

POLITICO

The hopeless optimism of trusting the Taliban

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July 30, 2021

Earlier this week, when asked about Taliban fighters hunting down, detaining and killing Afghans as the Islamist fundamentalist militia seizes more territory, Secretary of State **ANTHONY BLINKEN** described such reports as “deeply, deeply troubling.”

But Blinken also struck a note he’s hit repeatedly since President **JOE BIDEN**’s decision to end the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan: The Taliban need to act responsibly, the secretary said.

“The Taliban says that it seeks international recognition, that it wants international support for Afghanistan,” Blinken told reporters. “Presumably it wants its leaders to be able to travel freely in the world, sanctions lifted, et cetera. Well ... taking over the country by force and abusing the rights of its people is not the path to achieve those objectives.”

But are those really the Taliban’s objectives? Do the Islamist movement’s leaders actually care about jet-setting to global conferences and making sure Afghanistan gets international aid? Do such benefits outrank their vision of placing the country under strict Islamic law?

Back in the mid-1990s, as the Taliban first rose to power in a fractious Afghanistan, U.S. officials quickly became aware of the Taliban’s deeply conservative interpretations of Islam. But they thought they could harness it — especially against Iran, whose leaders hail from a different Islamic sect — while shaping Taliban behavior.

Accounts from that time are a reminder that predictions are a fool’s errand in foreign policy.

“The Taliban does not practice the anti-U.S. style of fundamentalism practiced by Iran — it is closer to the Saudi model,” **ZALMAY KHALILZAD**, the current U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan peace talks, pointed out in a 1996 column in The Washington Post, implying Washington could get along with the Taliban the way it did with Riyadh. (This didn’t happen.)

Khalilzad added: “The departure of ... **OSAMA BIN LADEN**, the Saudi financier of various anti-U.S. terrorist groups, from Afghanistan indicates some common interest between the United States and the Taliban.” (Bin Laden came back. You know the rest.)

The New York Times also reported that year that U.S. officials hoped the Taliban would serve as a headache for Iran. Furthermore, the paper noted, some U.S. officials “have placed heavy emphasis on the hope that contacts with the new rulers in Kabul will encourage them to soften their policies, especially toward women.” (LOL.)

A 1996 Wall Street Journal editorial, meanwhile, made this astonishing claim: “Afghanistan’s Taliban ... are interested in religious observance, not control of a state apparatus. They have no political ideology, no political organization and — so far — no real animus towards the West.”

In the two decades since the United States dislodged the Taliban from power, it’s reasonable to believe the organization has evolved. After all, they recently sent delegations to meet with officials in Iran and China, both U.S. rivals. It’s also perfectly understandable that Blinken and other American officials are trying to shape the group’s behavior.

But it’s probably a good idea to prepare for everyone to get everything wrong, again.

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THE INBOX

MORE CUBA SANCTIONS COMING: Ahead of Biden’s meeting with Cuban-American leaders at the White House later this afternoon, a senior administration official confirmed the Treasury Department would level new sanctions today against one entity and two individuals under the Magnitsky Act “for their role in human rights abuses” against the Cuban people.

These new penalties follow the administration’s move last week to sanction 77-year-old **ÁLVARO LÓPEZ MIERA**, minister of Cuba’s Revolutionary Armed Forces, and the Brigada Especial Nacional del Ministerio del Interior, or the Cuban government’s Interior Ministry Special Brigade.

At the White House meeting today — which will be attended by Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair **BOB MENENDEZ** (D-N.J.) and House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair **GREGORY MEEKS** (D-N.Y.), per the senior administration official — Biden and the other participants are expected to discuss “humanitarian support” for the Cuban people and “plans for the [U.S.] embassy staffing going forward.”

In addition, the administration is “in talks with private sector providers about the possibility of providing wireless LTE communication for the Cuban people, which we consider to be a right,” the official said — without making any concrete announcement about potential internet access for the island nation.

NEW AFGHAN INTERPRETERS ARRIVING NEXT MONTH: The first round of Afghan nationals applying for the State Department’s special immigrant visa program began arriving in the United States this morning. Just over 200 Afghans — including interpreters who aided the U.S. war effort and their family members — began the long flight from Kabul on Thursday to

Fort Lee in Virginia. They'll spend several days there at the Army base, finishing up the final medical and administrative checks required to complete their SIV applications.

“These brave men and women, at great risk to themselves and their families, served alongside U.S. and coalition forces and diplomats to support our operations and prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorism that threatens our homeland,” Defense Secretary **LLOYD AUSTIN** said in a statement. “We have spoken many times about the moral obligation we have to help those who have helped us, and we are fully committed to working closely with our interagency partners to meet that obligation.”

Our own **LARA SELIGMAN** reports that the State Department is looking to evacuate a second group of Afghan interpreters in August — consisting of roughly 4,000 SIV applicants who initially will be flown to countries outside of the United States. The total number of Afghans in this second group to be relocated and eventually brought to America could reach up to 20,000, including both the interpreters applying for visas and their family members.

TROOPS REQUIRED TO REVEAL VACCINE STATUS: President **JOE BIDEN** — who issued an order yesterday requiring roughly 2 million federal workers to disclose whether they've been vaccinated against the coronavirus, or else submit to regular testing — is also directing the Pentagon to determine how and when it might add Covid-19 vaccination to the list of mandated immunizations for the military, per our own **LAUREN GARDNER**.

Austin will begin meeting with the department's medical professionals, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to prepare recommendations for the president, Pentagon spokesperson **JAMAL BROWN** said in a statement: “In accordance with the guidance the President issued today, all military and civilian DoD personnel will be asked to attest to their vaccination status. Personnel unable or unwilling to do that will be required to wear a mask, physically distance, comply with a regular testing requirement and be subject to official travel restrictions.”

VP'S SECOND FOREIGN TRIP: The White House has confirmed what NatSec Daily first reported Monday — that Vice President **KAMALA HARRIS** will travel to Singapore and Vietnam in August “to strengthen relationships and expand economic cooperation with two critical Indo-Pacific partners of the United States,” per Harris senior adviser and chief spokesperson **SYMONE SANDERS**.

It'll be Harris' second trek abroad as vice president — after her trip to Guatemala and Mexico last month — and she'll become the latest high-ranking administration official to travel to Southeast Asia. This week alone, Defense Secretary **LLOYD AUSTIN** visited Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines; and Secretary of State **ANTONY BLINKEN** made stops in India and Kuwait.

FOGGY BOTTOM'S WATCHDOG: The State Department inspector general's office has released a surprisingly interesting and somewhat damning report on the creation of “remote missions” — the pseudo embassies for countries such as Somalia, Venezuela, Yemen and Libya — noting the lack of formal protocols and inability to respond to changes in the security environment.

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BLOWING UP

IRANIAN DRONES SUSPECTED IN TANKER ATTACK: Two crew members aboard an oil tanker managed by an Israeli-owned shipping firm were killed in an attack on the vessel last night off the coast of Oman, [per PATRICK KINGSLEY and RONEN BERGMAN of The New York Times](#). A pair of Israeli officials told the Times that the attack appeared to have been carried out by several unmanned Iranian drones that crashed into living quarters underneath the ship's command center.

PALESTINIAN MAN KILLED IN WEST BANK: Palestinian health officials say Israeli troops shot and killed a Palestinian man — identified as 20-year-old **SHAUKAT AWAD** — during clashes in the West Bank following the funeral of a Palestinian boy killed by the Israel Defense Forces, [according to the Associated Press](#).

HONG KONG PROTESTER SENTENCED: TONG YING-KIT, a 24-year-old protester, has been found guilty of inciting secession and committing terrorist activities under the new Hong Kong national security law imposed by Beijing, [per the Wall Street Journal's ELAINE YU](#). Tong is the first person to be convicted under the law, which went into effect last June, and he was sentenced today to nine years in prison.

FBI REPORT RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT BEIRUT BLAST: An FBI investigation into [the massive blast at the Port of Beirut](#) last August concluded that the amount of ammonium nitrate blown up in the deadly explosion was only one fifth of the shipment unloaded there by a Russian-leased cargo vessel in 2013, [according to Reuters](#) — which reviewed the bureau's October 2020 findings.

KEYSTROKES

RUSSIA EXPLAINS ISS SNAFU: A Russian space agency company claims a software failure is the reason why the engines of a research module briefly knocked the International Space Station off course yesterday, [report ANDREW OSBORN and ALEXANDER MARROW of Reuters](#).

SCANT CYBER WORKFORCE: The United States is suffering a shortage of as many as 500,000 employees in its cyber workforce, warned an expert witness at a House Homeland Security subcommittee hearing yesterday.

“Let that number sink in,” **TONY COULSON**, director of the Cybersecurity Center at California State University, San Bernardino, [told lawmakers](#). “That’s an absurd number. If this was doctors and nurses, there would be a national outcry.”

One of the key causes of the deficit is insufficient cyber education among K-12 students, Coulson said: “We know that [K-12] is a huge opportunity and there’s a lot of activity in this space and there’s a lot of investment through a lot of agencies, but there are still gaps. There’s a lot of work to be done here.”

THE COMPLEX

ALLEGED NAVY ARSONIST CHARGED: The Navy has filed charges of aggravated arson and hazarding a vessel against a sailor for allegedly deliberately starting a fire last July that tore through the interior of the USS Bonhomme Richard, per **GIDGET FUENTES** of USNI News. The ship cost \$750 million to build in 1998; it was recently sold for scrap at just \$3.6 million.

CONTRACTOR OVERSIGHT CONCERNS: The Government Accountability Office determined in a new report that the Defense Department must improve its tracking and accounting of private security contractors that work alongside military and U.S. civilian agencies, according to **ANTHONY CAPACCIO** of Bloomberg News.

BEIJING’S ATOMIC AMBITIONS: U.S. Strategic Command promoted research from the Federation of American Scientists estimating that China has roughly 250 underground missile silos under construction, report **HUIZHONG WU** and **JON GAMBRELL** of the Associated Press.

ON THE HILL

LAWMAKERS PUSH YOUNG AFRICAN LEADERS PROGRAM: Sens. **CHRIS VAN HOLLEN** (D-Md.) and **MIKE ROUNDS** (R-S.D.) are rolling out legislation to make permanent the Young African Leaders Initiative — the State Department program launched in 2010 to invest in the next generation of African leaders and support their efforts to promote economic growth, democratic governance and peace across sub-Saharan Africa.

The bill from the two Senate Foreign Relations Committee members comes after Rep. **KAREN BASS** (D-Calif.) introduced the same measure in the House, where it passed in April. According to the State Department, nearly one in three Africans are between the ages of 10 and 24, and approximately 60 percent of Africa’s total population is below the age of 35.

SENATE INTEL DREADS CHINA’S DIGITAL CURRENCY: The Senate Intelligence Committee’s marked-up version of the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 now includes a bill that would require the Biden administration to report on U.S. national security risks related to China’s creation and use of an official digital currency.

The measure by Sens. **BILL HAGERTY** (R-Tenn.) and **MARK WARNER** (D-Va.) mandates reporting specifically on risks arising from the Chinese Communist Party’s potential surveillance of financial transactions; risks related to security and illicit finance; and risks related to economic coercion and social control by the CCP.

BROADSIDES

SECDEF GETS FLAK FOR FACE SHIELD: More than 24 hours after Defense Secretary **LLOYD AUSTIN** touched down in the Philippines for the final leg of his Southeast Asia trip, Republicans are still roundly mocking the Pentagon chief for disembarking his E4-B “Doomsday Plane” while wearing a mask and face shield.

Since posting a video of himself stepping onto the tarmac in personal protective equipment early yesterday, Austin has come under fire online from countless conservatives and prominent GOP elected officials. Sen. **MARCO RUBIO** called the display “Embarrassing COVID theatre,” and **DONALD TRUMP JR.** joined in on the ridicule this morning, tweeting: “Tell me you’re a democrat defense secretary without telling me you’re a democrat defense secretary! Lots of drama here folks.”

Of course, Austin’s critics have failed to mention that the Philippine government “has mandated that everyone must wear full-coverage face shields together with face masks while in public places,” according to the U.S. embassy in Manila.

When our own DAVE BROWN noted this guidance, Rubio doubled-down, tweeting a collage of photos from Austin’s foreign travel that showed the secretary wearing only a mask without an accompanying face shield. “I guess the face shield mandate was lifted shortly after he landed,” Rubio wrote. But of the three images posted by the senator, all showed Austin outdoors, and two were taken in Vietnam and Singapore — not the Philippines.

Despite the face shield fracas, the secretary scored a diplomatic win this morning: The Pentagon announced that, following a meeting with Austin last night, Philippine President **RODRIGO DUTERTE** had retracted a letter terminating the country’s Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States. “[T]he VFA is in full force again; there is no termination letter pending, and we are back on track with your secretary to plan for future exercises under the VFA,” **DELFIN LORENZANA**, the Philippine national defense secretary, said in a statement.

TRANSITIONS

ODNI ARRIVAL LOUNGE: Director of National Intelligence **AVRIL HAINES** just announced that **TIMOTHY BARRETT** is joining her team as assistant director of national intelligence for strategic communications.

ANTISEMITISM ENVOY: The White House has nominated Emory University professor **DEBORAH LIPSTADT** as the administration’s special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism, **GABBY DEUTCH** and **MARC ROD** first reported for Jewish Insider.

The acclaimed author and historian famously defeated a 1996 lawsuit from English writer and Holocaust denier **DAVID IRVING** that accused her of libel. (Lipstadt was portrayed by actress **RACHEL WEISZ** in the 2016 movie version of that case.)

RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS NOMINATIONS: In addition to Lipstadt, Biden has tapped **RASHAD HUSSAIN** as ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom; and **KHIZR KHAN** and **SHARON KLEINBAUM** as commissioners of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.

NEW OLYMPIC DELEGATION: Biden also announced that U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations **LINDA THOMAS-GREENFIELD** will lead the American delegation to Japan to attend the Closing Ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games. Other members of the delegation will include **RAYMOND GREENE**, chargé d’affaires ad interim, U.S. Embassy Tokyo; and **MARCIA BERNICAT**, senior official for economic growth, energy, and the environment and acting assistant secretary of State for oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs at the State Department.

THINK TANK TURNOVER: JOHN GLASER has stepped down as director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and will be moving to the role of adjunct scholar, he tweeted. Glaser will continue to host the institute's biweekly "Power Problems" podcast.