

Taliban Takeover Could Extinguish U.S. Influence in Kabul

After 20 years of diplomacy and support, American officials are now contemplating the harrowing question of whether — and how — they might engage with a Taliban government in Afghanistan.



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WASHINGTON — The fall of Kabul on Sunday left the Biden administration facing the once-unthinkable prospect of whether, and how, to engage with a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan's capital — or cede all influence in the country to an extremist group that brutalized Afghans and harbored Osama bin Laden as he planned attacks on America.

The sudden exile of President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan, just hours after President Biden and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken each assured him of full American support, gives the Taliban little incentive to negotiate a transitional government for a country in crisis, said two U.S. officials involved in discussions inside the administration.

The officials said Mr. Ghani fled his country without telling his cabinet or leaving plans for a government handover. That has all but ensured the Taliban's ascent to power — one that the Biden administration can only hope will be carried out as peacefully as possible.

It also likely extinguishes a long-stalled American effort for peace talks toward establishing a power-sharing system between the Taliban and Afghanistan's elected leaders, and leaves U.S. officials hoping that a group that has defied nearly all pleas for moderation in recent months will protect some semblance of women's and political rights and honor a pledge not to harbor Qaeda terrorists.

Mr. Blinken said the United States would support talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban "about the way forward."

The chief American negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, was in Doha, Qatar, working with the United Nations and other international diplomats "to see if there can be a peaceful resolution going forward, a peaceful settlement, a peaceful transfer of power that would be good for the people of Afghanistan to avoid further bloodshed," Mr. Blinken said on NBC's "Meet the Press."

One official said Mr. Khalilzad was working to get an agreement from Afghan leaders — including Abdullah Abdullah, the chairman of Afghan national reconciliation council, which was set up last year, and possibly Hamid Karzai, the former president — to start talks with Taliban negotiators. Both men are believed to be among the only Afghan officials left who have enough political standing to persuade the Taliban to discuss next steps.



Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said the United States would support talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban “about the way forward.” Pool photo by Brendan Smialowski

But privately, Biden administration officials said they were facing a bitter reality of having little to no influence over a peace process that now appears to be little more than a negotiated surrender by a defeated Afghan government.

Representative Liz Cheney, Republican of Wyoming, blamed both the Biden and Trump administrations for what she called the “devastating, catastrophic real-time lesson” of withdrawing U.S. troops from a nation where a tenuous government depended on military assistance. But she had particularly sharp words for former President Donald J. Trump and his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, who oversaw a February 2020 agreement with the Taliban to end the war.

“They walked down this path of legitimizing the Taliban, of perpetuating this fantasy, telling the American people that the Taliban were a partner for peace,” Ms. Cheney said on ABC’s “This Week.”

“President Trump told us that the Taliban was going to fight terror,” Ms. Cheney said. “Secretary Pompeo told us that the Taliban was going to renounce Al Qaeda. None of that has happened.”

After taking office in January, Mr. Biden decided to stick to the agreement with the Taliban, which Mr. Khalilzad brokered. On Sunday, Mr. Blinken sought to make the case that the deal committed the United States to withdrawing its troops or facing the certain prospect of attacks on Americans in Afghanistan who were already at risk given a dwindling number of security forces who could protect them.

He called the astonishing pace of the Taliban’s nationwide rout “a very fluid situation.”

The last American personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul fled to the capital’s international airport on Sunday, sheltering in what Mr. Blinken described earlier in the day as a small but enduring mission to be located there while leaving behind a sprawling compound, stripped of its American flag, in the heart of Kabul.

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Moving diplomatic offices to the airport will allow officials to swiftly depart if under immediate threat, and Mr. Blinken said it would maintain an American presence in Afghanistan as the Biden administration has promised. At the same time, embassy officials urged American citizens who were still in Afghanistan to shelter in place and resubmit paperwork to request help for evacuating instead of showing up at the airport, given reports of gunfire there.

While briefing members of Congress on the fast-moving developments, Mr. Blinken said the State Department was creating a new task force for Afghanistan issues, to be led by Dean Thompson, the acting assistant secretary for South and Central Asian affairs, according to a person familiar with the call.



Members of the Taliban in Kabul. The sudden exile of President Ashraf Ghani gives the Taliban little incentive to negotiate a transitional government for a country in crisis, U.S. officials said. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Despite the United States investing billions of dollars and suffering the deaths of thousands of Americans during a 20-year war in Afghanistan, it now has limited influence over the swiftly unfolding endgame in Kabul. The question now is what leverage, if any, the Biden administration might have over a government controlled in part or wholly by the Taliban.

For months, Biden officials have offered the hopeful rationale that the Taliban might moderate their behavior once in power to win diplomatic recognition and foreign aid. During a visit to Afghanistan in April, Mr. Blinken called it “very important that the Taliban recognize that it will never be legitimate and it will never be durable if it rejects a political process and tries to take the country by

force."

And during an interview with Al Jazeera last month, Mr. Blinken warned that "if an Afghanistan emerges that does not respect the basic rights of its people, that abuses the rights of women and girls, that does not respect the basic gains of the last 20 years, that Afghanistan will be a pariah in the international community."

But the Taliban's summer rampage across the country has left such hopes in shambles. While the group attended peace talks with Afghan government officials in the ostensible pursuit of a power-sharing agreement, its rapid takeover suggests it was never acting in good faith.

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.

The group's advance across the country has been marked by reports of massacres, targeted executions of government officials, security forces and civil society leaders, and forced "marriages" of women that human rights groups equate to sexual slavery.

"The Taliban are an ideological group, not just a group of politicians seeking power — they cannot go too far from their belief system," said Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistani ambassador to Washington who is now a senior fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute. "The notion that the desire for international legitimacy outweighs someone's core beliefs is a fantasy that has led Americans into unrealistic expectations and erroneous policies before."



Displaced families in Kabul on Wednesday. The Taliban's advance across the country has been marked by reports of massacres, executions of officials, security forces and civil society leaders, and forced "marriages" of women that human rights groups equate to sexual slavery. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

On Sunday, Mr. Blinken also said the Taliban should not dare to be caught sheltering international terrorists like bin Laden, who planned the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks from Afghanistan.

"The Taliban have a certain self-interest in this," Mr. Blinken said on "Meet the Press." "They know what happened the last time they harbored a terrorist group that attacked the United States. It's not in their self-interest to allow a repeat of that."

Mr. Haqqani noted, however, that the United States had demanded before the 2001 attacks that the Taliban hand over bin Laden and was rebuffed.

In a particularly ominous development, the Taliban on Sunday claimed to have freed prisoners held at the Bagram Air Base outside Kabul, where "high value" Qaeda members had been detained, according to Bill Roggio, a longtime Afghanistan analyst at the hawkish Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "This will reverberate for years to come," he wrote on Twitter.

As the United States raced to evacuate personnel from its embassy in Kabul, human and refugee rights groups sharply criticized the Biden administration for not moving faster to relocate America's Afghan allies from a country where they were at risk of lethal Taliban reprisals.

"Unless there is a swift and meaningful effort to evacuate the thousands of allies and their families to the United States or a U.S. territory, we will have broken our promise to leave no one behind," Jennifer Quigley, senior director for government affairs at Human Rights First, said in a statement.

Earlier this month, the Biden administration announced that Afghans not eligible for the Special Immigrant Visa program created by Congress to protect those who had assisted the American military — including those who worked for U.S.-based media organizations and nongovernmental organizations — could apply for high-priority refugee status.

But U.S. officials said those Afghans, who may number in the tens of thousands, must first leave the country under their own auspices merely to begin an application process that can take more than a year.

With the Taliban in control of cities, highways and border crossings, it may now be too late for many of them to leave.