Regardless of who controls the Air Base at present, it will continue to hold substantial strategic significance, especially due to the expanding nuclear capabilities of China nearby, as well as the base's strategic location, which allows greater access to the broader region. Therefore, in the coming days, the tensions surrounding the Bagram Airbase are likely to play a critical role not only in ascertaining power and influence in Kabul, but also in maintaining the global/regional power dynamics and preserving the peace and security of the broader region. It is also foreseeable that the complexities involving the Base will remain a point of contention in any future talks between these power players and the Afghan regime.●

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