

## ***Blinken Visits Kabul, Hours After Biden Speech on Afghan Withdrawal***

The American secretary of state said the trip was intended to demonstrate the United States' commitment to Afghanistan.



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Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken traveled to Kabul, Afghanistan, on Thursday, less than a day after President Biden formally announced plans to withdraw all remaining troops from the country by Sept. 11. The trip was intended to signal continued cooperation amid the major shift in policy.

The withdrawal, which comes nearly 20 years after the United States first sent troops to Afghanistan, has raised profound questions within the country about its effect on Afghan civilians and the ability of the government and the Taliban to negotiate a peace deal.

Mr. Biden, laying out his plan in an address to the nation on Wednesday afternoon, said the country could no longer “continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan.”

Following the president's announcement, NATO's foreign and defense ministers agreed to begin withdrawing NATO forces on May 1 and finish “within a few months,” the alliance said in a statement.

Hours later, Mr. Blinken arrived in Kabul for the unannounced and brief trip, during which he visited the United States Embassy and then met with Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president, and Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of the Afghan government council that has led peace negotiations with the Taliban. By Thursday evening, Mr. Blinken had departed for Washington.

“I wanted to demonstrate with my visit the ongoing commitment of the United States to the Islamic Republic and the people of Afghanistan,” Mr. Blinken said before his meeting with Mr. Ghani began. “The partnership is changing, but the partnership is enduring.”

Later, speaking at a news conference, Mr. Blinken said that the time had come for American troops to leave the country, but that there was “strong bipartisan support” for a continued commitment to Afghan security forces.

“Even when our troops come home, our partnership with Afghanistan will continue, our security partnership will endure,” he said, adding that diplomacy would be intensified with the Afghan government and with its regional and international partners.

Mr. Ghani said the Afghan government respected the decision and was “adjusting our priorities.”

Mr. Blinken and Mr. Ghani “discussed the importance of preserving the gains of the last 20 years, especially in building a strong civil society and protecting the rights of women and girls,” said Ned Price, a spokesman for the State Department.

The pair also spoke about counterterrorism cooperation and their shared commitment to ensuring that Al Qaeda does not regain a foothold in Afghanistan.

Mr. Blinken then met with Mr. Abdullah, who said he was grateful to the American people and the Biden administration.

“We have a new chapter, but it's a new chapter that we're writing together,” Mr. Abdullah added.

Mr. Blinken had traveled to Afghanistan from Brussels, where, alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, he briefed NATO officials on the decision to withdraw American troops.