

# **Biden meets Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at the White House**

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## **Finally taking Afghanistan crisis seriously, Joe? Four days after catastrophe began, President holds talks in the Situation Room with Kamala - who has laid low for six days - and Mark Milley, Lloyd Austin and Anthony Blinken**

President met with top military and security officials at the Wednesday amid the unfolding chaos in – as he prepared to try to explain the situation to the American people once again in a sit-down interview.

The president returned to the White House Tuesday evening, cutting short a trip to Camp David amid the rush to evacuate Americans and foreign nationals from the airport in Kabul.

The White House blasted out a photo image of the meeting Wednesday afternoon, in the latest public demonstration that Biden was in command, following days of televised images on television that the White House called 'heartbreaking.'

He was seated at the head of a table in the White House Situation Room, with Vice President Kamala Harris, who has had a low profile amid the calamity in Kabul, seated to his right. The president's black mask can be seen dangling from his ear. Seated around the table are Secretary of State Antony Blinken, whose agency is struggling to process potential Afghan special immigrants,

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley.

The name tag of White House counsel Dana Remus can be seen in the image.

Biden also received the President's Daily Brief Wednesday morning – amid an interagency clash over agency planning as well as intelligence failures over the swift collapse of Kabul – although the White House said Tuesday it had been 'clear eyed' about the contingencies.

And in his campaign to sell his Afghan strategy amid images the White House called 'heartbreaking', Biden sits down with ABC's George Stephanopoulos for an interview set to air Thursday morning on 'Good Morning America,' after speaking to the nation from the White House on Monday.

The veteran anchor and former Clinton Administration press secretary has been Biden's go-to interviewer in the past. Biden last sat down with Stephanopoulos in March.

His face time with Milley comes after the that Biden had cast aside Milley's request to maintain a force of 2,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, amid warnings by Milley and Austin about the potential risks. Biden went ahead with his plan to remove all U.S. troops anyway – in a move that many officials now say undermined the position of the Afghan government.

The Pentagon orchestrated its first public briefing with Milley and Austin on Wednesday, in its own effort to demonstrate command. At the press conference, Milley pushed back at critics who said the military should have better prepared for the U.S.-backed Afghan government to crater.

'There was nothing that I or anyone else saw indicating a collapse of this army and this government in 11 days,' Milley said.



President Joe Biden met with top military and security officials at the White House Wednesday amid the unfolding chaos in Afghanistan – as he prepared to try to explain the situation to the American people once again in a sit-down interview

Biden had been speaking to both men via videoconference from Camp David prior to his return.

According to an official White House readout released Wednesday afternoon, Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were briefed by their security team on the 'evolving situation in Afghanistan.'

'They were briefed on intelligence, security and diplomatic updates. They discussed efforts to accelerate evacuations of U.S. citizens, SIV applicants, and other vulnerable Afghans, and to facilitate safe passage to Hamid Karzai International Airport,' according to the readout.

They also discussed 'their focus on monitoring for any potential terrorist threats in Afghanistan, including from ISIS-K.'

Also attending were Secretary of State Antony Blinken, CIA Director William Burns, Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, and others.

Amid the turmoil in Kabul – with reports of Taliban guards firing into the air at the airport, a crush of would-be evacuees seeking to get there, and beatings of protesters in the northeastern city of Jalalabad – Biden is also getting briefed on the pandemic and vaccine developments.

His only public event is set for Wednesday afternoon, and is on the pandemic. A limited number of reporters are being allowed into the event, however, and he is certain to get hit with questions on Afghanistan.



President Joe Biden returned Tuesday night from Camp David



Biden met with Defense Sec. Lloyd Austin. The Pentagon confirmed Tuesday that it has a channel of communication with the Taliban

Lawmakers from Biden's own party are continuing to fume about the unfolding chaos in Afghanistan and firing up probes where they will demand answers from the Democratic administration.

The push for formal oversight comes even as White House national security advisor Jake Sullivan promised an internal 'hotwash' that would ultimately take a look back at how the events culminated in the sudden collapse of Kabul and a rush to evacuate U.S. nationals and allies.

The increasingly frustrated Democrats are vowing to investigate what went wrong, setting up a formal and public reckoning even as the Biden team is trying to field off bitter criticism from Republicans and former President Donald Trump.

'The events of recent days have been the culmination of a series of mistakes made by Republican and Democratic administrations over the past 20 years,'

Senator Bob Menendez, Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said in a statement.

'We are now witnessing the horrifying result of many years of policy and intelligence failures,' Menendez said. While hammering the Trump Administration for its deal with the Taliban, he also called out the Biden administration's 'flawed' execution of the strategy.

In implementing this flawed plan, I am disappointed that the Biden administration clearly did not accurately assess the implications of a rapid U.S. withdrawal,' Menendez said. 'We are now witnessing the horrifying results of many years of policy and intelligence failures.'



A Taliban fighter patrols in Wazir Akbar Khan in the city of Kabul, Afghanistan, Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2021. Lawmakers want to probe the swift Taliban takeover of much of the country



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The Taliban turned on the crowd at Kabul airport on Tuesday, driving the hundreds back from the airport perimeter as they pushed to flee the country. They had promised to be peaceful but have already given up on it



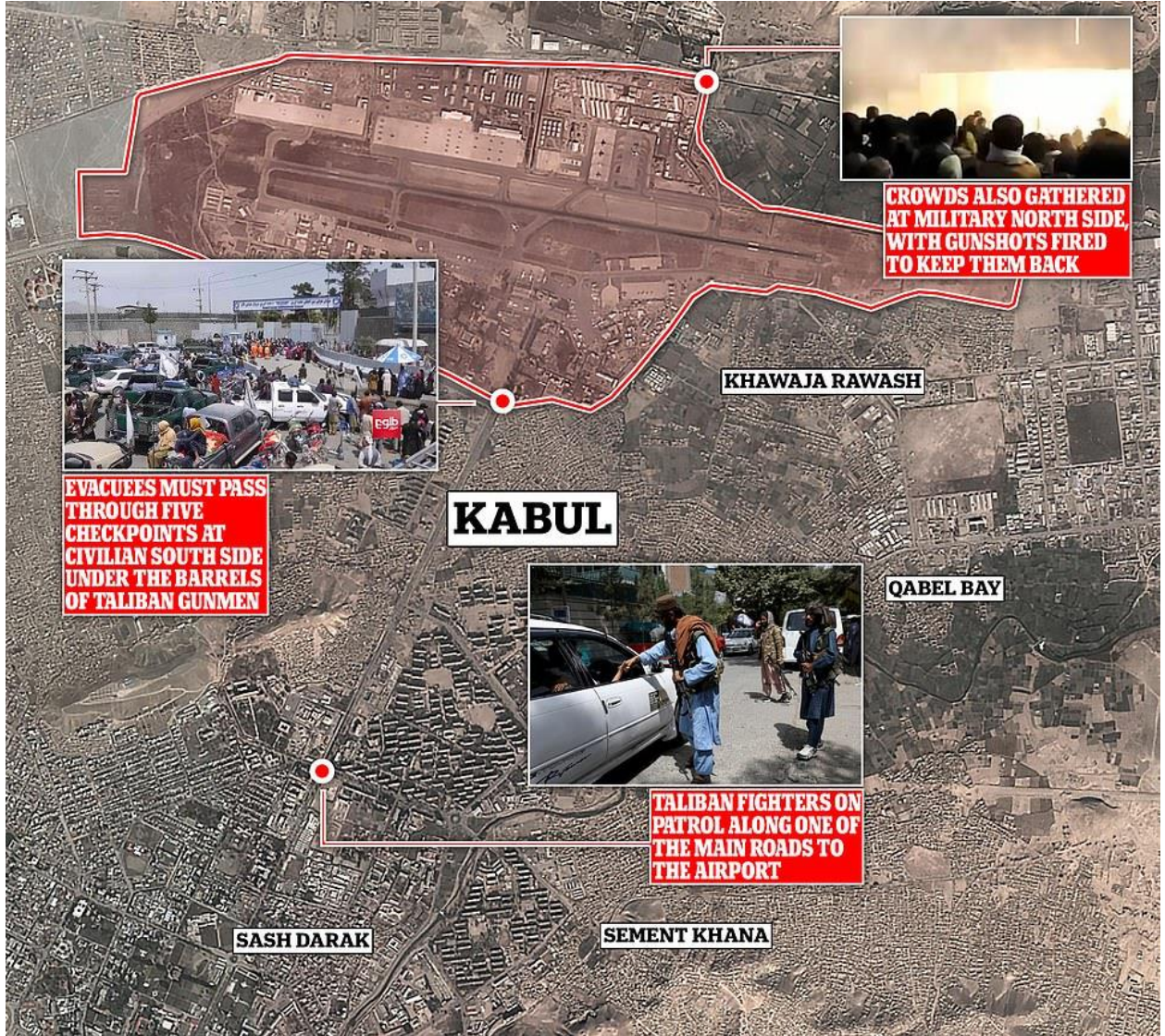
Taliban fighters patrol in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood in the city of Kabul, Afghanistan, Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2021. The group is becoming increasingly violent, abandoning promises to be peaceful, and their cooperation is what the evacuation mission is relying on







Taliban fighters stand guard at a checkpoint in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood in the city of Kabul, Afghanistan, Wednesday, Aug. 18, 2021



**CROWDS ALSO GATHERED AT MILITARY NORTH SIDE, WITH GUNSHOTS FIRED TO KEEP THEM BACK**



**EVACUEES MUST PASS THROUGH FIVE CHECKPOINTS AT CIVILIAN SOUTH SIDE UNDER THE BARRELS OF TALIBAN GUNMEN**

**KABUL**

**KHAWAJA RAWASH**



**TALIBAN FIGHTERS ON PATROL ALONG ONE OF THE MAIN ROADS TO THE AIRPORT**

**QABEL BAY**

**SASH DARAK**

**SEMENT KHANA**



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There are now 4,500 troops on the ground at the airport in Kabul including 1300 marines but the people outside the airport walls can't get to them safely and there is no presence in the town of any US military. Here Marines from the 24th Expeditionary Unit (MEU) prepare to board a C-17 Globemaster at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, en route to Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul, Afghanistan, in a photo released by the Pentagon



Biden will sit down with ABC's George Stephanopoulos amid the turmoil

Menendez said his committee would hold a hearing on U.S. policy toward Afghanistan, including negotiations between former Republican President Donald Trump's administration and the Taliban and the Biden's administration's execution of the withdrawal.

Committee Republicans said they wanted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to testify, 'to understand why the State Department was so ill prepared for the contingencies unfolding before us,' according to a letter sent to Menendez.

'Updates from the State Department have been inconsistent, lacked important detail, and not be responsive to Members and the American people,' the Republicans wrote.

The date of the hearing was not immediately announced.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) vowed in his own statement to probe 'failures of intelligence, diplomacy and a lack of imagination as we transitioned military forces from the country.'

Senator Mark Warner, the Democratic Intelligence Committee chairman, had said on Monday he intended to work with other committees 'to ask tough but necessary questions' about why the United States was not better prepared for the collapse of the Afghan government.

Republicans continued their harsh criticism of Biden's policies.

House Armed Services Committee member Rep. Jim Langevin (D-R.I.), called the latest events a 'catastrophe' in a blunt statement.

'At minimum, the Biden administration owed our Afghan allies of 20 years a real plan,' he said, reported.

Rep. Mark Kelley (D-Ariz.) said the 'rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan reveals a failure to prepare for a scenario where the Afghan government and military would refuse to fight the Taliban's advances when put to the test.'

'The security and humanitarian crisis now unfolding in Afghanistan could have been avoided if you had done any planning,' Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee wrote in a letter to the White House on Tuesday.

The congressional probes – Democrats control both Houses of Congress – follow a period in which committees tried and failed repeatedly to get top Trump Administration officials to testify in House probes when seeking to conduct public oversight of the administration.