

Transcript of Blinken's Speech on 'New Chapter' in Afghanistan

Shortly after the last U.S. troops left Afghanistan, the secretary of state outlined a plan to use diplomacy to try to extract remaining Americans and Afghan allies.

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The following is a transcript of Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken's remarks on Monday about the U.S. plan for engagement with Afghanistan after evacuations ended and the last American troops departed.

Good evening, everyone.

Eighteen days ago, the United States and our allies began our evacuation and relocation operation in Kabul. As you just heard from the Pentagon a few hours ago, that operation was completed. More than 123,000 people have been safely flown out of Afghanistan. That includes about 6,000 American citizens.

This has been a massive military, diplomatic and humanitarian undertaking. One of the most difficult in the nation's history and an extraordinary feat of logistics and coordination under some of the most challenging circumstances imaginable. Many, many people made this possible.

I want to commend our outstanding diplomats who worked around the clock, and around the world, to coordinate the operation. They volunteered for duty at the Kabul airport. They flew to transit countries to help process thousands of Afghans bound for the United States. They deployed to ports of entry and American military bases to welcome Afghans to their new homes.

They staffed a 24/7 task force here in Washington, overseen by Deputy Secretary Brian McKeon. And they built a list of Americans possibly seeking to leave Afghanistan, then worked to contact every single one of them, repeatedly, making 55,000 phone calls, sending 33,000 emails since Aug. 14.

They solved problem after problem to keep the mission moving forward. They did this because for the thousands of State Department and U.S.A.I.D. employees who served in Afghanistan in the past 20 years, this evacuation operation was very personal. Many worked hand in hand for years with Afghan partners, many of whom became trusted friends. We also lost cherished members of our foreign service community in Afghanistan. We'll never forget them.

Helping Americans, our foreign partners who have been by our side for 20 years and Afghans at risk at this critical moment was more than just a high-stakes assignment for our team. It was a sacred duty. And the world saw how our diplomats rose to the challenge with determination and heart.

U.S. service members in Kabul did heroic work securing the airport, protecting civilians of many nationalities, including tens of thousands of Afghans, and airlifting them out. They're also providing vital support right now caring for Afghans on military bases in Europe, the Middle East and here in the United States. We've seen pictures of U.S. service members at the Kabul airport cradling babies, comforting families. That's the kind of compassion and courage our men and women in uniform exemplify.

They carried out this mission under the constant threat of terrorist violence. And four days ago, 11 Marines, one Navy medic and one soldier were killed by a suicide bomber at the airport gate, as well as scores of Afghans. Nearly all of them were in their early 20s. Just babies or toddlers on Sept. 11, 2001. These deaths are a devastating loss for our country. We at the State Department feel them deeply.

We have a special bond with the Marines. The first person that you see when you visit an American embassy is a marine. They guard our diplomatic missions. They keep us safe around the world. We couldn't do our jobs without them. And we will never forget their sacrifice, nor will we forget what they achieved. The most exceptional among us perform a lifetime's work of service in a short time here on Earth. So it was for our exceptional brothers and sisters who died last week.

Finally, I want to thank our allies and partners. This operation was a global endeavor in every way. Many countries stepped up with robust contributions to the airlift, including working by our side at the airport. Some are now serving as transit countries, allowing evacuees to be registered and processed on their way to their final destinations. Others have agreed to resettle Afghan refugees permanently, and we hope more will do so in the days and weeks ahead. We're truly grateful for their support.

Now U.S. military flights have ended. And our troops have departed Afghanistan. A new chapter of America's engagement with Afghanistan has begun. It's one in which we will lead with our diplomacy. The military mission is over. A new diplomatic mission has begun. So here is our plan for the days and weeks ahead:

First, we built a new team to help lead this new mission. As of today, we suspended our diplomatic presence in Kabul and transferred our operations to Doha, Qatar, which will soon be formally notified to Congress. Given the uncertain security environment and political situation in Afghanistan, it was the prudent step to take. And let me take this opportunity to thank our

outstanding chargé d'affaires in Kabul, Ambassador Ross Wilson, who came out of retirement in January 2020 to lead our embassy in Afghanistan and has done exceptional, courageous work during a highly challenging time.

For the time being, we will use this post in Doha to manage our diplomacy with Afghanistan, including consular affairs, administering humanitarian assistance and working with allies, partners and regional and international stakeholders to coordinate our engagement and messaging to the Taliban. Our team there will be led by Ian McCary, who served as our deputy chief of mission in Afghanistan for this past year. No one's better prepared to do the job.

Second, we will continue our relentless efforts to help Americans, foreign nationals and Afghans leave Afghanistan if they choose.

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Let me talk briefly about the Americans who remain in Afghanistan.

We made extraordinary efforts to give Americans every opportunity to depart the country. In many cases, talking and sometimes walking them into the airport. Of those who self-identified as Americans in Afghanistan who are considering leaving the country, we've thus far received confirmation that about 6,000 have been evacuated or otherwise departed. This number will likely continue to grow as our outreach and arrivals continue.

We believe there are still a small number of Americans, under 200 and likely closer to 100, who remain in Afghanistan and want to leave. We're trying to determine exactly how many. We're going through manifests and calling and texting through our lists, and we will have more details to share as soon as possible. Part of the challenge with fixing a precise number is that there are longtime residents of Afghanistan who have American passports and who are trying to determine whether or not they wanted to leave. Many are dual citizen Americans with deep roots and extended families in Afghanistan who resided there for many years. For many, it's a painful choice. Our commitment to them and to all Americans in Afghanistan and everywhere in the world continues.

The protection and welfare of Americans abroad remains the State Department's most vital and enduring mission. If an American in Afghanistan tells us that they want to stay for now, and then in a week or a month or a year they reach out and say, 'I've changed my mind,' we will help them leave. Additionally, we've worked intensely to evacuate and relocate Afghans who worked alongside us and are at particular risk of reprisal. We've gotten many out, but many are still there. We will keep working to help them. Our commitment to them has no deadline.

Third, we will hold the Taliban to its pledge to let people freely depart Afghanistan. The Taliban is committed to let anyone with proper documents leave the country in a safe and orderly manner. They said this privately and publicly many times. On Friday, a senior Taliban official said it again on television and radio. And I quote: ‘Any Afghans may leave the country, including those who worked for Americans if they want and for whatever reason there may be.’

More than half the world’s countries have joined us in insisting that the Taliban let people travel outside Afghanistan freely. As of today, more than 100 countries have said that they expect the Taliban to honor travel authorizations by our countries. And just a few short hours ago, the United Nations security council passed a resolution that enshrines that responsibility, laying the groundwork to hold the Taliban accountable if they renege.

So the international chorus on this is strong, and it will stay strong. We will hold the Taliban to their commitment on freedom of movement for foreign nationals, visa holders, at-risk Afghans.

Fourth, we will work to secure their safe passage. This morning, I met with the foreign ministers of all the G7 countries — the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada, Italy, Japan — as well as Qatar, Turkey, the European Union and the secretary-general of NATO. We discussed how we will work together to facilitate safe travel out of Afghanistan, including by reopening Kabul’s civilian airport as soon as possible, and we very much appreciate the efforts of Qatar and Turkey in particular to make this happen. This would enable a small number of daily charter flights, which is a key for anyone who wants to depart from Afghanistan moving forward.

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.

We’re also working to identify ways to support Americans, legal permanent residents and Afghans who have worked with us and who may choose to depart via overland routes. We have no illusion that any of this will be easy or rapid. This will be an entirely different phase from the evacuation that just concluded. It will take time to work through a new set of challenges. But we will stay at it.

John Bass, our former ambassador to Afghanistan, who returned to Kabul two weeks ago to help lead our evacuation efforts at the airport, will spearhead our ongoing work across the State Department to help American citizens and permanent residents, citizens of allied nations, special immigrant visa applicants and Afghans at high risk if any of those people wish to depart Afghanistan. We're deeply grateful for all that John did in Kabul, and for his commitment to this mission, as well as the extraordinary officers who are serving by his side.

Fifth, we will stay focused on counterterrorism. The Taliban has made a commitment to prevent terrorist groups from using Afghanistan as a base for external operations that could threaten the United States or our allies, including Al Qaeda and the Taliban's sworn enemy, ISIS-K. Here, too, we will hold them accountable to that commitment. But while we have expectations of the Taliban, that doesn't mean we will rely on the Taliban. We will remain vigilant in monitoring threats ourselves and will maintain robust counterterrorism capabilities in the region to neutralize those threats if necessary, as we demonstrated in the past few days by striking ISIS facilitators and imminent threats in Afghanistan — and as we do in places around the world where we do not have military forces on the ground.

Let me speak directly to our engagement with the Taliban across these and other issues. We engaged with the Taliban during the past few weeks to enable our evacuation operations. Going forward, any engagement with a Taliban-led government in Kabul will be driven by one thing only: our vital national interests. If we can work with the new Afghan government in a way that helps secure those interests, including the safe return of Mark Frerichs, a U.S. citizen who has been held hostage in the region since early last year, and in a way that brings greater stability to the country and region and protects the gains of the past two decades, we will do it.

But we will not do it on the basis of trust or faith. Every step we take will be based not on what the Taliban-led government says but what it does to live up to its commitments. The Taliban seeks international legitimacy and support. Our message is any legitimacy and any support will have to be earned. The Taliban can do that by meeting commitments and obligations on freedom of travel, respecting the basic rights of the Afghan people, including women and minorities, upholding its commitments on counterterrorism, not carrying out reprisal violence against those who choose to stay in Afghanistan, and forming an inclusive government that can meet the needs and reflect the aspirations of the Afghan people.

Sixth, we will continue our humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan. The conflict has taken a terrible toll on the Afghan people. Millions are internally displaced. Millions are facing hunger, even starvation. The Covid-19 pandemic has also hit Afghanistan hard. The United States will continue to support humanitarian aid to the Afghan people. Consistent with our sanctions on the Taliban, the aid will not flow through the government but rather through independent organizations such as U.N. agencies and N.G.O.s. And we expect that those efforts will not be impeded by the Taliban or anyone else.

And seventh, we will continue our broad international diplomacy across all these issues and many others. We believe we can accomplish far more and exert far greater leverage when we work in coordination with our allies and partners. Over the last two weeks, we've had a series of intensive diplomatic engagements with allies and partners to plan and coordinate the way ahead in Afghanistan. I met with the foreign ministers of NATO and the G7. I've spoken one-on-one with dozens of my counterparts.

Last week, president Biden met with the leaders of the G7 countries, and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman has been convening a group of 28 allies and partners from all regions of the world every other day. Going forward, we'll coordinate closely with countries in the region and around the world as well as with leading organizations, N.G.O.s and the private sector. Our allies and partners share our objectives and are committed to working with us. I'll have more to say on these matters in the coming days.

The main point I want to drive home here today is that America's work in Afghanistan continues. We have a plan for what's next. We're putting it into action. This moment also demands reflection. The war in Afghanistan was a 20-year endeavor. We must learn its lessons, and allow those lessons to shape how we think about fundamental questions of national security and foreign policy. We owe that to future diplomats, policymakers, military leaders, service members. We owe that to the American people.

But as we do, we will be relentlessly focused on today and the future. We'll make sure we're finding every opportunity to make good on our commitment to the Afghan people, including by welcoming thousands of them into our communities — as the American people have done many times before — with generosity and grace throughout our history.

In this way, we'll honor all those brave men and women from the United States and many other countries who risked or sacrificed their lives as part of this long mission, right up to today.

Thanks for listening.