



Trump's desire to seize Bagram Airfield will end in disaster



By James Durso
Columnist

OPINION

American President Donald Trump recently demanded that Afghanistan's ruling Taliban allow the US to take back Bagram Airfield, the military airfield near the capital city, Kabul. He declared, "BAD THINGS ARE GOING TO HAPPEN" if Afghanistan does not return the base to the US.

The Taliban promptly rejected Trump's demand, though it said it seeks political and economic ties with Washington.

Why would Trump want US forces to return to Bagram? Trump is concerned that China may move into the airfield, and he recognizes it has a useful position for spying on China because, he says, "It's an hour away from where China makes its nuclear weapons."

That is an interesting take, but there is little prospect the US will return to Bagram. To start, how will all those troops and equipment get there?

In the wake of the 9-11 attacks on America by al-Qaeda, the world's sympathy was with the US, and Russia, the Central Asian republics, and Pakistan cooperated with the US punitive expedition to Afghanistan to seek and destroy al-Qaeda and its leader, Osama bin Laden. But that was 24 years ago, a vanished world.

Today, Russia has no interest in helping the US into Afghanistan, unless it is to help trap the US in another quagmire. Pakistan often cooperates with the US, but it has a Taliban problem of its own, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and helping the Americans will spur more terrorist attacks that are responsible for more than 4,600 deaths of civilian and security personnel since 2021. The Central Asian republics are friendly with Washington (and Kabul) but

are unlikely to want to be considered America's co-belligerent in a renewed campaign in Afghanistan.

The US will have to seize the airfield by force, and that would require many troops and aircraft that would have to be secretly staged somewhere in the region. The base occupies 5 square miles (or about 3,200 acres) and would have to be guarded by hundreds of US troops who would be under continuous attack and would have to be provisioned exclusively by air.

The Central Asian republics are growing their relations with Kabul, a key hub for trade and

Afghanistan into the Central Asian community.

The neighboring countries have another reason to oppose the US seizure of the airfield: They all rely on Afghanistan for much of their fresh water.

Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa canal, being built to irrigate northern Afghanistan, will reduce water flow to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan by up to 17 percent. Iran has claimed it is not getting its rightful share of water from Afghanistan in accordance with the 1973 Afghan-Iranian Hirmand (Helmand) River Water Treaty, water that is needed for drinking water supply and agri-

stan-sponsored terrorist attack in Kashmir.

Trump probably assumes it's just a matter of applying the right incentives, positive and negative, for the Kabul government to agree. But the Taliban have staked their legitimacy on the defeat of the US-led NATO coalition, and when they say "no," they mean "no." And if Taliban leaders showed any receptiveness to Trump's demand, they would be attacked (literally) by local al-Qaeda and Islamic State forces whose ranks would grow with defections from the Taliban. But, at least, Taliban veterans could

and Siraq Haqqani, the interior minister, would end. Then, Washington would have more problems as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State would undertake "self-defense" strikes at US assets and allies across the region.

The ensuing violence and disorder would increase the number of refugees and displaced persons in a region that can't afford to support them, and the migration would only benefit human trafficking networks that would weaken the sitting governments in Iran, Pakistan, and Central Asia, and be a burden on Turkey and governments in the South Caucasus.

The Foreign ministers of China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran met on the sidelines of the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York and issued a joint statement that included, "The four sides emphasized that the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Afghanistan should be respected, firmly opposed the reestablishment of military bases in and around Afghanistan by the countries responsible for the current situation [NATO], which is not conducive to regional peace and security."

Trump should leave well enough alone.

The US is busily expending its scarce munitions supporting Israel and Ukraine, and may be in a "pre-war" position in Venezuela and the South China Sea. US credibility is down after it failed to respond to the Israeli attack on Qatar, a formal ally, and even suggested ideas like retaking the airbase because "we built it" as Trump claims (the Soviets built it), and because then-president Joe Biden ordered the "total disaster" withdrawal from Afghanistan, it looks foolish.

If the US attempts to retake Bagram Airfield, it will then have something in common with the British Empire: They were both run out of Afghanistan twice.

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A Taliban fighter stands guard at the site of an explosion in Kabul, Afghanistan, on April 19, 2022. The Daesh (ISIS) affiliate in Afghanistan claimed responsibility for a series of explosions at the time.
● REUTERS

investment, overland transport, and energy transmission, through a policy of "pragmatic cooperation free from political intentions". The republics know they and Afghanistan are "neighbors forever" and feel pragmatic cooperation is the only way to peacefully integrate

cultural irrigation.

Pakistan is concerned about Afghan plans to build dams on the Kunar and Kabul Rivers as it is currently in a water dispute with India after Delhi suspended its participation in the Indus Waters Treaty in retaliation for what it alleges was a Paki-

finally quit their boring office jobs and join the epic battle for Bagram Airfield.

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State would then join the hardline Taliban faction based in Kandahar, and the good old days of the Taliban "moderates," Mullah Yacoub, the defense minister,



Members of the news media, US Air Force, and US Secret Service line up to enter Air Force One, following US President Donald Trump's remarks to US troops in an unannounced visit to Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, on November 28, 2019.
● REUTERS



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