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2014 or Bust

The Pentagon's Building Boom in Afghanistan Indicates a Long War Ahead

By Nick Turse
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In recent weeks, President Obama has been contemplating the future of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. He has also been [touting the effects](#) of his policies at home, reporting that this year's Recovery Act not only saved jobs, but also was "the largest investment in infrastructure since [President Dwight] Eisenhower built the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s." At the same time, another much less publicized U.S.-taxpayer-funded infrastructure boom has been underway. This one in Afghanistan.

While Washington has put modest funding into civilian projects in Afghanistan this year — ranging from small-scale [power plants](#) to "public latrines" to a [meat market](#) — the real construction boom is military in nature. The Pentagon has been funneling stimulus-sized sums of money to defense contractors to markedly boost its military infrastructure in that country.

In fiscal year 2009, for example, the civilian U.S. Agency for International Development awarded \$20 million in contracts for work in Afghanistan, while the U.S. Army alone awarded \$2.2 billion — \$834 million of it for construction projects. In fact, [according to](#) Walter Pincus of the *Washington Post*, the Pentagon has spent "roughly \$2.7 billion on construction over the past three fiscal years" in that country and, "if its request is approved as part of the fiscal 2010 defense appropriations bill, it would spend another \$1.3 billion on more than 100 projects at 40 sites across the country, according to a Senate report on the legislation."

Bogged Down at Bagram

Nowhere has the building boom been more apparent than Bagram Air Base, a key military site used by the Soviet Union during its occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. In its American incarnation, the base has significantly expanded from its old Soviet days and, in

just the last two years, the population of the more than 5,000 acre compound has doubled to 20,000 troops, in addition to thousands of coalition forces and civilian contractors. To keep up with its exponential growth rate, more than \$200 million in construction projects are planned or in-progress at this moment on just the Air Force section of the base. "Seven days a week, concrete trucks rumble along the dusty perimeter road of this air base as bulldozers and backhoes reshape the rocky earth," Chuck Crumbo of *The State* [reported recently](#). "Hundreds of laborers slap mortar onto bricks as they build barracks and offices. Four concrete plants on the base have operated around the clock for 18 months to keep up with the construction needs."

The base already [boasts](#) fast food favorites Burger King, a combination Pizza Hut/Bojangles, and Popeyes as well as a day spa and shops selling jewelry, cell phones and, of course, Afghan rugs. In the near future, notes Pincus, "the military is planning to build a \$30 million passenger terminal and adjacent cargo facility to handle the flow of troops, many of whom arrive at the base north of Kabul before moving on to other sites." In addition, [according to the Associated Press](#), the base command is "acquiring more land next year on the east side to expand" even further.

To handle the influx of troops already being dispatched by the Obama administration (with more expected once the president decides on his long-term war plans) "new dormitories" are going up at Bagram, [according to](#) David Axe of the *Washington Times*. The base's population will also increase in the near future, thanks to a project-in-progress recently profiled in *The Freedom Builder*, an Army Corps of Engineers publication: the MILCON Bagram Theater Internment Facility (TIF) currently being built at a cost of \$60 million by a team of more than 1,000 Filipinos, Indians, Sri Lankans, and Afghans. When completed, it will consist of 19 buildings and 16 guard towers designed to hold more than 1,000 detainees on the sprawling base which has long been [notorious](#) for the torture and even murder of prisoners within its confines.

While the United States officially insists that it is not setting up permanent bases in Afghanistan, the scale and permanency of the construction underway at Bagram seems to suggest, at the least, a very long stay. According to published reports, in fact, the new terminal facilities for the complex aren't even slated to be operational until 2011.

One of the private companies involved in hardening and building up Bagram's facilities is [Contrack International](#), an international engineering and construction firm which, according to U.S. government records, received more than \$120 million in contracts in 2009 for work in Afghanistan. According to Contrack's website, it is, among other things, currently designing and constructing a new "entry control point" — a fortified entrance — as well as a new "ammunition supply point" facility at the base. It is also responsible for "the design and construction of taxiways and aprons; airfield lighting and navigation aid improvements; and new apron construction" for the base's massive and expanding air operations infrastructure. The building boom at Bagram (which has received at least a modest amount of attention in the American mainstream press) is, however, just a fraction of the story of the way the U.S. military — and Contrack International — are digging in throughout Afghanistan.

Rave Reviews for Kandahar

In March, according to Pentagon documents, Contrack was awarded a \$23 million contract for "the design and construction of [an] Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance ramp,

Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan." Last year, in the *Washington Post*, Pincus reported that a planned expansion at the airfield, also once used by the Soviets and now a major U.S. and NATO base, was to accommodate aircraft working for a Task Force ODIN — an Afghanistan-based version of the Army unit which used drones and helicopters to [target insurgents](#) planting IEDs in Iraq. Today, Task Force ODIN-Afghanistan — the acronym stands for "observe, detect, identify and neutralize," with a nod to the chief Norse god — is up and running, and still [reportedly piloted](#) out of "Bagram in one of two small, nondescript ground control stations." Whether ODIN aircraft are also operating out of Kandahar Airfield is — like so much information about the U.S. military in Afghanistan — unclear. Certainly, though, many more NATO and U.S. aircraft will be flying out of the base once Contrack, as it notes on its website, completes its "[d]esign and construction of replacement runways with asphalt and touch down areas with concrete pavement" and "rehabilitation of 6 existing taxiways," among other projects.

Contrack's Kandahar contract is set to be fulfilled by late December, but like Bagram, the base already gives every appearance of permanence. "It's one of the busiest single runways in the world," Captain Max Hanlin from the 2nd U.S. Army Division's 5th Stryker Brigade [told](#) Agence France-Presse recently. Originally built to house 12,000 troops, Kandahar Air Base now supports 30,000 or more NATO and U.S. personnel. Some do battle in the inhospitable terrain of the surrounding region, while others have never been outside the wire and while away their time in the base's cafes and small shops (where troops reportedly can buy, among other items, belly dancer costumes), party in the "Dutch corner," play roller hockey in the base's central square, or dance the night away at a Saturday rave. "They are shaking glowsticks as if they have no concept of the mines and the war outside," said one U.S. officer, watching troops on the dance floor.

In recent days, U.S. forces [announced](#) a decrease in recreational perks and an imposition of more austere circumstances — salsa and karaoke nights have already been cut at Kandahar — prompting worries by NATO allies that their recreational facilities will be overrun by entertainment-starved U.S. troops.

A Mob of FOBs

It seems that no one outside the Pentagon knows just exactly how many U.S. camps, forward operating bases, combat outposts, patrol bases and other fortified sites the U.S. military is currently using or constructing in Afghanistan. And while the Americans have recently abandoned a few of their [installations](#), effectively ceding the northeastern province of Nuristan to Taliban forces, elsewhere a base-building boom has been underway.

In April, Contrack was awarded another \$28 million contract for work on airfields — to be performed at unspecified sites in Afghanistan. In June, Florida-based IAP Worldwide Services was awarded a \$21 million contract to enhance electrical power distribution at the U.S. Marines' still-growing Forward Operating Base (FOB) Leatherneck in Helmand Province, a Taliban stronghold. Scheduled for completion in June 2010, that project is only part of IAP's work, which has involved "almost two dozen power plants at U.S. Army bases in Afghanistan and Iraq" that, according to the company's promotional literature, its teams have "delivered, installed, operated and maintained."

FOB Dwyer, also in Helmand Province, is fast becoming a "hub" for air support in southern Afghanistan, [according to Captain Vincent Rea](#) of the Air Force's 809th Expeditionary Red

Horse Squadron. To that end, Marine Corps and Air Force personnel are building runways and helipads to accommodate ever more fixed-wing and rotary aircraft on the base. The two services collaborated on the construction of a 4,300-foot airstrip capable of accommodating giant C-130 Hercules transport aircraft that increase the U.S. capability to support more troops on more bases in more remote areas.

"With the C-130s coming in more frequently, more Marines can travel at a given time and will definitely help Camp Dwyer and other FOBs and COPs (Combat Outposts) to build up," [says](#) Capt. Alexander Lugo-Velazquez of Marine Light/Attack Helicopter Squadron 169. In September, the Air Force reported the completion of the first phase of a six-phase construction project at FOB Dwyer which will eventually include additional fuel pits and taxiways, increased tarmac space, and the lengthening of the runway to 6,000 feet. In October, according to government documents, the Army also began soliciting bids — in the \$10-\$25 million range — for construction of fuel storage and distribution facilities at FOB Dwyer. These, like the infrastructure upgrades at Bagram, are not scheduled to be completed until sometime in 2011.

In Helmand, as well as Farah, Kandahar, and Nimruz provinces, between June and September the Marine Expeditionary Brigade-Afghanistan alone [established](#) four new forward operating bases, "10 combat outposts, six patrol bases, and four ancillary operating positions, helicopter landing zones and an expeditionary airfield." In October, defense contractor AECOM Technology [signed a \\$78 million](#), 6-month extension contract with the Army to "provide general-support maintenance as well as the operation of maintenance facilities, living quarters and offices at two U.S. military bases as well as forward operating bases and satellite locations" in Afghanistan.

Defense contracting giant [Fluor](#) has also been hard at work landing lucrative deals in Afghanistan. In March, the Army [reported](#) that, in accordance with President Obama's spring surge of troops, Regional Command East in Afghanistan had tasked Fluor to expand four existing forward operating bases and, if need be, build another eight new ones.

In Regional Command South, it was reported that "[e]mergency work to expand eight FOBs [wa]s underway after being competitively awarded to Fluor under LOGCAP IV." This is the current version of a military program first instituted by the Pentagon in 1985. It has been the key means by which military logistics and supply functions have been turned over to private contractors. (The previous version of the program, LOGCAP III, was awarded solely to Kellogg, Brown and Root Services or KBR, then a division of the oil services giant [Halliburton](#), primarily in support of U.S. operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kuwait and was plagued by [scandals](#).)

In Afghanistan, companies like Fluor are clearly digging in. Fluor, in fact, [describes](#) itself as "co-located with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, where the team coordinates, provides oversight, and implements Fluor's execution plan to provide the necessary resources and labor to accomplish this mission" of "providing multi-functional base life support and combat services support (CSS) to the U.S. and Coalition Forces in Afghanistan."

The company is "simultaneously constructing and managing the expansion of eight Forward Operating Bases[...] in Southern Afghanistan. This includes the construction of an FOB to accommodate 17,000 to 20,000 U.S. Military personnel." Fluor, no doubt, expects to be "co-located with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan" for a long time. In July 2009, the defense giant

was awarded a \$1.5 billion contract for LOGCAP IV services in Afghanistan; in October, the Army [reported](#) that the LOGCAP program was responsible for erecting 6,020 units of containerized housing known as relocatable buildings or RLBs in Regional Command South.

In July, under an existing LOGCAP IV contract, [scandal-tainted defense contractor](#) DynCorp International, along with partners [CH2M Hill](#) and Taos Industries, [received](#) a one year \$643.5 million order to "provide existing bases within the Afghanistan South AOR [area of responsibility] with operations and maintenance support, including but not limited to: facilities management, electrical power, water, sewage and waste management, laundry operations, food services and transportation motor pool operations," as well as "construction services for additional sites." With an eye to the future, the Pentagon has included four one-year options in the contract which, if taken up, would be worth an estimated \$5.8 billion.

Just recently, the Australian military indicated it was also digging in for a long stay, [announcing](#) a \$37 million upgrade of its main base near Tarin Kowt in Oruzgan province, to be completed by mid-2011. As at other NATO facilities, increasing numbers of U.S. troops have been operating out of Tarin Kowt recently and, in late September, the U.S.-based company Kandahar Constructors signed a \$25 million deal with the Pentagon for runway upgrades there, also to be completed in 2011.

Speaking the Language of Occupation

In 2009 alone, after many billions of dollars had already gone into the construction, expansion, and maintenance of U.S. bases in Afghanistan, American taxpayers were called upon to pay for more than \$1 billion in construction contracts — and based on the evidence at hand, including those future options, this may prove just a drop in the proverbial bucket.

All of this has been happening without a clear plan laid out in Washington for the future of U.S. military operations in that country, without a legitimate national government in Kabul, and of course with no shortage of [infrastructural repairs](#) needed at home. Americans curious to know much of anything about the Pentagon's Afghan building boom beyond Bagram would have found little on the nightly news or in major newspapers. It has essentially been carried out in the dark, far away, and with only the most modest reportorial interest.

Forget for a moment the "debates" in Washington over Afghan War policy and, if you just focus on the construction activity and the flow of money into Afghanistan, what you see is a war that, from the point of view of the Pentagon, isn't going to end any time soon. In fact, the U.S. military's building boom in that country suggests that, in the ninth year of the Afghan War, the Pentagon has plans for a far longer-term, if not near-permanent, garrisoning of the country, no matter what course Washington may decide upon. Alternatively, it suggests that the Pentagon is willing to waste taxpayer money (which might have shored up sagging infrastructure in the U.S. and created a plethora of jobs) on what will sooner or later be abandoned runways, landing zones and forward operating bases.

The building and fortifying of bases in Afghanistan isn't the only sign that the U.S. military is digging in for an even longer haul. Another key indicator can be found in a Pentagon contract awarded in late September to [SOS International, Ltd.](#), a privately owned "operations support company" that provides everything from "cultural advisory services" to "intelligence and counterintelligence analysis and training" to numerous federal agencies. That contract,

primarily for linguistic services in support of military operations in Afghanistan, has an estimated completion date of September 2014.