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Bagram Airbase: America's Return, China's Nightmare, Pakistan's Gamble

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Abstract: The Bagram Airbase, which is the center of the Afghan military operations, has been at the crossroads of international tensions over the last 50 years. An important symbol of the modern global power changes, Bagram was originally constructed by the Soviet Union and became the main point of America in the War on Terror and was currently captured by the Taliban. The base is scarcely the remnant of past wars: it continues to represent the disputed nature of the Afghan geography, with all its possibilities and dangers to the powers that surround it. The article is about the role of history of Bagram and its heritage in still being relevant to the US, China and Pakistan. The article is based on the thesis that the airbase is not merely a military base, but an aspect of the 21st-century Great Game, which is a geopolitical tinderbox. This overview through historical-analysis places Bagram within greater contexts of great power politics, regional security and competing visions of development such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Key Words: Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan, U.S.-China Rivalry, Pakistan's Foreign Policy, Taliban, CPEC, Geopolitics, Great Game

Introduction

The longest standing testament to the position of Afghanistan as a geopolitical crossroads may well be Bagram Airbase. The United States has long been using it as its primary base of operations in Central Asia, having appropriated it in the mid-century by the Soviet Union, and expanded upon and reused it. The base was re-captured by the Taliban after the US pulled out of Afghanistan in August 2021. But Bagram has not disappeared in some forgotten chapter of history but rather appears to be center stage of strategic debate as speculation intensifies over whether the Americans could return (Jackson & Stewart, 2025).

The center of American war operations in Afghanistan has been Bagram where thousands of US troops, intelligence facilities, logistical support bases, and satellite communications facilities have been at times. The base was one of the biggest forward bases in the area at its peak that had two-runways to accommodate extra heavy planes and sophisticated command facilities (Bifolchi, 2025). Its decline to the Taliban did not annul its symbolism or possible usefulness--it merely shifted the battle ground.

It is not difficult to see why Bagram remains on the list: Geography does not disappear. Bagram is a crossroad of regional faults, located in the central plain to the North of Kabul. Where it stands, power projection and surveillance can extend into a wide basin to Russia and Central Asia, much of Iran, Pakistan, but above all of the lands in the western frontier of China, Xinjiang. This is enhanced by the fact that it is close to Chinese nuclear test ranges as well as missile installations (Jiangtao et al., 2025).

To the United States, Bagram would be more than a tactical win to recapture, but it would be a geopolitical win. That in an emerging strategic competition with China, Bagram has given Washington the power to spy and possibly neutralize the western flank of Beijing. The American interest in Bagram can be used to justify the recent allegations

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made by the U.S. that the base is an hour away where China manufactures its nuclear weapons as a major chess piece on the strategic games (Watson, 2025).

In reaction, China considers Bagram a threat to its security as well as to the vision of connectivity across Eurasia that it intends to establish. Reclaiming the U.S. control of the base would be intruding more on the western buffer zones of China and perhaps restrain its Belt and Road ambitions. Bagram does not only pose a threat to the rise of Beijing because it is not only a military installation but a direct threat (Jiangtao et al., 2025).

Bagram is a challenge and an opportunity to Pakistan. Islamabad has long suffered the fallout of American actions across the border - drone attacks, covert operations and boundary conflicts. However, Pakistan sees the re-emerging U.S. interest as a strategic opportunity as well: development aid or diplomatic relief might be used. However, in drawing too near Washington, the PTI exposes itself to damaging China the sponsor of the long-term policy of Pakistan and the architect of CPEC. Such a balancing game is demonstrated in the town of Bagram (Arab News, 2025).

The fact that the Taliban have taken over Bagram is only a complication. They are rulers and, therefore, consider the base as a prize of regaining the sovereignty. But it is also a liability since it could bring them legitimacy or aid at the cost of their base by giving them direct access to the U.S. The representatives of Taliban have publicly already responded by ignoring U.S. demands to surrender Bagram, Ramadan Contents | 92 204 with references to sovereignty as well as the Doha Agreement (Genn, 2025).

In such a way that Bagram was not merely a military base, but it was a geopolitical hot spot too. The value of the ground it is mastered by, does not lie so much in whose hands it is now put, but in the character of the strategic vision its usages suggest. It is a possible check to China to the United States and a threat on its own border to China, a test of allegiance to Pakistan and an asset and a liability to the Taliban. This paper is a retrospective on the history of Bagram, and its importance to the United States, China, Pakistan and the Taliban, placing it within a bigger context of regional power politics between the desire to be connected and the need to pursue great power politics.

Literature Review

Afghanistan is a nation that has been referred to as the graveyard of empires, a nation where foreign interventions have failed miserably due to resistance, geography and history. The literature on the Soviet and American experience supports this characterization. Annals of History Coll, An Explanation of the Failure: Bagram was a pivot of Soviet battlefield positioning between 1979 and 1989 when Soviet forces used it as base which supplied logistical support and a staging area to military operations across Afghanistan. His wearying work on the archives brings out the role of Bagram infrastructure in supporting an otherwise unsustainable occupation of the Soviet, and its critical role in the later Afghan wars.

The fulcrum of the military presence of the United States in Afghanistan was in Bagram, which was during the intervention of the United States, following the 9/11. The base is more than a logistic center as explained by Rashid (2010), it developed into a colossal fortress, which symbolized the war on terror by America, including intelligence facilities and drone missions, and massive barracks to house NATO troops. He also asserts that Bagram was a hub of American counterinsurgency and counterterrorism policy, despite being turned into a symbol of Western world contradictions, and failures, in attempting to implement state-building on behalf of Afghanistan.

Bagram is established in the literature of geopolitics as a part of the Great Game with Central Asia. It has been argued by Brzezinski (1997) that the world rule will depend on power over part of the nodes in Eurasia such as Afghanistan. Although his work pre-dates the U.S. occupation, it's as timely as it has never been to explain why powers are so much interested in Bagram: whoever holds Afghanistan can exert influence over Russia, Iran, China and South Asia. Thus, the base is quite literally a representation of the geostrategic pivot of Afghanistan in international politics.

The departure of the U.S. in 2021 should not be understood as a withdrawal, but a change in strategy, analysts have said. That, as reports by policy institutes, involves the Pentagon developing a strategic interest in Afghanistan over the years, keeping tabs on Iran and keeping China at bay and keeping Russia off. Ducharme (2025) observes that

reopening of Bagram could help Washington regain its presence in central Asia and its surveillance posture in various axes, which would give it an advantage in great-power rivalry in the 21st century.

In the view of Beijing, Bagram is a significant security issue. According to analysts, the base is near the nuclear and missile facilities that are sensitive to China in Xinjiang. This analysis by Jiangtao et al. (2025) indicates that Chinese planners would view a U.S. future takeover of the Bagram base as a kind of existential threat to their western front: they refer to this as a knife at the throat of China. Such a state of mind is turning Bagram into a provincial base of Afghanistan into a strategic concern in the very core of Chinese national defense strategies.

Besides the security of the military, Chinese scholars indicate that Bagram may also be detrimental to the economic ambitions of the Beijing. The U.S. control over Afghanistan, will permit Washington to spy on and, possibly, monitoring the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and One Belt-One Road Initiative (BRI), according to the Afzal (2025). To China, Bagram is both a security crisis and also an economic weakness, which delegitimizes the dream of trans-Eurasian connectivity in Beijing.

There is an unusually tense battlefield in this debate in Pakistan. On the one hand, Islamabad, to this day, recalls the U.S. drone attacks and even cross-border raids which were often launched as a result of Afghan territory. Pakistan, on the other, has never lacked times of American dependence, and even diplomacy. According to Siddiqa (2021), this is the balancing act of short-term gain by Washington and long-term reliance on Beijing, in particular, in the context of investing in CPEC. This intricate balancing act is summed up in Bagram where Pakistan is forced to balance between the competing states.

This image also becomes blurred by the Taliban ruling Bagram since 2021. On the one hand, it represents a powerful image of success and independence to the Taliban, but a bargaining asset that can be beneficial in the process of negotiations with foreign powers. Leaders of the Taliban categorically declined U.S. demand to surrender (2025) Bagram, claiming that Afghanistan sovereignty and Doha Agreement are redlines (Post). That is how Bagram has been now out of Taliban webbed of legitimacy, at home and abroad.

Critics are alerting that the U.S. may bring chaos to the world by attempting to re-occupy Bagram. According to a report by Bukhton (2025), recapturing the base would have resulted in disastrous consequences through the resurgence of a Taliban insurgency, hostilities with Pakistan and direct conflicts with China and Russia. In fact, these warnings are a reminder of the fact that when you consider Bagram merely as what you can do with it, you will be failing to appreciate what it took to get.

Last but not least, human rights reports highlight a controversial history of Bagram as a detention facility and a location of abuse. Most notoriously, perhaps, in the War on Terror, the C.I.A. operated a secret prison in Bagram (so-called Salt Pit) where prisoners were kept under extrajudicial detention and torture. This piece of evidence, especially the entries in Wikipedia (2025), is a reminder to the researchers that Bagram does not only act as a kind of military and geopolitical nexus, but also as a symbol of legitimacy, sovereignty, justice in international politics.

This literature, taken as a whole, makes Bagram to be more than a physical installation. It is also a key location, a geopolitical relic and a disputed memory location. To the United States it remains a potential tool in great power rivalry, to China a looming danger to western security and economic goals, to Pakistan a dilemma on which side to confront and to the Taliban a prize and a weakness. The existing literature establishes Bagram as a point of convergence in the nascent order of the world in the 21st century where regional hemispheres converge into a fault zone of global competition.

Methodology

The present paper is a qualitative historical and analytic paper. Primary sources include US DoD press releases, Chinese policy documents and letters of the Pakistani foreign ministry. Peer-reviewed academic articles, think tank reports and investigative journalism are also considered to be secondary sources. Discourse analysis to analyze how different actors, such as the US, China, Pakistan and the Taliban regime, discourse Bagram. Bagram is compared to the other warring

military bases of Asia through comparative geopolitical studies. Limitations to access to classified information and utilization of publicly available sources are classified weaknesses and triangulation helps to make the data valid.

Discussion

Bagram's Historical Role

Bagram Airbase towers like one of the most significant and famous military bases in the modern world. Initially established by the Soviet Union in the 1950s, the network was greatly enhanced when they invaded Afghanistan which started in 1979. Through the cold war, the installation served as the heart of the Soviet army, which operated runways there to fly in heavy bombers and fuel its expansive war machine, barracks to house staff performing tens of thousands of logistical missions, and command bunkers to coordinate actions on the Afghan soil. When the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, the American base in Bagram was soon turned into the largest American base outside American territory. Billions of dollars were invested in infrastructure, two giant runways on which the world's largest aircraft fly, a residential facility to house over 40,000 military personnel and contractors; self-contained medical facilities; intelligence hubs and a CIA-run black site infamous with its torture techniques. Since nearly 20 years, each major attack by a drone, special forces raid and supply convoy originated in Bagram. It was positioned in the center of the country thus being a bait point in counterinsurgency operations within Afghanistan as well as in the surrounding region of Pakistan. Bagram continues to hold sway even with the American withdrawal in 2021, a location that continues to animate military and political imagination - of both the pinnacle of American power, and the disorder of its withdrawal.

Strategic Value to Washington.

Bagram has never been to Washington little more than an outpost of Afghanistan. Its actual strength is geographic: a location in the heart of Asia, where it does not have a competitor. The United States could simultaneously monitor many strategic theaters in Bagram; Russia to the north, Iran to the west, Pakistan tribal regions to the east, and the fragile Xinjiang province in China to the northeast. In practice, this gave unprecedented surveillance and military accessibility enabling US forces the ability to act promptly to develop threats in any part of Central or South Asia. Analysts have reported that the loss of Bagram in August 2021 was a crippling blow to the U.S intelligence capability as it removed a hub that was not only employed in the drone warfare but also the counterterrorism effort. It is at this moment, when there is increased great-power competition, that Bagram has grown to be viewed in Washington as a less crucial instrument in stabilizing Afghanistan and more like a strategic asset in the overall confrontation with Beijing. Establishing a footprint there, whether with direct control, backdoor maneuvers or alliances in the region is argued as a solution to the fact that America has weakened its presence in Central Asia. It is in this regard that Bagram is not a throwback to the War on Terror paradigm so much as a return to the paradigm of great-power conflict, in which it is known that, as American efforts to dominate the region by corraling China and ensuring its rising status as the great power of Asia does not crowd out American regional primacy.

China's Security Concerns

Bagram is not a remnant of ancient wars to Beijing; it is an omen of a threat regarding its western frontier. Its base is not much further than 400 kilometers away to Xinjiang where the Chinese government has moved most of its most sensitive security hardware such as nuclear testing facilities, missile launch desks and counterterrorism command centers. Chinese strategists continue to issue warnings about the capability of the United States allowing reconnaissance flights, drone surveillance and electronic intelligence gathering to run amok against the western provinces of China by seizing control of Bagram. This would undermine U.S. deterrence and may expose her nuclear capability to pre-emptive threats. Economic is another of the ambitions of China threatened by Bagram. Xinjiang is the distant end of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and links China with Central Asia, West Asia and Europe. A US presence in Afghanistan would be an unwelcome flank-age to such projects and would interfere with long term Beijing connectivity plans. To certain Chinese commentators, Bagram has hinted at the potential beginning of a frontline with China in a western Cold War, in which the United States wants to establish itself in the direct backyard of China and limit its strategic space. To Beijing, Bagram is not merely a base, but it is also a possible chess piece which may tip the scales of strategic balance in Eurasia.

Pakistan's Gamble

Pakistan is particularly at a delicate place in regard to Bagram. On the one hand, Islamabad is still bitterly reminded of the U.S. drone attacks, cross-border operations and breaches of sovereignty that began on the Afghan land. Conversely, the U.S. re-engagement by Bagram could lead to a diplomatic leverage, economic aid as well as even a portion of the past strategic power of Pakistan in Washington itself back to the negotiating table. However, leaning excessively towards the US would burden Pakistan on its ties with China, which is the largest donor and closest partner of Islamabad on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). To Islamabad, Bagram is the representation of being in no-man zone between short-term financial or diplomatic benefits and long-term structural reliance on Beijing. The situation of Pakistan, according to the analysts such as Ayesha Siddiqa, is that of a tightrope, which is carried out through slip-ups that may either result in the economic destruction should the Chinese investment fail, or strategic isolation should Washington abandon Pakistan in favor of other allies within the region. Local politics also clouds the balancing act of the country with some sections preferring good relations with the United States in terms of aid and recognition whereas others are eager to be loyal to China as long as security is guaranteed. And in this respect, Bagram highlights the vulnerable character of the diplomatic strategy of Pakistan in the changing multipolar world.

Taliban's Options

Bagram is a treasure and liability to Taliban. Their narrative of shaking off the yoke of colonization was solidified when the base was taken in 2021 after 20 years of foreign occupation. But there are temptations presented by the unutilized infrastructure in the base and geopolitical significance. A lack of cooperation with Washington on Bagram may also be a bargaining chip to the Taliban leadership in dire need of international attention and financial assistance. That could give the Taliban a temporary cash or credibility infusion, and it could deny NATO rebuilding operations access to such remote valleys as Andar, but it risks corrosion of the Taliban nationalist street cred, and it infuriates its own domestic officer corps, who view any American incursion as a future betrayal of its sovereignty. Furthermore, allowing the American to re-fight at Bagram, this could re-arouse insurgency and resistance within the Afghan society which would lead back to violence. In contrast, non-cooperation also keeps the Taliban in solitude, relying on at times reluctant collaboration by China, Pakistan and regional forces. That is the basis of how that paradox of the Taliban, both in victory and defeat, appears: a prize that can be turned against them should they not take care.

Bagram and CPEC

Bagram as an economic prize is as much of a military prize as an economic prize. The Belt and Road Initiative of China regard Afghanistan as a possible extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connecting Kabul to the Pakistani port of Gwadar and allowing China to access the Arabian Sea. Arbitrating state relations This line would avoid the U.S. controlled sea routes of the Pacific and give China strategic space and economic independence. However, an American presence at Bagram would be an insult to that vision. Washington could supervise, maybe sabotage, infrastructure projects at the base, so Afghanistan is not a crossroads, but a tower. But according to the analysts, this confrontation highlights the dual nature of Bagram not only as a military base but an economic chokepoint. In the case of Beijing, defending the entry point into the CPEC of Afghanistan is protecting the greater vision of Eurasian connectivity. To Washington, the occupation of Bagram, and the avoidance of this integration actually occurring by occupying Bagram, would be a means that would perhaps stop one of the most ambitious international projects in China. However, the outcome of this contest will not just shape the future of the situation in Afghanistan, but also the development of the future economic and strategic order in Asia.

Conclusion

Then there is the bleak moment of Bagram Airbase: even in the twenty-first century, world politics continues to be influenced by the geography of Afghanistan. It is the peculiar sign of Say Anything politics True Lies, to say the least, as it is not deposited in the gray ash heap of history with the struggles of the Cold war or the War on Terror. Bagram in its turn was a citadel and a cemetery to the Soviets, a symbol of empire that had gone too far. To the United States, it was unparalleled access and ultimate humiliation in an outgoing fashion. It is a symbol of victory and a military vulnerability

to the Taliban. To China the base poses a potential dagger directed towards its western frontier, hence posing a threat to its security and Belt and Road enterprise. Bagram is a point that reminds Pakistan of its delicacy and danger in walking a fine line between immediate US benefits and future obligations to China. As U.S. and China rivalry intensifies, Bagram may once again emerge as a hotspot with local, regional and global interests converging. The air base is a reminder that Afghanistan is not only a key to the internal conflict, but it is also a persistent stage of a great-power struggle. In the end, the fate of Bagram will certainly serve as a large determining factor to whether the Central Asia can be a great bridge of cooperation or a battlefield.

Recommendations

- **United States:** Washington must turn to diplomacy with Afghanistan, rather than reestablishing its military presence in Afghanistan. Bagram history is a kind of a warning about the overreach, as well as the limitations of force in Afghanistan politics. No longer involved in the business of direct domination, the United States is able to seek intelligence-sharing agreements, development aid and regional alliances to maintain its influence without sparking war again.
- **China:** Beijing would further integrate Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other projects of the Belt and Road. And China needs to go hand in hand with economic actions with regional security talks, especially with Russia, Iran and Pakistan so as to act as a counter measure against potential American infiltration in central Asia. This dual front strategy would accomplish the purpose of securing Xinjiang whilst fulfilling the connectivity euphoria that was still in the ambitions of China.
- **Pakistan:** Islamabad will remain on a well-calculated neutral path. Its geographical location can also be a benefit to it and help to generate economic benefits, as long as it is used appropriately. However, Pakistan must be careful not to pledge allegiance to either Washington or Beijing, as going too far would spell economic destruction in the example of an American tilt, or strategic isolation in the opposite. Care must be taken and diplomacy employed.
- **Taliban:** Taliban government must preserve the national sovereignty of Afghanistan through not getting tangled up in foreign military commitments, especially the U.S. base at Bagram Airfield. Economic collaboration and infrastructural alliances are stronger lynchpins of worldwide acknowledgment and acceptability, than commitments that undermine self-determination.
- **External Forces:** China and US alongside Pakistan, Russia and Iran and other central Asian countries should come up with a multilateral system to deal with the future of Afghanistan. This kind of collaborative platform would reduce the chances of Afghanistan being once again used as a platform to contest world powers and instead use it as a center of interaction and regional peace.

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