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The Importance of Controlling Bagram Air Base to US Interests in Afghanistan and Surrounding Areas

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Recently, the U.S. has expressed the importance of who controls the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. In President Trump's first cabinet meeting since returning to office, he and Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, discussed the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent loss of Bagram Air Base. In the meeting, Trump said that in his previous Afghanistan withdrawal plan, "we were going to keep Bagram... not because of Afghanistan but because of China because its exactly one hour away from where China makes its nuclear missiles..." He went on to say that Bagram is one of the biggest airbases in the world, with one of the biggest and most powerful runways constructed of heavy concrete and steel.^[i] The airfield has an 11,800-foot runway capable of serving bomber and large cargo aircraft.^[ii]

President Trump also claimed that China is now occupying Bagram Airfield.^[iii] The Taliban has since rejected Trump's claims. Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Majahid said the airfield is currently controlled by the Islamic Emirate, not China.^[iv]

Regardless of who currently occupies Bagram Air Base, the airbase maintains its regional importance due in part to China's ever increasing nuclear capabilities and the more central access to Central Asia that Bagram provides. In addition, Bagram Air Base provides easier access to combatting the ever-evolving terrorist threat in and around Afghanistan.

China's Increasing Nuclear Abilities

China's defense budget remains the second highest behind the United States. Defense Intelligence Agency reported in 2024 that China is undergoing the "most rapid expansion and

ambitious modernization of its nuclear forces in history—almost certainly driven by an aim for enduring strategic competition with the U.S.” This expansion includes development of new nuclear capabilities that include its largest buildup of nuclear missile silos; ground-mobile, air-launched, and submarine launched weapons; and other nuclear capabilities.[\[v\]](#) The Department of Defense estimates the People’s Republic of China has surpassed 600 operational nuclear warheads in its stockpile as of 2024 and estimates that they will have over 1,000 operational nuclear warheads by 2030.[\[vi\]](#)

In addition, July 2021 satellite images confirmed ongoing construction of a large nuclear missile silo field in China’s Xinjiang Province, a province that borders Afghanistan.[\[vii\]](#) Specifically, “the silo construction at Yumen and Hami, in Xinjiang, constitutes the most significant expansion of the Chinese nuclear arsenal ever. China has for decades operated about 20 silos for liquid-fuel DF-5 ICBMs. With 120 silos under construction at Yumen, another 110 silos at Hami, a dozen silos at Jilantai, and possibly more silos being added... the People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) appears to have approximately 250 silos under construction - more than ten times the number of ICBM [Intercontinental Ballistic Missile] silos in operation today.”

Recent data further illustrates China’s intent to expand its nuclear defenses. China’s 2025 budget reflects a 7.2% increase to its defense budget when compared to its 2024 budget, which includes funding to increase its nuclear arsenal. [\[viii\]](#) In fact, January 2025 satellite images show construction of a nuclear fusion research center in Mianyang.[\[ix\]](#)

Current Threat Posed by IS-K, al Qaeda, and TTP

In the February 2020 comprehensive agreement for bringing peace to Afghanistan signed by President Trump and the Taliban, the Taliban agreed to prevent any group or individual, including al Qaeda, from using the soil of Afghanistan to threaten the security of the U.S. and its allies. This included the prevention of terrorist recruitment, training, and fundraising, among other things.[\[x\]](#) However, it appears the Taliban may not be holding up their end of the agreement. Currently, three of the most prominent terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan are the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K), al Qaeda, and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

(TTP). According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), foreign terrorist organizations maintain the intent to conduct or inspire attacks on the U.S. and have leveraged the conflict in the Middle East to affirm this intent.[\[xi\]](#)

During a recent United Nations Security Council Meeting, counterterrorism officials warned that ISIS-K in Afghanistan remains a threat to security both regionally and globally and is one of the most dangerous branches of ISIS that remains.[\[xii\]](#) ISIS-K has carried out repeated attacks targeting Afghan civilians and Taliban rulers.[\[xiii\]](#) U.S. Ambassador to the UN remains concerned about ISIS-K's abilities to utilize Afghanistan for planning and conducting terrorist attacks and for recruitment.[\[xiv\]](#) The group has also been increasingly active outside Afghanistan, with successful attacks in Iran and Russia in 2024. These attacks killed more than 230 people collectively and were the first major attacks conducted outside of the group's typical operational area in many years.[\[xv\]](#) Attacks outside of Afghanistan continue to raise alarm.

Despite al Qaeda's organizational struggles following U.S. intervention in Afghanistan beginning in 2001, the group remains committed to striking the U.S. and has restarted its outreach to Western audiences.[\[xvi\]](#) Since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, al Qaeda has made progress as an organization. As of August 2024, the Taliban had set up nine new terrorist camps in Afghanistan in 2024 alone. The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan reconstruction reported in July 2024 that, though the Taliban have targeted the Islamic State and other groups, they have largely tolerated the presence of al Qaeda. With a lack of the promised Taliban opposition to terrorist groups using Afghanistan, al Qaeda leader called for foreign fighters to migrate to Afghanistan and prepare to attack the West.[\[xvii\]](#) Today, al Qaeda maintains a presence throughout Afghanistan.[\[xviii\]](#)

In addition, a recent UN monitoring report confirms that the Taliban continues to provide TTP with "logistical and operational space and financial support" despite their reassurances not to do so.[\[xix\]](#) TTP's attacks on Pakistan have substantially increased. Between July and December 2024, more than 600 attacks were recorded, many of which were launched from Afghanistan.
[\[xx\]](#)

And, with Trump's decision to lift the bounties on three senior Taliban officials, is there an indication that the U.S. plans to reengage with the Taliban and reopen Embassy Kabul?[\[xxi\]](#) If that is the case, the terrorist threat in Afghanistan and their ability to target Americans significantly increases. Regaining control of Bagram Air Base would be *vital* in U.S. defenses against these organizations as a central military presence.

Why does this matter to the US?

U.S. policy to use overseas bases to enable rapid response to military contingencies outside the territorial bounds of the U.S. has remained a priority since World War II. In addition, the U.S.'s foreign presence is fundamentally important to defining and communicating U.S. strategic interests to its allies, partners, and adversaries.[\[xxii\]](#) However, since relinquishing control of Bagram Air Base in July 2021, the U.S. lacks a military presence in or near Central Asia. If the U.S. regained control of Bagram Airbase, it could reassert U.S. influence in the region, counter China's growing influence, combat China's growing nuclear capabilities, and better protect the U.S. from the growing terrorist threats.

In responding to China's growing nuclear footprint, the closest areas that the U.S. currently has forces stationed to China are in Japan, the Philippines, and other areas in the Indo-Pacific region.[\[xxiii\]](#) The Philippines, one of the closest bases to China, is close to 3,000 miles from Xinjiang. Bagram, on the other hand, is less than 500 miles from the Afghanistan-Xinjiang province border and less than 1,500 miles from the closest missile facility in Hami, China. As China continues to spread their nuclear facilities into Western areas of the country, the U.S.'s ability to respond to threats becomes more pressing. Regaining control of Bagram Air Base could make U.S. response to threats timelier.

US Policy Implications

The question to consider: is the risk of an escalation in armed conflict using the U.S. military to regain control of Bagram worth the benefits having control of Bagram would bring?

Despite the benefits of regaining control of Bagram Airbase, there could be several policy implications domestically and internationally, such as an impact on U.S. relations with

Afghanistan and implications for U.S. national security.

Reestablishing a military presence in Afghanistan through regaining control of Bagram may signal a renewed commitment to U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in the eyes of many. As part of the agreement the U.S. made with the Taliban, the U.S. committed to withdrawing all military forces from Afghanistan.^[xxiv] If the U.S. sought to regain control of Bagram Air Base and stationed military forces there to maintain that control, the Taliban may view this as opposition to the previous agreement. The Taliban has made it clear that U.S. military presence in Afghanistan is unacceptable, and retaking Bagram could undermine the peace agreement and reignite hostilities between the two countries. However, the decision to retake Bagram could set a precedent that the U.S. is willing to reassert military control in high-conflict regions, such as Afghanistan. In addition, the U.S.'s ability to combat and respond to China's growing nuclear capabilities and to the threats posed by Jihadist terrorist groups could be invaluable to U.S. interests in the region and to the safety of the American people.

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