AFGHAN AIRFIELDS BUILT FOR WAR SEEN AS ECONOMIC HUBS

News / Airports / Routes



It is a striking vision for a country torn to pieces by war and jihadi insurrection: a series of airports, built by NATO to fight the Taliban, are being handed over to the Afghan government in a civil aviation upgrade that optimists hope will fuel not only regional trade but even tourism.

The eight airfields, worth an estimated $2 billion, are scattered around a landlocked and mountainous land whose lack of rail transport or decent roads makes almost every intercity journey a perilous adventure — even without factoring in attacks from Taliban militants.

Ex-lawmaker Mohammad Daud Sultanzoy, who is overseeing the project for the government, said the airfields — self-contained cities that housed thousands of foreign troops who are now pulling out — will amount to a latter-day "Silk Road" that "will connect Afghanistan internally and to South Asia and Central Asia, and beyond."

The billions of people living in Asia and the Middle East "can constitute a huge number of tourists and related other activities: cargo, passenger and export/import," Sultanzoy said.

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.

Pessimists will have little trouble imagining the Taliban trying to shoot down planes as they land, but officials say the militants do not currently have that ability, making air travel a reasonable and safe option.

U.S. Maj. Gen. Todd Semonite, who oversees $5 billion in funding to Afghanistan's security sector, said the decision to transfer rather than close the airfields was made in conjunction with President Ashraf Ghani's government after he took power last year, in the belief they could help "jump start the economy."

Military teams are upgrading them ahead of an international roadshow organized by the Afghan and U.S. governments due to be held in Dubai next month.

Under an agreement with the United States, only the top-drawer facilities are being transferred, while small, remote military bases and airfields are being dismantled.

Afghanistan has an aviation infrastructure in place already, but it is rickety. Many of the country's 27 airports — four of them international — are little more than a shack at the end of a tarmac.

About 130 domestic and international flights land and take off weekly in these existing fields, said Qassim Rahimi, spokesman for the Civil Aviation Authority of Afghanistan, itself a new operation. He said that with the establishment of the CAAA, regulation and service have improved dramatically, and that change has fueled a leap in both passenger numbers and revenues. Up to 45,000 passengers now fly domestically each month, already a sharp rise compared to 12,000 monthly in 2013. The sector generated $2 billion in revenue last year, and Rahimi estimates a 25-percent rise this year.

Challenges aplenty stand in the way of further progress.

One is the country's inexperience with air traffic control. Afghanistan will take over air traffic control starting in 2016; the U.S. government ended its contract in June after controlling Afghan air space since 2001, and Japan's government will run it to the end of the year. The CAAA has expressed confidence it will be ready to take on the responsibility starting in January.

Corruption is another issue.

"Corruption will increase if these airports are under the control of the government, and the government does not have the capacity to run these airports," said former Transport and Civil Aviation Minister Daoud Ali Najafi. He also cited a lack of trained staff, as many who had been trained had left the industry for higher incomes in the private sector. Privatization of the new fields will be key, he said.

Among the modern airports on offer is one at Kandahar in the south, with a 20-kilometer (12-mile) perimeter. At the height of the Afghan war, in 2009-2010, Kandahar Air Field was one of the world's busiest in terms of frequency, with an aircraft taking off or landing every minute. KAF has two airports— one military, one civilian — both with air traffic control towers.

There are warehouses alongside the runway, hangars for aircraft and vehicles of almost any size; power generation and water purification plants; cold storage units for perishables with temperatures ranging from chilled to minus-20 degrees Celsius. There are 36 guard towers.

More than 35,000 mostly military people were stationed at KAF, with cafes, restaurants, banks and fast food outlets around a wooden boardwalk, which also had carpet, computer and cell phone

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.

shops. Hockey, basketball and touch-football were played on the grassy pitches in the middle. .

There are also airfields at Shindand and Herat in the western Herat province; Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Balkh province; Bagram, 50 kilometers (30 miles) northeast of Kabul; Jalalabad in eastern Nangarhar province; and Kabul, adjacent to Kabul International Airport.

Bastion in southern Helmand province, which was run by the British military and later U.S. Marines, has already been transferred and a small section is used by the Afghan army. The remainder of the airfields will pass to Afghan government control over the coming 18 months.

The economy could certainly use a boost after 36 years of conflict.

The global economic crisis has taken a toll as well, compounded by the recent departure of most international combat troops and charities. Bases that fueled local economies have closed, and those remaining — including the airfields — have been pared to skeleton staffs, no longer employing thousands of locals to do laundry, carpentry, vehicle repair and translation.

A dysfunctional government that lacks coherent economic policy and does not truly control much of the country is another factor, and the 2.5 percent growth projected by the World Bank this year is not enough to create jobs for a young and increasingly restless population.

According to the plan, the facilities are to be offered as special economic zones with regulations, concessions, tax holidays and legal guarantees, Sultanzoy said.

He envisages an initial boom in agriculture exports, especially fruits and nuts, saying the trade is already worth around $100 million a year but is "held hostage" to high tariffs at road border crossings into Pakistan. Kandahar is famous for pomegranates, apricots, grapes and mulberries, but much of it rots before it can reach markets. Sultanzoy points to the cold storage facilities at KAF as a salve for waste and transport problems.

The country also hopes to create demand for secondary agriculture products such as preserves and juices, and on to meat, dairy products, leather, handicrafts and light manufacturing.

Eventually, the growth generated by the airfields will require extra power generation and financial and technological services.

"The airfields will be the kingpin of all other growth the government wants to bring," Sultanzoy said. "An economic chain creates its own ripple effects and leads to larger and larger expansion into other areas. This will propel decades of growth."

31 AUGUST 2015

SOURCE: AP
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ut.50skyshades.com/news/airports-routes/afghan-airfields-built-for-war-seen-as-economic-hubs

© 2015-2026 50SKYSHADES.COM — Reproduction, copying, or redistribution for commercial purposes is prohibited.