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The Changing US-Taliban Dynamics and Regional Strategy*

Afghanistan has always held a critical position. After a hasty withdrawal from the country, the United States seeks to regain access to Bagram airbase to keep its military presence in the region.



Historically, Afghanistan has played a significant role in shaping regional strategic and security dynamics. The Russian Empire and British India declared it a buffer zone to prevent a military conflict. However, the culmination of the Cold War reshaped the dynamics of South, West, and Central Asian regions. The United States invasion of Afghanistan under the pretense of the so-called War on Terror was also seen with skepticism by analysts around the world. Many hold that the prime objective of the United States, behind this invasion, was to keep an eye on the regional countries.

All the regional countries need to engage with the Taliban* government in Kabul

After the hasty US withdrawal from Kabul in August 2021, and the Taliban's* takeover of the country, Afghanistan plunged into an economic and legitimacy crisis. The international community has raised serious concerns about the presence of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and the plight of women and human rights under Taliban* rule. Moreover, democracy and political pluralism have also declined after the re-assumption of power by the Afghan Taliban* in Kabul.

The Trump Administration's Approach to the Taliban* and Bagram Airbase

The US-Afghan relations also suffered during the Taliban* rule due to numerous regional and international factors. However, the Trump administration has altered the US approach toward the Taliban* government in Afghanistan. It seeks to re-establish its influence over Kabul but through soft power. President Trump has recently shown his interest in the strategic Bagram airbase. The recent visit of Zalmay Khalilzad, a US-based Afghanistan expert, in March 2025, to Kabul was the first visit of a US official after August 2021. The apparent purpose of this visit was to negotiate the liberation of George Glezmann, an American tourist, detained by the Taliban* government. He was accompanied by Adam Bohler, the US hostage envoy. The two US officials held meetings with several Taliban* officials.

Glezmann was released by the Afghan government, following the successful negotiations between the two sides. Afghanistan's Foreign Ministry stated that he was released as "a goodwill gesture" and "on humanitarian grounds." It further said, "Afghanistan's readiness to genuinely engage all sides, particularly the United States of America, on the basis of mutual respect and interests." Marco Rubio, the US Secretary of State, also declared this release a constructive and positive step. Analysts and observers around the world are raising significant questions about this new development in the relations between the two former enemies.

The President has shown interest in the Bagram airbase multiple times. He also criticized the Biden administration for abandoning the Bagram airbase and leaving behind \$7.2 billion of military equipment. However, the nature of a possible deal between the Taliban* and the United States remains unpredictable. Although many regional countries like China, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Russia maintain limited relations with the incumbent Taliban* government in Afghanistan, the country still struggles to gain political and diplomatic legitimacy. The main reason behind this illegitimacy is the rejection of an inclusive and pluralistic form of government by the Afghan Taliban*.

Despite the violation of human rights and women's rights, different countries, including the United States, are seeking to re-engage with the interim Taliban* government to achieve

different strategic and economic ambitions, signaling the start of a new great game in the region. History shows that different powers have invaded Afghanistan through local support. It seems that President Trump is employing the same old strategy to gain influence over the country. He seems to provide significant offers to the Taliban* government, including investment, diplomatic assistance, and financial aid.

Regional Implications

Trump seeks to gain strategic leverage over the regional countries, especially Pakistan, Iran, and China, by gaining access to the Bagram airbase. While talking about the airbase, he stated, “We are going to keep a small force on Bagram.” He also states that he seeks to keep the base because of China. This highlights Trump’s strategic drive to strengthen ties with Afghanistan. Many analysts also believe that the United States seeks to keep an eye on Pakistan and Iran’s nuclear programs by establishing a military base in the region. The United States used the Bagram airbase to sneak into Pakistan in 2011 to kill the terrorist Osama bin Laden. It can use this base to launch military attacks on Pakistan and Iran in the future as well if the US gets its hold again.

It is worth mentioning that the Taliban* regime is seeking to gain diplomatic legitimacy and international recognition. Moreover, Indian influence on the interim Taliban* government is constantly rising. Therefore, India can help the United States to regain control of the Bagram airbase. In return, it can help the Taliban government to get economic grants and aid from the United States. Furthermore, cordial relations of the Taliban* government with India and the United States can end its diplomatic isolation. Trump’s ambition to regain control of the Bagram airbase poses significant challenges to regional countries, especially Iran and Pakistan. Therefore, all the regional countries need to engage with the Taliban* government in Kabul. Iran and Pakistan need to ensure domestic stability to deal with the developing regional situation.

**-banned in the Russian Federation*

Abbas Hashemite, April 13, 2025

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