

## *U.S. Defense Secretary Makes Secret Visit to Afghanistan*

Lloyd J. Austin III is the first member of President Biden's cabinet to travel to the country, where he met with the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani.



By John Ismay

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III landed in Afghanistan's capital Sunday morning, becoming the first member of President Biden's cabinet to set foot in the country that is home to America's longest war.

The United States is tentatively set to withdraw American forces from the country on May 1, the date set in an agreement signed by the Trump administration and the Taliban more than a year ago.

Speaking to reporters before his departure from Afghanistan, Mr. Austin declined to comment on whether the Taliban had met their obligations under that agreement.

"It's obvious that the level of violence remains pretty high in the country," Mr. Austin said. "We'd really like to see that violence come down, and I think if it does come down it can begin to set the conditions for some really fruitful diplomatic work."

Mr. Austin demurred on the idea of setting a different departure date for U.S. forces, saying that Mr. Biden would make that decision.

"What we want to see is a responsible end to this conflict," he added.

Mr. Biden said in an interview with ABC News broadcast this past week that meeting the deadline would be "tough." On Saturday, speaking with reporters in India, Mr. Austin expressed confidence that he could remove all remaining U.S. troops from Afghanistan by May 1, should the president direct him to do so.

Roughly 3,500 U.S. troops are now stationed in Afghanistan, 1,000 more than government officials had previously disclosed. The New York Times reported the higher troop levels last week, citing a senior U.S. official who noted that some Special

Operations forces had been put “off the books.” American troops have had a continuous presence in the country since 2001.

The defense secretary’s visit came at the end of more than a week of travel across the Pacific during which he reassured allies that they would have the United States’ support in countering potential threats from China.

First, at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in Hawaii, the secretary was briefed by Adm. Philip S. Davidson on various threats in the region and how American military assets have been deployed in response. Flying next to Japan and South Korea, Mr. Austin joined Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken for talks with the foreign and defense ministers of both nations.

Both secretaries emphasized the Biden administration’s stance that diplomacy would again be the United States’ first course of action in foreign affairs.

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In New Delhi, where Mr. Austin met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the defense minister, Rajnath Singh, senior U.S. defense officials said that Indian leaders spoke mostly about their concerns regarding China. It was only toward the end of their talks that the issue of Pakistan — India’s neighbor and traditional main enemy — came up.

The trip, Mr. Austin’s first as a cabinet member, comes as Mr. Biden seeks to build a series of security agreements with various nations that could band together to respond to Chinese military operations in the South and East China Seas.

One such agreement between the United States, Australia, Japan and India — called “the Quad” — was repeatedly cited by both Mr. Austin and Mr. Blinken as a model for combined military operations in region. Mr. Austin did not ask South Korea to join the Quad during his time in Seoul, according to a senior defense official.

## **Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan**

**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public

punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Mr. Austin's trip to Kabul was kept secret, and was to remain confidential until two hours after he left, but local reporters broke news of his visit after he met with President Ashraf Ghani.

The secretary's arrival in Kabul came on Nowruz, the Persian new year — a date on which the Islamic State in Afghanistan had pledged to carry out attacks. That led the Pentagon to keep the secretary's visit under wraps as long as possible.

After landing in Kabul, Mr. Austin boarded a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter for a brief flight to the headquarters of the American military mission. Just off the former soccer stadium that serves as the command's heliport, Gen. Austin S. Miller, the American commander in Afghanistan, quickly walked Mr. Austin through a warren of small buildings and tall concrete blast walls to his office.

Mr. Austin told reporters that he had no particular message that he conveyed to Mr. Ghani, preferring instead to listen to the Afghan president's thoughts on the situation in his country.

"We've done a lot to work with the Afghan security forces," Mr. Austin said in response to a question regarding concerns Afghans might have following a U.S. withdrawal. "And I don't want to speculate about what could happen or what could not happen going forward."