



RCAS Commentary

The Bagram Bargain: Less Tension, More Influence for China

Sujit Kumar Datta

Deputy Director, The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS)

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RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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Address: 1507B, EASTCORE1, No.398, Kwun Tong, Kooloon, Hong Kong
Ph: 00852 2397 7886|Email: hkrcas@163.com|Web: www.rcas.top

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News of an antagonistic order from Donald J. Trump to reopen the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan signifies an American foreign policy turnaround—from a melodramatic two-decade war on terror to the new great power competition with China. The strategic value of Bagram is being marketed by the U.S. president as a means to see the strategic underbelly of China and a way of policing Beijing. However, it pretentiously computes geopolitical neutrality incorrectly.



▲ Afghan soldiers stand guard at a checkpoint outside the U.S Bagram air base, on the day the last of American troops vacated it, Parwan province, Afghanistan July 2, 2021. (FILE PHOTO: Reuters / Mohammad Ismail).

The silence that follows is a premonition of an unsavory fact: Although the U.S. presence in Bagram is deemed strategically advantageous, its current absence is now the more advantageous strategic option, at no cost to Beijing but serving its interests much better.

The Chinese Bagram bargain is simple: The more America is irritated, the less Chinese domination results. And a clear Western front emerges. Among these is the

reoccupation issue being discussed by Trump, which is rooted in the fact that Bagram actually occupies a geographical location comparable, in a way, to that of China. It lies 800 kilometers from the Chinese frontier, and situated near sensitive Xinjiang province. It is pure gold in the classical geopolitical mentality, which is obsessed with direct territorial domination and the extension of hard power.

Clearly, a Bagram reoccupation has theoretical benefits. The U.S. presence in Central Asia would significantly increase military surveillance and intelligence-gathering in the region. A base such as Bagram, with a runway 3.6 kilometers long—enough to accommodate enormous military cargo jets—can be transformed into a stepping-off point that extends U.S. air power, along with its electronic warfare capabilities, far into an area currently becoming a zone of influence for both China and Russia.

The hyperbolic political language Trump uses (he claims that the base is only an hour away from being a manufacturing plant for Chinese nuclear weapons) is a calculated effort to convey a message: The re-establishment of a military presence in the heartland of Afghanistan is to counterbalance the all-encompassing Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. With Central Asian states already wary of their growing economic reliance on China, the logic would be that a U.S. presence would offer some kind of insurance, serving as a second security guarantor in case of Chinese overreach.

In theory, Bagram would serve as a hard-power response to China's soft-power BRI expansion. However, this argument is dead on its feet, as it overlooks the cost, the local opposition and the strategic bounty the U.S. retreat has already handed to Beijing.

The U.S. occupation of Bagram was also a constant source of expensive strategic headaches for China over almost two decades. The American presence compelled Beijing to continuously invest in military, intelligence and diplomatic capital resources to reduce the threat of a foreign superpower working right on its western doorstep. In this case, the most critical parameter is the security of the Xinjiang autonomous region. The location is essential to the logistics of the BRI in China, as well as a concentration area for sensitive military gear, which could be directly monitored by the U.S. base a few hundred miles away at all times.

The U.S. presence, which was always high in terms of military and intelligence, needed to be constantly defended against counter-intelligence activities and the arm-twisting of diplomats by the Chinese. The U.S. left Bagram in 2021 on condition that it would be destroyed. It gave ground to the world with no conditions, which is a rather severe strategic failure on a historic scale in the framework of containment.

The U.S. withdrawal fulfilled the fundamental Chinese security requirement of a demilitarized and secure western flank, without Beijing firing a single bullet or spending a single yuan in the conflict. The strategic advantage of a vacuum in hard military power is much more beneficial to China than the hypothetical surveillance that Bagram might provide.

Today, the U.S. must sustain its policy of containment at a thousand-mile distance, utilizing expensive offshore resources in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, as China has its borders restricting its freedom of action in between. The Bagram withdrawal, however, did not result in an American victory in the war on terror or even a strategic pivot in a containment strategy. It was merely a strategic subsidy to the long-term security architecture of China.

The second strategic benefit of the U.S. withdrawal, in terms of its size, is the virtually complete elimination of military opposition to the BRI in the Eurasian heartland. The presence of the United States, however well-intentioned as a check on China, had the inadvertent effect of drawing regional powers—Russia, Iran and Pakistan—into an anti-U.S. alliance. These nations had a similar interest in eliminating the American military presence. Since Bagram is no longer staffed, this local opinion has shifted from being opposed to U.S. military occupation to supporting regional stability and economic integration. It's a story that hinges heavily on Beijing.

China is now able to implement its BRI expansion without any apprehension of a strong military combatant on the ground. Rather than spending money on military counterbalances, Beijing can devote its full attention to what it has excelled in: economic participation and infrastructure development. Central Asian countries, which probably could have turned to the U.S. as a means of balancing the region, are finding no viable option in China. They are being incorporated into China's economic realm of influence. And China is consolidating its leading role. It is gaining the affection and trust of the region as it becomes the leading investor and economic partner, all while promoting the idea of non-interference—a powerful soft-power antidote to the history of American military intervention.

A reoccupation of Bagram by the United States, which is unlikely to be peaceful this time, would unleash multi-state resistance and thrust the U.S. into an entirely alien, antagonistic and prohibitively expensive military effort. By staying out, China would be able to use its economic might to play a containment role itself, attracting countries to it through trade and economic infrastructure, rather than relying on military pressure. It would be a complete strategic bargain: China has a say, and the U.S. withdraws.

The international response to Trump validates the fact that his Bagram proposal is going nowhere. The Taliban has clearly rejected the demand, and regional powers, including China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, have also voiced opposition to any move to reintroduce a foreign military presence into the region. Lin Jian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said that weaving tension and conflict in the region will not bode well.

This is a foreign policy victory for Beijing. China's reaction reinforces its image of a responsible member of the region concerned with stability and Afghan self-determination—which is precisely the opposite of the U.S. image as a country that is constantly intervening. Trump's obsession over the geographical location of Bagram as an offensive strategic site is a 19th-century military thought process.

The 21st-century power game with China can be described as more of a geo-economic one, waged through infrastructure, trade, technology and regional alignment, rather than by remote military bases deep within the Eurasian landmass. The cost of maintaining a position at such a remote base today is not so much a strategic weakness as it is reflective of the political cost of maintaining a position contrary to the mutual will of every regional power. It would once again overtax American military resources, estrange Washington diplomatically and provide Beijing with all the bargaining chips it requires to call upon its neighbors to rise against U.S. imperialism.

The Bagram bargain offers a practical geopolitical lesson: At some point, the absence of a superpower is more tactically favorable than its presence. Trump's obsessive insistence on restoring Bagram Air Base—which had been abandoned under the pretext of a necessary operation to check China—shows that he has no concept of the strategic position Beijing inherited when the U.S. pulled out. The fact that the western Chinese border is demilitarized and stable provides the nation with an opportunity to promote the BRI without hindrances and to avoid incurring immense spending to counter American surveillance and containment.

The U.S. pullout from Afghanistan, rather than being a tactic in a great power competition, was a strategic debacle. Going back to Bagram would not reinforce its Indo-Pacific strategy but only sink the U.S. into another costly, divisive and failure-prone intervention in the geo-economic war at the center of Asia.

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About Author



Sujit Kumar Datta is Deputy Director, Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong, and the former Chairman and Professor in the International Relations Department at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Dr. Datta graduated with a BA (Honors) and MA degree in International Relations from the Jahangiragar University and completed his PhD in International Politics from the School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, China. After that, he had worked at the BRAC Training Division (BTD) as a faculty member. He had joined in the department of International Relations, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh as a Lecturer in January, 2010. Dr. Datta has authored several articles and book chapters in renowned national and international peer-reviewed journals (Web of Science, Scopus indexed). Email:datta.ir@cu.ac.bd.