

## Will Pakistan Give US Post-Afghanistan Military Bases?

Speculation is rife Pakistan may give US base access to combat terrorism after it withdraws troops from Afghanistan

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*Last week, Pakistan categorically denied that it would provide military bases for US forces amid rampant speculation that it has agreed to a post-troop withdrawal from Afghanistan deal that will facilitate Washington’s regional counterterrorism operations.*

The rumors deepened when **General Kenneth McKenzie Jr**, commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), recently made a policy statement to the US Senate saying that a fraction of US forces will remain stationed nearby Afghanistan after the troops’ fully withdraw from the country by September 11.

McKenzie said that the Biden administration was busy consulting several of the landlocked country’s neighbors to keep Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda militants in check through counterterrorism operations from outside Afghanistan.

Equally intriguing was a telephone call US **Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin** made last month to Pakistan’s Chief of Army Staff **General Qamar Javed Bajwa**, in which the military leaders reportedly discussed “the situation arising out of the drawdown in Afghanistan.”

They also discussed “regional stability and the US-Pakistan bilateral relationship.” Austin reportedly expressed his desire to continue “working together on shared goals and objectives in the region.”

Meanwhile, reports that Pakistan intends to open a new airbase in the Nasirabad area of Balochistan province have kept the rumor mill churning that Islamabad has already tacitly granted basing rights to the US military for counterterrorism operations.

Military analysts say that the Jacobabad base in Sindh province, which served to provide logistical support to US and allied forces in Afghanistan since 2001, is specially designated to deploy US F-16s, as US authorities do not allow F-16s to be based in hangars with other

planes.



An aerial view of the Jacobabad base in Sindh province in Pakistan. Image: Wikipedia

The new airbase at Balochistan, the same analysts say, will most likely act as an additional facility to deploy JF-17 Block-3 aircraft and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and for logistics systems.

JF-17 block-3, a multirole two-seater jet built with Chinese collaboration, is Pakistan's most futuristic fighter, made with more modern technology than the Indian Air Force's Rafael jets.

Shahid Raza, an Islamabad-based strategic affairs analyst, told Asia Times that it was still unlikely that Pakistan will accede to America's request for basing rights.

He said that US authorities requested military base access from Pakistan during the Afghanistan Doha peace process but Islamabad remained noncommittal.

"The military strategists know very well that it won't benefit Pakistan in the long run, notwithstanding some short-term gains in the resumption of coalition support funds, supply of naval ships, delivery of held up gunship helicopters and F-16 jets," he added.

Shahid said Pakistan cannot risk annoying China, which has become Pakistan's major arms supplier and financier since 2016, when US-Pakistan military cooperation ended.

The relationship deteriorated after the US launched a unilateral raid in Pakistan in May 2011 that assassinated al-Qaeda founder **Osama bin Laden**, who was hiding in a compound in Abbottabad suspiciously near a Pakistan military base.

"China will not buy the rationale that the bases are Afghanistan-centric because the presence of foreign troops in the region would not only worry Beijing but Tehran and Moscow would also get upset," Shahid claimed.

"The moment you allow the US military bases in the country, China will interpret it as an extension of the US Indo-pacific strategy, which they consider [a] China containment strategy and may roll back the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and withdraw other facilities including soft loans, military cooperation and diplomatic support," he said.

Shahid said a US basing agreement could also compromise Pakistan's sensitive installations to US surveillance.

From 2016 to now, there has been virtually no military cooperation between the US and Pakistan, nor has Islamabad purchased or ordered any US-made military equipment over the period. But analysts say Pakistan is overdue for military upgrades that the US could potentially provide.

"Pakistan needs to beef up its naval strength by making a five-times expansion in its existing size, strength and assets to enhance its compatibility.

In his briefing, McKenzie warned Pakistan that the "regrouping of the militant of Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda" in the aftermath of the US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan would be the biggest concern for Pakistan and other states bordering the conflict-ridden country.

"Al-Qaeda and IS militants will be able to regenerate if pressure is not kept on them, which will be very concerning to the neighboring states mainly Pakistan," he said. In the same breath, McKenzie also hinted at "working with nations surrounding Afghanistan to base troops and aircraft for countering terrorists after the US pullout."

Shahid maintains that Pakistan has recently improved its capability to counter threats from local and foreign terror organizations. Islamabad, he said, was well prepared for such an eventuality.

"The situation has since been changed and the Pakistan army is now in a better position to take on the foreign militants," he claimed.

He said that tens of thousands of Pakistani troops posted at the border with Afghanistan are now checking the infiltration of militants. "They pushed the foreign militants back to Afghanistan from its territory and made an 800-kilometer-long trench at the Balochistan border to foil their designs," he claimed.





Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters on the march in Afghanistan in a file photo. Image: Facebook

**Jan Achakzai**, ex-adviser to Pakistan’s Balochistan provincial government, told Asia Times that granting basing rights to the US would be disastrous for Pakistan.

“At most Pakistan can allow its airspace for search-and-rescue operations in terms of Ground Lines of Communication (GLOC) and the Airlines of Communication (ALOC) agreements reached with the US authorities back in 2001, after the 9/11 debacle,” he said.

The US engagements in Afghanistan, he said, were only possible through the GLOC and ALOC mechanisms.

Achakzai underlined concerns about the possible reaction of China, Iran and Russia and ruled out any covert facilitation of the US request that could annoy the rival powers.

“Islamabad would not like to see Washington give any sleepless nights to Beijing, Tehran and Moscow as they used to give in the Cold War era when the US Lockheed U-2 reconnaissance aircraft would spy on Russia from Pakistan’s Peshawar airbase,” he recalled.

Another redline, he said, concerns the radicalized right-wing political forces who galvanize new anti-American sentiments among the masses if Islamabad allowed US military bases on Pakistani soil.

“These elements would provoke resentments and create political instability in the country if the government succumbed to the US pressure,” he warned.

The history of US-Pakistan military cooperation dates back to 1959 when then-military dictator General Ayub Khan allowed US forces to use the Badaber airbase in Peshawar for intelligence-gathering and spying on the erstwhile Soviet Union.

As many as 800 personnel and an equal number of supporting staff were then staffed at the

base. The Badaber base remained operative until 1970 when the Pakistan Air Force resumed control.

Military dictator General Pervez Musharraf also granted the US basing rights at Jacobabad Airbase (Sindh), Shamsi Airbase (Balochistan), Dalbandin base (Balochistan), Pasni base (Balochistan) and Samungli base (Balochistan).

These bases gave US forces logistical support for their units in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom from 2001 to 2014.

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