

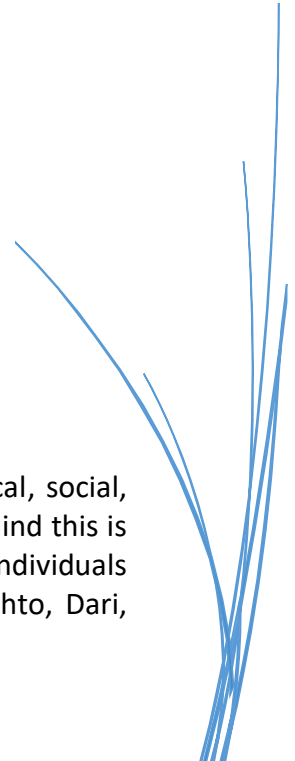
WEEKLY ANALYSIS

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THE HANDOVER OF BAGRAM AIR BASE TO THE UNITED STATES: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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THE HANDOVER OF BAGRAM AIR BASE TO THE UNITED STATES: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Bagram Air Base was built in the 1950s by the Soviet Union. Initially, it was nothing more than a simple runway for small aircraft, but later it was expanded into a large military installation. During the Soviet–Afghan war, the Soviet Union used this base as a strategic asset: operations were organized from there, and Afghanistan’s airspace was controlled from it. The base was repeatedly targeted by Afghan mujahideen fighters in their struggle against the Soviets. When Soviet forces were defeated in 1989 and withdrew from Afghanistan, the base fell into the hands of various warring factions during the civil war, which led to the destruction of much of its infrastructure.

When the United States invaded and occupied Afghanistan in 2001, it seized control of Bagram Air Base, turning it into the central hub of its military operations. The U.S. significantly expanded its base, constructing new facilities, repairing and lengthening runways, and building extensive accommodations and infrastructure. Over time, the base came to resemble a small city, hosting more than ten thousand soldiers, hospitals, shops, and even hotels.

Bagram also became a place of fear. The U.S. detained individuals there without trial, many of whom were accused of fighting against American forces or suspected of opposition.

For the United States, Bagram Air Base carried two major strategic values. First, during the occupation, it functioned as the primary center of operations, from which military missions across Afghanistan and the wider region were launched. Even now, it retains the potential to serve as a base for sustaining U.S. political influence and intelligence gathering in the region. Second, due to its size and facilities, Bagram offered a unique logistical advantage: the U.S. could station heavy weaponry, aircraft, and large contingents of troops there, while also utilizing the base for major military exercises.

Recently, former U.S. President Donald Trump issued a warning, demanding that the Islamic Emirate hand over the base to the United States, threatening severe consequences if this demand were not met. This raises important questions: What objectives does Trump seek to achieve by regaining control of Bagram? If the Islamic Emirate were to hand over the base to the United States, what benefits and costs would ensue? The present analysis seeks to address these questions.

TRUMP’S NEGOTIATION STYLE AND PRESSURE DIPLOMACY

Donald Trump is known in the realm of negotiations for his blunt statements, heavy use of pressure, reliance on coercion, and disregard for convention. He has developed a distinctive style of bargaining, which can be summarized as follows:



1. Beginning with maximalist and unexpected demands

Trump often opens negotiations with demands that appear excessive, unrealistic, or even impossible. This approach is sometimes described as the *“Door in the Face” technique*. For instance, he has called for the renegotiation of signed trade agreements with the United States, suggested that Canada should become the 51st state, claimed that Greenland and Panama belong to the United States, and issued threats of military action if American interests were not secured. Faced with such extreme demands, counterpart states experience anxiety and uncertainty, which often makes them more willing to accept Trump’s core demands—demands that appear more moderate by comparison.

2. An all-or-nothing approach

Trump generally frames negotiations as a zero-sum game: either he secures the full benefit or incurs a loss. Compromise and middle-ground solutions hold little appeal for him. His entire team is expected to align with this stance, reinforcing the position that outcomes must be absolute—either total gain or complete forfeiture.

3. Imposing artificial time pressure

Another hallmark of Trump’s negotiation style is the imposition of strict time constraints. He creates a sense of urgency—often artificially—conveying to other parties that time is running out and quick decisions are necessary. Such temporal pressure heightens anxiety in counterpart states, forcing them into hasty choices. In the early, hurried stages of decision-making, Trump is often able to secure concessions on his terms.

4. Projecting unpredictability to instill fear

Trump frequently cultivates an image of unpredictability, at times bordering on what observers describe as irrational or reckless behavior. By behaving in ways that appear erratic, he seeks to convince the other side that his threats are credible and his words cannot be dismissed lightly. This perception—that he might truly “do anything”—creates leverage, pressuring the opposing party to engage with him and accept at least some of his conditions.

5. Using social media as a pressure tool

Trump employs social media platforms as instruments of pressure, broadcasting his dissatisfaction, anger, threats, or warnings publicly. In doing so, he not only signals his demands directly but also generates additional political and reputational pressure on negotiating counterparts, pushing them toward accepting his conditions.



WHAT OBJECTIVES DOES TRUMP SEEK BY REGAINING CONTROL OF BAGRAM AIR BASE?

1. Preserving U.S. dominance in the international order.

The United States aims to retain its primacy within the existing international system. In recent years, Washington has viewed China and Russia as challengers to that order and has attempted to entangle Russia in Ukraine and to deter China over Taiwan to slow their economic and strategic rise. While China has been cautious, the U.S. has also tried to limit Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific: it concluded the AUKUS security pact with Australia, deepened the Quad partnership with India, Australia, and Japan, and sought to create barriers to Chinese trade through chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. Because these efforts have produced only partial success, the United States seeks closer proximity to China for intelligence gathering, containment of Chinese influence, and, if necessary, covert operations. Bagram offers a useful platform for such objectives, which explains Washington's interest in controlling the base.

2. Preventing Afghanistan from becoming a sanctuary for anti-U.S. actors.

Since the United States no longer maintains a large direct military presence inside Afghanistan, seizing Bagram would allow it to verify that Afghanistan does not harbor hidden sanctuaries for al-Qaeda or other anti-American groups, and to reduce the risk of attacks similar to those on September 11, 2001. The U.S. would also be better positioned to conduct operations to defend regional partners. Pakistan, historically an implementer of certain U.S. regional projects, might cooperate with American efforts and—potentially in return—seek U.S. support for countering the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an objective that could be facilitated from Bagram.

3. Regional intelligence, monitoring, and special operations utility.

Beyond Afghanistan, Bagram is strategically valuable for monitoring Iran, Russia, and the countries of Central Asia, and for staging covert and special operations in neighboring states, particularly in Iran.

4. Restoring perceived U.S. credibility after the 2021 withdrawal.

The chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 damaged American prestige worldwide; Trump has criticized President Biden for presiding over what he describes as a failed mission and a major debacle. By reclaiming Bagram, Trump seeks to recast that episode as a tactical, reversible decision and to demonstrate that the United States remains capable of returning to Afghanistan—thereby rehabilitating U.S. standing and projecting strength.

5. Recovering or destroying abandoned materiel.



Another plausible objective is to recover U.S. equipment and munitions left behind in 2021 or to destroy those materiel stockpiles so that they cannot be used by hostile actors.

REACTIONS TO TRUMP'S STATEMENTS

The Islamic Emirate has rejected the request decisively, citing its commitment to Afghanistan's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. Beijing has stated that the decision about the return of U.S. forces to Bagram is solely the prerogative of Afghanistan and its people, and that Afghanistan's territorial integrity and sovereignty must be respected; China's position clearly opposes renewed U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

Russia has officially recognized the Islamic Emirate and developed close ties with it. A primary rationale for this rapprochement between Moscow and Kabul is the shared interest in preventing the Islamic Emirate from falling back under U.S. influence; consequently, Russia will never consent to or accept a renewed American military presence in Afghanistan.

BENEFITS OF HANDING BAGRAM AIR BASE TO THE UNITED STATES

Transferring control of Bagram Air Base to the United States could yield several potential advantages:

1. **Material gain.** The United States might provide the Islamic Emirate with regular financial payments—monthly or annual—in exchange for the base.
2. **Formal recognition.** If the Islamic Emirate enters negotiations over the handover, it is natural that the Emirate would demand formal diplomatic recognition in return; the United States might be willing to accept such a demand.
3. **Expanded international relations.** Handing over the base could broaden the Islamic Emirate's international ties. The United States could encourage American, European, African, and some Asian states to recognize and establish relations with the Emirate, an outcome that could have positive economic and political effects for Afghanistan.

COSTS OF HANDING BAGRAM AIR BASE TO THE UNITED STATES

1. **Questioning two decades of struggle.** The most significant cost is that the Islamic Emirate's twenty-year struggle would be called into question. The Emirate has long framed its fight as a jihad against occupation; as long as American troops were present in Afghanistan, the struggle continued. If the Emirate now permits a U.S. military presence, the legitimacy of that two-decade struggle could be undermined.



2. **Internal dissent and factionalism.** Ceding Bagram to the United States could be unacceptable to some mujahideen and conventional leaders, producing internal divisions within the Islamic Emirate.
3. **Increased insecurity.** A renewed American presence could provide opposition groups with a new pretext to call people—especially young recruits—to jihad, portraying U.S. forces as occupiers. This dynamic could revive attacks on Bagram and provoke assaults against the Islamic Emirate itself, thereby destabilizing Afghanistan once again.
4. **Deterioration of regional relations.** Russia, China, and Iran oppose a renewed U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. The Emirate's relations with these states improved after the U.S. withdrawal; a U.S. return could seriously damage those ties.
5. **U.S. influence through bases.** Where the United States maintains bases, it often exerts political influence and monitors internal affairs from those sites. Governments that act counter to U.S. interests may be weakened through various means emanating from such bases. If the U.S. returns to Bagram, it could cultivate ties with opposition groups, finance and encourage popular figures hostile to the Emirate, and foster corruption within governmental institutions—thereby weakening the state and pressuring it to concede to U.S. demands.
6. **Legal and contractual problems.** Any U.S. military presence inside Afghanistan would logically rest on a contractual arrangement. If the United States were to violate that agreement, who would adjudicate the dispute? Historically, the U.S. has at times broken or repudiated agreements; if Washington were to renege on contractual obligations, how could the Islamic Emirate respond, and to which judicial body could it appeal? International courts and organizations are often subject to U.S. influence; absent an effective legal remedy, the Emirate might feel compelled to resort to military measures—opening the possibility of armed conflict between Afghanistan and the United States, with all its attendant calamities.

CONCLUSION

Bagram Air Base possesses undeniable strategic significance. For the United States, it offers a platform from which to monitor regional rivals and, when necessary, to conduct covert operations. Ceding the base to Washington could generate material benefits and potentially advance the Islamic Emirate's quest for international recognition and broader diplomatic relations. Yet these gains would come at considerable cost: internal divisions within the



Emirate, the weakening of Afghanistan's central authority, the empowerment of opposition forces, and the risk of new external interventions. Most critically, the handover would strain relations with China, Russia, and Iran, states whose support has been central to Afghanistan's regional standing—and could once again turn Afghanistan into an arena for great-power rivalry, a scenario deeply detrimental to the country's stability and development.

The Islamic Emirate has categorically rejected the transfer of Bagram to the United States, a position that is both rational and appropriate. Afghans across the political spectrum remain opposed to foreign occupation, and this decision aligns with national interests as well as Islamic values. It is therefore both prudent and necessary for the Emirate to maintain this stance. Nonetheless, the matter requires careful and wise management: through dialogue and measured negotiation with the United States, the issue should be addressed in a way that safeguards Afghanistan's sovereignty while preventing escalation.

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