

# New CIA Drone Bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia

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*US looking for new drone bases after Pakistan's refusal*

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With the exception of the Khost base that is under the operational command of CIA, the US Army, Air Force and Navy jointly administer the remaining six bases.

-According to officials at a diplomatic mission, the US was actively considering establishing covert military bases in Central Asia for continuing drone-hits in Pakistan but the Central Asian Republics (CARs) refused to provide launching pads owing to Russia's pressure.

-78 drone attacks in the ongoing year have killed 607 persons including militants and civilians in the Pakistan's tribal region while 306 drone strikes claimed 3659 lives in this region since 2004.

ISLAMABAD - The CIA-sponsored drone campaign in Pakistan's Northwestern Tribal region is likely to remain stalled amid the reports that the US may not find a feasible alternative venue to target Pak-Afghan borderlands after having become entangled in a deadlock with Pakistan over the Mohmand attack row.

Till the middle of last month, the Central intelligence Agency (CIA) oversaw drone hits in Pakistan's Waziristan region mostly from the Shamsi base in Balochistan province and partly from a US base in Khost province, Afghanistan.

After US AC-130H Spectre gunship choppers targeted a couple of military check posts in Mohmand Agency killing two dozen Pak soldiers on November 26th, Pakistan gave a 15-day deadline to the US to vacate the Shamsi base that followed its evacuation by December 11th. Since then, there has been a complete halt in drone hits.

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Reportedly, the United States mulled over using the Shindand base in Helmand, the Bagram base in Parwan and the Camp Leatherneck base in Nimroz province as launching pads for drone hits in Pakistani borderlands but the idea ceased to work owing to the engagements of these bases in extensive aerial operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan's refusal to allow

the CIA to carry on with the covert drone programme in its tribal area in the post-November 26th scenario.

Talking to The Nation, Abdullah Khan, Director of the Conflict Monitoring Centre (CMC), an Islamabad-based think-tank that monitors conflict scenarios in South Asia, said the CIA had the option of using the Khost base for drones but things were to be different compared to the Shamsi base.

“Its not as convenient and easy as it used to be. There are too many operational constraints involved in launching drone strikes from Khost compared to Shamsi. Secondly, given that Pakistan has completely disrupted intelligence sharing on drones, it’s next to impossible for them (CIA) to continue with drones here” he said.

Elaborating on the operational constraints for the drone programme at the Khost base, Khan said: “It’s not only about drones. There’s a whole lot of surveillance, spying and military movements that were being overseen from Shamsi. That’s not possible from Afghanistan due to the proximity factor. The Khost base had come under a deadly suicide attack last year.”

According to CMC figures, 78 drone attacks in the ongoing year have killed 607 persons including militants and civilians in the Pakistan’s tribal region while 306 drone strikes claimed 3659 lives in this region since 2004.

The last drone hit was reported in the Shawal area of North Waziristan that killed some six to nine persons. The Khost provincial government spokesman Mubarez Zadran expressed ignorance regarding the presence of a covert military base for drones in Khost. “This is something nobody would want to speak on.

“Yes, the US military bases are there and that’s no hidden affair but these bases are not being used for drone-hits in Pakistan. I think you better consult US military on this,” he suggested to this scribe.

Neither the US Embassy in Islamabad nor the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) officially comments on the CIA drone programme.

NATO officials in Afghanistan, when contacted on prior occasions, had denied having any involvement with drone hits in Pakistan. According to officials at a diplomatic mission, the US was actively considering to establish covert military bases in Central Asia for continuing drone-hits in Pakistan but the Central Asian Republics (CARs) refused to provide launching pads owing to Russia’s pressure.

Russia has serious disagreements with the US presence in Afghanistan.

In October this year, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to Pakistan along with top military officials had followed a secretive agreement on drones as part of renewed Pak-US military cooperation after a spree of hostility. Unearthed by The Nation on October 22nd, the agreement envisaged resumption of intelligence cooperation between Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the CIA for hunting down militants on both sides of the border.

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