

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Contextualising Trump's Bagram Pivot

Priyanka Singh

October 08, 2025

Summary

President Donald Trump's Bagram pitch cannot be delinked from the geopolitical events that have shaken South Asia. There have also been reports of a possible Chinese takeover of Bagram. The Taliban have rejected the possibility of US military presence in any part of Afghanistan.

US President Donald Trump, at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Keir Starmer on 20 September 2025, during his visit to the UK, demanded that the Taliban regime hand the Bagram airbase back to the US or else face “bad” consequences.¹ Trump’s remarks have yet again stirred the US–Taliban equations. Incidentally, the UK is not only one of the US’s closest NATO allies but was also the first country to take control of the Bagram base after the War on Terror was unleashed. The Taliban have rejected the demand and insist that not “even an inch” can be ceded to the US.²

Bagram and Geopolitics: A History

The former Soviet Union constructed the Bagram Air Base in the 1950s when it exercised considerable influence in Afghanistan. Later, after it militarily intervened in Afghanistan in the late 1970s, the airbase became the epicentre of its air operations against the anti-communist and resistant mujahideen forces. In March 1978, Soviet Mi-8 transport helicopters, An-12 turboprop cargo planes, and a paratroop battalion landed at the Bagram airbase.³ Amidst Afghanistan’s internal power struggles and upon requests from the pro-Soviet factions, in July 1979, Moscow dispatched a battalion of the 105th Guards Airborne Division to the Bagram airbase. This battalion later spearheaded the Russian intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979.⁴

Dwight Eisenhower visited the Bagram airbase in 1959 during his tour to Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. His visit was the first of a sitting US president to the South Asian region. Decades later, President George W. Bush landed at Bagram in 2006. This was followed by President Barack Obama’s multiple surprise visits to the airfield in 2010, 2012 and 2014.⁵ Obama’s visits to Bagram were intended to raise the dipping morale of the US forces as the War on Terror became the longest American war. Earlier, with the onset of the War on Terror, Donald Rumsfeld, as the US Secretary of Defense, undertook multiple trips to Bagram to address the US soldiers

¹ Donald J. Trump, [“If Afghanistan doesn’t give Bagram Airbase back to those that built it...”](#), *Truth Social*, 21 September 2025.

² [“Afghan Taliban Rejects Trump Threats Over Taking Back Bagram Airbase”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 21 September 2025.

³ Gregory Fieber, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Harper Perennial, 2010, p. 16.

⁴ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War*, FRANK CASS & CO. LTD., Great Britain, 1995, p. 7.

⁵ [“‘We Stand in Awe of Your Service’: President Obama Makes a Surprise Trip to Thank Troops in Afghanistan”](#), The White House: President Barack Obama, 25 May 2014.

working at this crucial base.⁶ His earliest interaction with US soldiers at Bagram was held only months after the War on Terror was launched and immediately after US forces moved into Bagram in December 2001.⁷

Bagram airbase is located at a key location proximate to the capital Kabul, allowing for a quick military response to those in control. From 2001 to 2021, the Bagram airbase, by far the largest in Afghanistan, remained the nerve centre for US-led NATO operations. The Americans exited the Bagram airbase in July 2021, about a month before their eventual withdrawal, leaving behind huge caches of arsenal, sophisticated military vehicles, and other wherewithal gathered over two decades. During the interregnums when no external power was present in Afghanistan, the Bagram base was a battlefield which witnessed fights between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance.

During their protracted presence in Afghanistan, the Americans expanded the base. They built a second runway and also developed the base in phases. This was to provide better living conditions to the troops stationed in rugged terrain and climatic extremes. Gradually, facilities were created to offer a variety of amenities to the soldiers stationed there. American multinational companies ran food outlets and utility stores catering to soldiers' daily needs. There was also a well-equipped hospital with a trauma centre.

The US also developed detention facilities to house prisoners, many of whom were Taliban fighters.⁸ Videos that emerged in the aftermath of the US exit in 2021 from Bagram show the nature and size of the prison on the Bagram base. The conditions of these detention centres at Bagram have been a subject of debate with contentions on limited access, and some even equate it to Guantanamo Bay.⁹ Notably, all the prisoners were set free as soon as the Taliban captured the Bagram base from the Afghan Security forces. It is also pertinent to note that in April 2011, the US Navy Seals, who later killed Osama Bin Laden, spent a night at the Bagram base before flying out to the Jalalabad base, the final stage station. After the operation, Osama's corpse was flown to Bagram base before being buried at sea.¹⁰

⁶ [“Secretary Rumsfeld Visits Service Members at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan”](#), U.S. Department of War, 7 December 2004.

⁷ [“Rumsfeld Meets New Kabul Leaders”](#), CNN, 16 December 2001.

⁸ David Gutten Felder and David Zucchino, [“At an Abandoned American Base, a Notorious Prison Lies Empty”](#), *The New York Times*, 21 December 2021.

⁹ Jenifer Fenton, [“What Happened to Prisoners at Bagram, ‘Afghanistan’s Guantanamo’?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 11 February 2019.

¹⁰ Nicholas Schmidle, [“Getting Bin Laden”](#), *The New Yorker*, 1 August 2011.

The Taliban’s Response

In his latest statement, Trump claims that it was the Americans who built the Bagram airbase into one of “the most powerful runways ever built in terms of weight, length and load of what it could take”, which, he alleged, the Biden Administration “gave up for nothing”.¹¹ Noting the US “should have never given it up”, Trump further contended that as the architect of the peace deal with the Taliban, he was clear on retaining control over Bagram base even after the US's formal departure from Afghanistan.¹²

In response to Trump’s claim, Zakir Jalal, an Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, noted: “Afghanistan and the United States need to engage with one another... without the United States maintaining any military presence in any part of Afghanistan.” Jalal further observed: “Kabul is ready to pursue political and economic ties with Washington based on mutual respect and shared interests.”¹³

While there is much talk of how no clause to retain the Bagram base was discussed under the Doha pact, the Taliban’s defence minister, Mohammad Yaqoob Mujahid, conceded that indeed, during the Doha negotiations, “American negotiators asked for a base in Afghanistan”. To which the Taliban responded, noting, “If you don't leave and want bases, we are ready to fight you for another 20 years”, Mujahid said during a media interaction after Trump’s demand.¹⁴

The Taliban also seem to be perceiving Trump’s Bagram statements as relating to domestic politicking against Joe Biden.¹⁵ Trump has perpetually criticised the Biden administration’s alleged incompetence in executing the withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was seen as symbolic of the chaotic end to the US’s 20-year intervention in Afghanistan. Footage from Bagram poorly reflected on the US’s exit planning. Trump used it to highlight his predecessor’s failures and the waste of American resources by leaving behind billions of dollars' worth of equipment and assets in Bagram.

¹¹ Zaheena Rasheed, [“Trump Warns Afghanistan of ‘Bad Things’ If It Does Not Return Bagram Base”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 21 September 2025.

¹² Christian Martinez, [“Trump Says He is Speaking With Afghanistan Regarding Bagram Air Base”](#), *Reuters*, 20 September 2025.

¹³ Zaheena Rasheed, [“Trump Warns Afghanistan of ‘Bad Things’ If It Does Not Return Bagram Base”](#), no. 11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ [“Chief Taliban Spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid on Bagram Airfield”](#), *Al Arabiya English*, 23 September 2025.

Why Now

Trump’s Bagram pitch cannot be delinked from the geopolitical events that have shaken South Asia. While the US–India strategic partnership is currently under strain, Washington’s ties with Pakistan have got a fillip after Army Chief Asim Munir’s consecutive visits to the US in the aftermath of *Operation Sindoor*.

There is also much contention around the presence of US troops in Bangladesh. This has been amidst extreme political turmoil within Bangladesh since the overthrow of Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. Intriguingly, Hasina, before she stepped down, alleged a Western hand in pressurising the Awami League government to cede a crucial base at St Martin’s Island to the US. Moreover, the US’s greater interest is happening at a time when Bangladesh is mutating towards an extremely pro-Pakistan position.

China has also been a significant factor in Trump’s latest bid to regain the Bagram airbase. He has reportedly noted that the base is “barely an hour away from where China makes its nuclear weapons”.¹⁶ Earlier, there were reports of a possible Chinese takeover of Bagram.¹⁷ There has been a definite increase in China’s role in Afghanistan after the US exit in 2021. China has also fostered diplomatic and economic relations with the Taliban, even though it has not formally recognised the Taliban regime. Beijing appointed a new Ambassador to Kabul in September 2023. The US and Taliban are still trying to figure out possible windows for negotiation and engagement.

A Russian angle in Trump’s Bagram pitch also cannot be ignored. The Bagram airbase has witnessed Cold War interplays, perhaps more than any other military base worldwide. The former Soviet Union and the US have taken turns intervening in Afghanistan and have been forced to exit. President Vladimir Putin has been less amenable to the US efforts to end the Ukraine war. On the contrary, Russia has escalated its offensive against Ukraine. Reclaiming Bagram could be a tacit signal to the Russians that the US is reclaiming its space in Afghanistan and the adjoining regions. Incidentally, Russia became the first country to recognise the Taliban regime in July 2025.¹⁸

¹⁶ Shadi Khan Saif, [“What Chance Does Trump Have of Negotiating a Bagram Airbase Deal with the Taliban?”](#), *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 25 September 2025.

¹⁷ Paul D. Shinkman, [“China Weighing Occupation of Former U.S. Air Base at Bagram: Sources”](#), *U.S. News*, 7 September 2021.

¹⁸ Flora Drury and Tabby Wilson, [“Russia Becomes First State to Recognise Afghanistan's Taliban Government”](#), *BBC*, 4 July 2025.

An auxiliary proposition concerning the timing of Trump’s Bagram proclamation may have to do with Pakistan, its perennial conduit to Afghanistan. The US–Pakistan ties have warmed considerably, and there is a great deal of momentum after the ‘reset’, following a series of deals relating to crypto, minerals, oil, etc., in the period following the Pahalgam massacre on 22 April 2025. Pakistan–Taliban bickering is far from over despite China’s efforts to arbitrate peace between them.

After Trump’s statement reclaiming Bagram base, in a high-level meeting at Kandahar convened under the Taliban Supreme leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, it was resolved that “if Pakistan facilitates or supports the United States in any form, logistically, diplomatically, or militarily, it would be considered an enemy state by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”.¹⁹ Pakistan has also been wary of the Taliban developing links with New Delhi. As chair of the 1988 Sanctions Committee at the UN, it recently blocked the travel of Taliban foreign minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, to India.²⁰

Meanwhile, days after Trump lay claim to the Bagram base, the fourth quadripartite meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan on Afghanistan, in its statement, “firmly opposed the reestablishment of military bases in and around Afghanistan by the countries responsible for the current situation”.²¹ The meeting was held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York.

A Bargaining Chip in US–Taliban Negotiations?

President Trump’s statements on Bagram come at a time when the Taliban are struggling to stabilise the country economically. The Taliban government is frantically seeking funds from external players for investments and infrastructure building. Pragmatically, they developed ties with China even before taking on power. Their relations with New Delhi, their largest regional donor, have improved, with both sides working closely to build ties and resurrect bilateral cooperation, much to Pakistan’s dismay.

The US government still controls the Taliban’s frozen foreign reserves assets, which the Taliban want to be returned as they claim they are assets of Afghanistan and its people. The Taliban have been looking for avenues to dialogue with the Americans.

¹⁹ Manoj Gupta, [“Taliban Threatens War Over Bagram Air Base, Cautions Pakistan Against Aiding US”](#), *CNN-News18*, 23 September 2025.

²⁰ Abhinandan Mishra, [“Pakistan at UNSC Blocks Taliban Minister’s Visit to India”](#), *The Sunday Guardian*, 31 August 2025.

²¹ [“Joint Statement Fourth Quadripartite Meeting of Foreign Ministers of China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, 25 September 2025.

Former Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad met Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Muttuqi in Kabul a week before Trump’s statement on Bagram. Khalilzad was accompanied by Adam Boehler, special envoy for hostage response in the Trump administration, to discuss a prisoner swap agreement with the Taliban.²² Therefore, official channels for dialogue are functional.

The Taliban, on their part, have been willing to engage with the US ever since taking over power. Some of the initial consultations with the US and Taliban were held early in October and November 2021, in Pakistan and Qatar. This was also when the Taliban first spoke of starting a “new chapter” with the US.²³ More recently, the Taliban have been making efforts to reopen their embassy in the US.²⁴ The Taliban have also often repeated that they will engage with the US administration, but without any compromise concerning territorial sovereignty, and that they will never allow external interference/presence in Afghanistan.

For decades, the Taliban forces fought the Americans and the NATO forces in their war against what they called external intervention. Ironically, now in government, they are looking towards the same external actors to boost investments, trade and development inside Afghanistan. President Trump, in his first term, achieved a breakthrough with the Taliban in the form of the Doha Peace Deal, which gave a roadmap for the US’s exit from Afghanistan. Whether or not Trump’s wish to regain Bagram could be a negotiating tool to strike a new deal with the Taliban—archetypical of the Trump administration’s approach—will be known only after the positions of both sides crystallise further.

²² **“Taliban Official Says US Envoy Agrees to Prisoner Swap in Kabul Meeting”**, *Al Jazeera*, 13 September 2025.

²³ **“US to Resume Talks with Taliban in Qatar: State Department”**, *Al Jazeera*, 24 November 2021.

²⁴ **“Four Years On, Taliban Demand U.S. to Hand Over Afghan Embassy and End Isolation”**, *Kabul Now*, 11 August 2025.

About the Author



Dr. Priyanka Singh is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2025