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# Afghanistan's Empty Throne and Trump's Crossroads Temptations

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*Without a legitimate, all-inclusive Kabul government, the allure of Bagram is a mirage of strategy masking mere distraction.*

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President Trump's recent demand that the Taliban hand over Afghanistan's Bagram Air Base to the United States has sparked a flurry of discussions among Afghan elites, Washington policy circles, and in the region, particularly in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Islamabad, regarding the nuts-and-bolts of a potential U.S. return to the region.

Afghanistan's geostrategic location, which sits at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, the Middle East, and the Far East, is both unquestionable and unparalleled. Bagram's capacity and runways, capable of handling the heaviest cargo aircrafts, are indisputable. The country's promise of strategic reach has long seduced great powers, but that allure masks a harsher truth: conquest is simple, permanence is not. In the absence of a legitimate, all-inclusive Kabul government, any U.S. attempt to retake Bagram, whether through compromise or coercion, will either unintentionally ignite a proxy war fueled by ethnic fragmentations in the years to follow or entangle the U.S. in a strategic distraction of counter-terrorism, inevitably transforming advantage into liability and a stronghold into a trap.

## **Bagram's Strategic Value**

Bagram, as a geopolitical symbol, is as important as its runways in the military. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Bagram in 1989, followed by the presence of NATO allies, symbolized the West's victory over communism. There are no doubts that with a presence in Bagram, a base that U.S. forces are intimately familiar with, the U.S. could project power and primacy over the region. Afghanistan shares borders with two nuclear powers, China and Pakistan, as well as three Central Asian countries and Iran.

It's plain to see that for the U.S., at least under President Trump, a foothold in Bagram is more about its significance in containing China than anything else. On numerous occasions, President Trump has stated that Bagram Air Base is "one hour away" from China's "nuclear sites," referring to Lop Nur in Xinjiang, China's nuclear testing ranges, as his main motive for retaking Bagram. This statement oversimplifies geography and geopolitics.

One might suggest that the U.S. could rely on Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar for such purpose, which has more capacity than Bagram and is two hours away from Lop Nur, according to President Trump's calculations.

## **Afghanistan's Political Quagmire**

On paper, Bagram offers ready-made runways to watch China's Xinjiang province, which is home to nuclear testing ranges, advanced air-defense systems, rocket launchers, and recently-constructed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silos. In practice, however, the necessary foundation - a legitimate and all-inclusive Kabul government capable of hosting a U.S. presence, whether temporary or permanent - is missing.

Panjshir, less than 50 miles from Bagram, is a historic bastion of anti-Taliban resistance and the stronghold of former Ahmad Shah Massoud, who, with U.S. support, fought the Soviet Union to withdrawal, and opposed the Taliban's first regime. Today, his son, Ahmad Massoud, leads the National Resistance Front, carrying on the legacy of opposition to the Taliban's second regime.

On top of that, the central and northern belts of Afghanistan, where Bagram is located, are home predominantly to Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks - communities that together make up nearly 60% of the country's population. Any settlement with the Taliban, a Pashtun-dominated group, would only deepen ethnic fragmentations and rivalries, and ignite unrest in the years ahead.

For many young Afghans, however, the geography is not the main issue; whether the U.S. returns to Bagram, Kandahar Airfield, or Helmand's Airfield (the former Camp Bastion) would make little difference. What matters is perception and circumstances. The people of Afghanistan struggle and fight for their rights and liberties, and any U.S. presence operating through the Taliban serves as ultimate legitimization of their oppressive regime, transforming America's return from a symbol of security into a seal of tyranny.

In contrast to these realities, President Trump appears to be pushing his officials to retake Bagram and has hinted that the Taliban want "certain things" from the U.S., which could include diplomatic recognition of their regime, removal of sanctions, reopening the U.S. embassy in Kabul, controlling the Afghanistan embassy in Washington, taking over Afghanistan's UN seat, and releasing \$7 billion in frozen

Afghan central bank assets.

One can confidently argue that if the price of the U.S.'s return to Bagram is these concessions, it risks paying far more than it could ever gain.

## **Realism Without Pragmatism**

President Trump's interest in Bagram for its proximity to China reflects foreign policy with realism at its core, yet one colored by optimism rather than pragmatism. Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, Islamabad, and Delhi have deepened ties with the Taliban and engaged them at every diplomatic level. Moscow has even become the first and only capital to officially recognize the Taliban's second regime.

For Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran, the Taliban's value lies in a simple calculation: as long as they keep the U.S. military out, they serve a strategic purpose. After all, it was Pakistan, Iran, and Russia that quietly supported the Taliban's insurgency until the final days of U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

The hard truth is that the U.S.'s path back to Bagram, if pursued through a settlement with the Taliban, passes through the capitals that once facilitated its withdrawal. In the absence of a regional consent, any settlement with the Taliban is highly unlikely. If the U.S. somehow managed to bypass the region, such as through the concessions mentioned above, those same actors would likely respond by fueling any insurgent flare-ups to ensure Afghanistan remains politically ungovernable and strategically unusable for an American presence.

In that scenario, with the Axis of Resistance largely defeated across the Middle East, Tehran may view Afghanistan as a new arena for retaliation once the U.S. reestablishes itself at Bagram. Moscow, too, could frame America's return as an extension of its broader confrontation with the West.

Just as the Kremlin characterizes the war in Ukraine as a proxy conflict, it might quietly - or even overtly - support militant groups, including the Taliban factions hostile to foreign presence, to complicate a U.S. presence in the region. Pakistan and India, locked in a proxy contest in Afghanistan since the 1970s, are unlikely to let slip any new opportunity to blunt each other's influence.

Beijing, for its part, is unlikely to join any proxy effort, but it would not intervene to stop one either. A distracted U.S. would benefit Beijing; the U.S. would not be able to surveil China's "one hour away" nuclear sites.

## **The Path Forward**

First, the strategic logic of Bagram remains intact. The return of the U.S. to Bagram is certainly possible, and it serves both the U.S. and Afghanistan's interests. But if the U.S.

is to reestablish a presence, it should do so through a broadly legitimate, all-inclusive government in Afghanistan - one that is constitutional, has a functioning system of governance, a coherent foreign policy doctrine, and a commitment to international norms and treaties.

Only such a foundation reduces the risk of ethnic fragmentation, minimizes regional repercussions, and secures Afghan consent rather than resistance. This should not be interpreted as nation-building; the 2020 U.S.-Taliban Doha Agreement (Part One, §§ D-E) already conditioned further steps on intra-Afghan negotiations toward an inclusive political settlement.

Second, the U.S. should maintain its counter-terrorism focus in Afghanistan. Although advanced technologies allow for sophisticated aerial surveillance and precision strikes, the U.S. no longer has the ground intelligence network it once relied on and now might be dependent on Taliban cooperation.

The IS-K attack on the Abbey Gate in August 2021, the presence of an Al-Qaeda leader in Kabul in August 2022, an uptick in TTP attacks in Pakistan, and the recent UN Secretary-General's report clearly show that for some extremist groups, the Taliban are unwilling to cooperate, and for others, simply unable.

Ultimately, Afghanistan is already grappling with crushing poverty, active transnational terrorist networks, and a deepening humanitarian crisis under an oppressive regime. Drafting the country into the U.S.-China rivalry would not benefit American interests. It would, instead, lead to new cycles of violence and a strategic distraction for the U.S. in the region. A U.S. return may be desirable for the people of Afghanistan, but only under the right circumstances.

Without a legitimate, all-inclusive Kabul government, Bagram offers no strategy - only the mirage of one.