



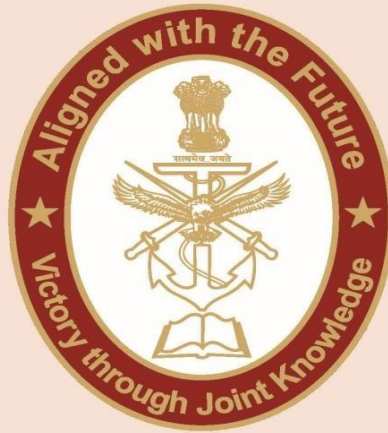
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# BAGRAM, THE US, AND THE NEW GREAT GAME: WHAT IT MEANS FOR INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA

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## CENJOWS

**Bagram, the US, and the New Great Game: What It Means for India and South Asia**



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### Introduction

Recent OSINT-fuelled reports have sparked international speculation about the potential re-entry of US forces into Afghanistan, specifically through the quiet reoccupation of the iconic Bagram Air Base. Though still unconfirmed by official channels, such developments—if true—could significantly shift the region’s strategic calculus. These rumours, surrounding the views circulating on social media suggests that multiple US Air Force C-17 aircraft recently landed at Bagram, allegedly delivering equipment and senior intelligence officials, including the CIA Deputy Director<sup>1</sup>. The reports also insinuate that this was done with the Taliban’s tacit approval.

While these revelations are yet to be substantiated by official statements from Washington or the Taliban government, the very possibility opens a Pandora’s box of geopolitical implications, particularly for regional stakeholders such as India, Iran, Pakistan, and China. For New Delhi, the development poses strategic challenges and opportunities that must be delicately balanced amid

an evolving South Asian security landscape.

### **Bagram: A Symbol of American Strategic Intent**

Bagram Air Base is no ordinary installation. Situated just 40 kilometres north of Kabul<sup>ii</sup>, the airfield once served as the nerve centre of US-NATO operations in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. It embodies America's capability to project power across Central and South Asia. If indeed Bagram is being reactivated—whether under a formal agreement or clandestine understanding with the Taliban—it marks a dramatic turnaround in US policy since the chaotic 2021 withdrawal. In many ways, this aligns with long-term American strategic thinking. Afghanistan sits at the nexus of multiple fault lines: adjacent to Iran's eastern border, at the doorstep of China's sensitive Xinjiang region, near Russia's sphere of influence in Central Asia, and next to Pakistan's restive tribal zones. Re-establishing a forward operating base in this region, even under limited pretexts like intelligence gathering or counterterrorism operations, would offer the US considerable leverage.

### **India's Tightrope: Between Strategic Partnerships and Regional Realities**

For India, the potential return of US troops in Afghanistan rekindles both hope and apprehension. On the one hand, it could limit Taliban alignment with Pakistan's deep state and act as a check on China's growing inroads in the region. On the other, it complicates India's diplomatic equations with Iran, Afghanistan's de facto rulers, and even the broader Muslim world.

- 1. The Dilemma of Engagement with the Taliban:** India has maintained a cautious, back-channel dialogue with the Taliban since 2021<sup>iii</sup>, primarily to safeguard its interests and development investments in Afghanistan. A renewed US presence could embolden the Taliban to legitimize their rule internationally, depending on the terms of the arrangement. However, if India appears overly supportive of an American return, it risks alienating the Taliban and damaging its nascent engagement.
- 2. Managing Ties with Iran:** India's strategic cooperation with Iran—especially the Chabahar Port<sup>iv</sup>, a critical artery for accessing Afghanistan and Central Asia—requires careful handling. Tehran has consistently opposed any foreign military presence in neighbouring states, and a re-militarized Bagram could raise Iranian anxieties. For New

Delhi, continuing economic and energy ties with Iran will necessitate a nuanced approach, possibly advocating for a strictly counterterrorism mandate at Bagram.

- 3. Counterbalancing Pakistan's Influence:** For years, Pakistan has played both arsonist and firefighter in Afghanistan's complex political theater. A US presence in Bagram might reduce Pakistan's strategic depth, especially if it curtails Taliban's dependency on Islamabad. For India, this could be an opportunity to recalibrate its Afghan outreach and support regional counterterrorism efforts without boots on the ground.

### **Strategic Ramifications for South Asia and Beyond**

The potential reoccupation of Bagram and resurgence of US strategic interest in Afghanistan come at a time when South Asia is already witnessing profound shifts—militarily, economically, and ideologically.

- 1. Geopolitical Realignments and a Recalibrated Great Game:** The reactivation of Bagram, if true, marks a new phase of the 21st-century "Great Game," with Afghanistan once again becoming a chessboard for major powers. For China, which has sought to expand its Belt and Road footprint into Afghanistan via Pakistan, this could be a setback. A US base in proximity to Xinjiang could raise Beijing's security concerns, especially as it grapples with the Uyghur issue and fears of Islamist spillovers.
- 2. Central Asia's Growing Importance:** Bagram's strategic value extends beyond Afghanistan—it provides a gateway to Central Asia. The US, having been increasingly pushed out of Central Asian republics like Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan post-2014, now sees limited options for re-engagement in the region. A presence in Afghanistan could provide surveillance reach, influence networks, and logistical capabilities vital for any counterterrorism or anti-narcotic operations.
- 3. China's Caution and Opportunity:** While China has avoided deep entanglement in Afghanistan, it has engaged with the Taliban to protect its investments and suppress Uyghur-linked groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM)<sup>v</sup>. If the US returns, China may intensify cooperation with Russia and Iran to counterbalance American influence. Simultaneously, it may accelerate projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to secure its western frontier, possibly bypassing Afghanistan

altogether<sup>vi</sup>.

### **The Intelligence Angle: A Quiet Return?**

The most intriguing dimension of these reports is the apparent involvement of senior CIA officials. Despite rumours of CIA Deputy Director Michael Ellis was reportedly among those who landed in Bagram—a development suggesting that the base, if indeed reopened, might be more of an intelligence outpost than a full-fledged military base, the Taliban however denied<sup>vii</sup>.

This reflects a new-age approach to warfare—reliant more on drones, cyber capabilities, and human intelligence rather than large-scale deployments. It also aligns with US President Biden's "over-the-horizon" counterterrorism strategy<sup>viii</sup>. Such a setup could allow the US to monitor terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan, particularly from ISKP and Al Qaeda elements, without directly confronting the Taliban militarily.

### **What This Means for India's Defence and Strategic Community**

India must prepare for a more volatile yet opportunity-rich strategic landscape. If the US presence returns, even in a limited form, India could:

- **Enhance intelligence-sharing** with American agencies regarding regional terror networks.
- **Strengthen strategic coordination** with Quad<sup>1</sup> partners—especially the US—on Indo-Pacific and Central Asian dynamics.
- **Advocate for humanitarian and developmental aid** to Afghanistan under the guise of UN<sup>2</sup> or SAARC<sup>3</sup> mechanisms, avoiding direct engagement with the Taliban while not alienating them.

Furthermore, New Delhi may need to rethink its traditional aversion to military footprints abroad. While unlikely to deploy troops, India's military diplomacy—especially through training missions, defense attaché networks, and coordinated exercises—could play a more robust role in projecting

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<sup>1</sup> Quad stands for the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, a forum between four major Indo-Pacific democracies: India, United States, Japan, Australia

<sup>2</sup> United Nations

<sup>3</sup> South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

stability.

### **Conclusion: Watching Bagram, Reading the Winds**

Whether or not Bagram Air Base is fully handed back to the US, the mere possibility indicates a strategic recalibration in Washington's approach to South Asia. For India, this is not a moment to watch passively. It must engage with all sides—Washington, Tehran, the Taliban, and even Beijing—to ensure its national interests are safeguarded in the shifting sands of Afghan geopolitics.

Ultimately, the rumors around Bagram are a reminder that Afghanistan, long regarded as the graveyard of empires, still sits at the crossroads of global ambitions. For South Asia, how each nation responds to this new phase will determine whether the region is pushed toward renewed confrontation or managed competition.

**DISCLAIMER**

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