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# Heart of Asia

Your Gateway to Afghanistan & the Region

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## NATO Warns of Risks of Early Afghanistan Withdrawal

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said on Sunday night that "what is clear now is that the U.S. is going to reduce [troop levels in Afghanistan] but they are not going to leave."

Speaking to Halifax International, Stoltenberg also said that NATO would have to make the decision early next year on whether to stay or to leave Afghanistan.

In the meantime, the U.S. will continue to provide support to the other NATO Allies in Afghanistan, he said. "We have to remember that more than half of the troops in Afghanistan now are non-U.S. – they are European Allies and also partner nations. "We are in Afghanistan to make sure that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe haven for international terrorists, a platform where terrorists can plan, organize, finance, launch terrorist attacks against our countries," Stoltenberg said. ... **P2**



## Ghani Says Afghanistan Wants Connectivity, Not Charity

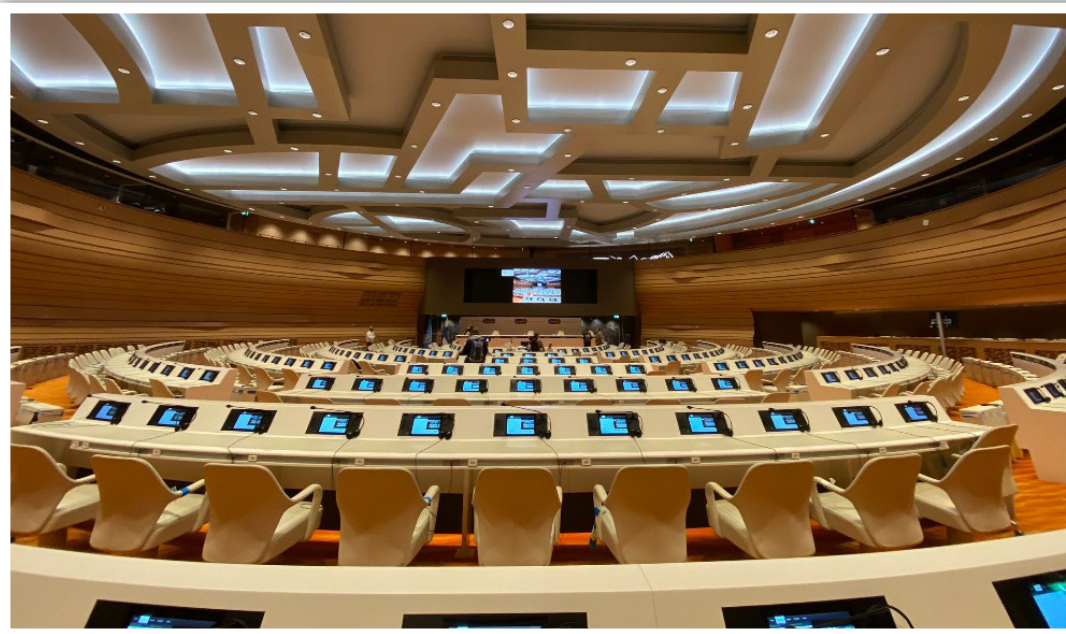
President Ghani addressed a side event of the Geneva summit on Monday where he explained the ways through which can improve its economy and reiterated that the country does not want charity; it wants connectivity.

Ghani said that Afghanistan's dream is to become a roundabout for the region. "Afghanistan is one of these places of intersection, as historical trade roads ranging from the grand trunk road to the lapis lazuli and silk met here," Ghani said. "Names given to us capture the significance of our location best: the heart of Asia; gates of India; land bridge; roundabout, a place where goods, ideas, and people freely move, circulate and interact; Switzerland of Asia."

Ghani said a strong regional consensus is essential to creating sustainable peace in the country.

He added that sustainable peace can be achieved by developing a common understanding of the current context, having reached an agreed-upon ... **P3**

# Geneva Conference: Participants Call for Reduction in Violence



Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Mohammad Haneef Atmar on Monday opened the two-day 2020 Geneva Conference on Afghanistan where he said that "peace efforts should lead to a reduction in violence in the country."

Atmar said that without a peace deal, the Afghan government has released thousands Taliban prisoners, but "violence is still high in Afghanistan." The 2020 Afghanistan Conference is the last pledging conference of the Transformation Decade

(2015-24), which aims to take the country towards self-reliance, and is expected to renew the international community and Afghan commitments to the development and stability of Afghanistan up to 2024.

The main conference will take place on November 24 with representatives of at least 100 countries to discuss key challenges and accomplishments for Afghanistan occurring the day before. Addressing the event, Afghanistan's First Lady Rula Ghani said the Afghan Republic gives all guarantees that

human rights will be respected. She said the Republic and the Constitution respect the diversity of the Afghan population, adding that the Taliban has delayed the start of the peace negotiations in Doha. Taliban's perspective on women's rights has not changed and that they have made "vague" commitments in this respect. State Minister for Peace Affairs and peace negotiator Sayed Sadat Mansoor Nader Naderi said that the peace process should be inclusive.

"Afghanistan needs continued support from the international community to preserve its gains in pursuit of peace," he said.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said women's rights cannot be compromised, adding that "Afghan women should have meaningful participation in the peace process."

"Civilian casualties in Afghanistan have not lessened following the start of the Doha talks in September," he said.

Afghan chief negotiator Masoom Stanekzai said that the woman members of the Afghan Republic negotiating team are active and motivated and that "they are not only fighting for women's rights but for the rights of all Afghans."

He also said that the violence will not end in Afghanistan unless the problem of Afghan refugees is addressed.

"There is a need for a reintegration and return plan for the refugees," he said.

Stanekzai said any peace deal should also ensure the rights of internally displaced persons and return refugees.

"We must prevent the repeat of history in Afghanistan," Stanekzai says.

Norway Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soreide says peace negotiations ... **P3**

## Biden to seek more concessions from Taliban

US president-elect Joe Biden is likely to push for seeking a ceasefire as well as guarantees from the Taliban on human rights, something the Democrats have always pushed for, a media report said on Monday. Observers believe that Biden's push for more concessions is likely to put additional pressure on Pakistan, according to the Express Tribune. The reason for this is that Pakistan has been instrumental in first brokering the talks between the Afghan Taliban and the US leading to the intra-Afghan talks. ... **P2**



## 26,000 Afghan Children Killed or Maimed Since 2005

An average of five children have been killed or wounded every day for the past 14 years in war-torn Afghanistan, a charity has found. Data from the UN showed at least 26,025 children were killed or maimed from 2005 to 2019, said Save the Children.

The charity has urged donor nations to protect the future of Afghan children ahead of a key meeting in Geneva.

Violence has been rising in Afghanistan amid stalled peace talks and U.S. troop withdrawals.

Afghanistan is among the 11 most dangerous nations in the world for children, according to Save the Children.

In 2019 it accounted for the greatest number of killing and maiming violations of all the global conflicts covered in the charity's report, released on Friday, with 874 Afghan children killed and 2,275 maimed.



More than two-thirds of those killed and maimed last year were boys, it said, "as a result of ground engagements between pro- and anti-government forces or of improvised explosive devices in both suicide and non-suicide attacks".

The report found that schools have routinely been attacked in the ongoing conflict that pits the Afghan government, supported by U.S. troops, against the Taliban and other insurgents.

Save the Children said that between 2017 and 2019 there were more than 300 attacks on schools.

"Imagine living with the constant fear that today might be the day that your child is killed in a suicide attack or an airstrike. This is the grim reality for tens of thousands of Afghan parents whose children have been killed or injured," said Chris Nyamandi, Save the Children's country director in Afghanistan, in a statement.

### NATO Warns...

He also said NATO strongly supports the current peace talks taking place between the government and Taliban and pointed out that part of the agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban in February stated that all foreign troops should be out of Afghanistan by May 1 next year.

“So early next year, we need to make a very hard decision. That’s: whether we leave and risk to lose the gains we have made, but then at least we can be out of Afghanistan; or whether we stay and then continue to be involved in the very challenging and demanding military operation in Afghanistan,” Stoltenberg said. “My message is that we need to assess whether the conditions for leaving are met, together. We need to make these decisions together. And as we have said many times in NATO: we went into Afghanistan together, we should make decisions on adjustments of a presence there together, and when the time is right, we should leave together, but then in a coordinated and orderly way.”

The U.S. is expected to reduce its number of troops from 4,500 to about 2,500 in the coming weeks – while NATO has an estimated 11,000 troops still in Afghanistan.

### Australia...

koalas, following the devastating bushfires which killed and injured thousands. “Today’s announcement will support the conservation community to respond to the devastating 2019-20 summer bushfire season which impacted important habitat for koalas and other threatened species right across Australia,” said Box.

By Mohammad Yahya Qanie

# Afghan History Repeats Itself; This Time Jeopardizes US Interests

If we look back to the past, we find that this is not the first time a foreign country has attempted to end the war in Afghanistan through negotiation with insurgents. In early 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, he decided to negotiate with the Mujahidin (freedom fighters against the Soviet Union occupation) to facilitate an orderly withdrawal and ensure the stability of its supported government in Kabul, and ultimately end the war which he called “the bleeding wound.”

In December 1986, following the encouragement of the Soviet Union, Dr. Najibullah, whose survival depended on the Soviet military and financial assistance, announced a national reconciliation to negotiate with Mujahidin and give them a share in power. To show his seriousness, Dr. Najibullah, announced a six-month ceasefire, approved a new constitution that recognized Islam as state religion, released 16,000 Mujahidin prisoners, and offered 50-50 share in the government. But the Mujahidin refused to negotiate and vowed to continue “jihad” until the unconditional withdrawal of the Soviet Union and make their own Islamic Afghanistan.

The main reason that the Mujahidin refused to negotiate with the Kabul government was that the Soviet Union announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan and this decision gave the Mujahidin more confidence knowing if they do not share the power today, they will have it all tomorrow.

Later, the Soviet Union directly negotiated with the Mujahidin and the Mujahidin agreed to allow the Red Army exit from Afghanistan without attacking them during the withdrawal, but they kept fighting the Kabul government. Unlike expectations, once the Soviet Union left Afghanistan, the war against the Kabul government escalated and finally, in the spring of 1992, General Dostum, Kabul government loyal—who is now promoted to marshal rank—joined Mujahidin and overthrew the government.

Soon after the fall of the government, the country became a proxy battlefield for regional players. During fights among Mujahidin, in 1994 Taliban emerged with the assistance of Al Qaeda and Pakistan and could capture up to 90% of the country, less through war more through deals and diplomacy.

Taliban was unable to confront Mujahidin, so they used them against each other. First, they got the support of the Kabul government (Jamiat-e-Islami) to disarm



Hizb-e-Islami in Kandahar, a common enemy for both the Taliban and Jamiat-e-Islami. Once done, the Taliban took control of the province and removed Jamiat-e-Islami too. In another deal with General Dostum, the Taliban launched airstrikes against Ismail Khan in Herat. Soon, the Taliban separated from Dostum and joined General Malik, another Uzbek Leader, and exiled General Dostum. Once Dostum left, the Taliban imprisoned General Malik too. Later in 1995, the Taliban made a deal with Ali Mazari, in the Iranian Consulate in Pakistan, to capture Kabul. Once they captured Kabul, they killed Mazari too.

After two decades of failed attempts by the former President Karzai and the National Unity Government to bring the Taliban at the table of negotiations, in early 2019, President Trump announced his new, yet similar to the Soviet Union, strategy for Afghanistan and ordered the US Department of State to hold direct negotiations with the Taliban. With a withdrawal plot attached to his new strategy, it was a significant shift in American policy in Afghanistan, done in the hope of ending the 19-years war.

Eventually in mid-2018, the United States started direct negotiations with the Taliban and tried to take practical measures, through an agreement, to ensure the stability of the Afghan government in post-withdrawal and pave the way for Intra-Afghan Peace Talks. But the Taliban always had a different agenda and used

negotiations to get more legitimacy and international recognition with a focus on their goal to get the power. With Trump’s exit strategy from Afghanistan, the Taliban are waiting until the US and NATO forces leave and overthrow the Afghan government. Until then, they continue their attacks to undermine the Afghan government, make excuses to delay the Intra-Afghan Peace Talks and encourage the US to withdraw their forces by not attacking them during the withdrawal. With the Taliban clearly not seeking peace and not ready to cut ties with Al Qaeda, the US, under President-elect Biden, and its allies shall equip Afghan security forces with modern intelligence equipment, weapons, and fighters to give a win chance for Afghan forces in the battlefield. The international community must, as well, draw a comprehensive strategy to target the Taliban’s financial assets and its support networks in Pakistan and the Middle East.

Above all, the US, under President-elect Joe Biden, must realize that an inclusive political solution to end America’s longest war is desirable, but a shortsighted deal with the Taliban could jeopardize the hard-won gains of the last decades, inflame ethnic tension, and can even take the country to new chaos of civil war, and ultimately endangers the US interests. At this stage, pursuing negotiations with the Taliban as an exit strategy, as the Soviet experience shows, is both unrealistic and dangerous.

By Michael Kugelman

## Pak-US ties approaching an inflection point: Dawn contributor

When asked what to expect for Pak-US relations under President-elect Joe Biden, one is tempted to say “more of the same”. Indeed, Mr Biden and US President Donald Trump don’t agree on much, but Pakistan is a rare case of convergence.

For Mr Biden, like Mr Trump, the priorities will be Islamabad’s assistance with peace talks in Afghanistan and its ongoing efforts to dismantle terrorist networks at home. Drivers of cooperation - Afghan peace talks, bilateral trade, some shared counterterrorism (CT) goals - remain intact.

The constraints - US-China rivalry, US-India partnership - do as well. Yet, even amid expectations of policy continuity, Mr Biden will usher in a different era for Pak-US relations.

That’s because his experiences with Pakistan, and his broader foreign policy views, are so markedly different from Mr Trump’s.

No US president has taken office with as much knowledge of Pakistan as Mr Biden. He has crafted Pakistan-focused legislation, made multiple visits, cultivated deep ties with civilian and military leaders, and experienced directly the best and worst periods of the relationship’s recent history. He even received the Hilal-i-Pakistan award.

Mr Biden will enter office as the most foreign policy-savvy president since George H.W. Bush, and he will advance a foreign policy agenda diametrically opposed to Mr Trump’s. His focus will be on restoring US leadership and reinvigorating democracy and rights.

Accordingly, Pak-US relations under Mr Biden could strengthen considerably - or get much worse.

Under the optimistic scenario, the two sides continue engaging on peace in Afghanistan, Islamabad keeps making progress in weakening

terrorist infrastructure, and bilateral trade grows more.

Mr Biden may bring back parts of the strategic dialogue launched during the Obama years. And his comfort level with Pakistan should enable his administration to pursue effective, meaningful diplomacy.

The relationship may receive another boost through three US foreign policy moves. Mr Biden hopes to take the edge off Washington’s toxic relationship with Beijing; he supports pursuing cooperation in some spaces, including climate change and health.

He aims to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal. And he will be more willing than Mr Trump to broach human rights issues with India.

The more pessimistic scenario is that the Mr Biden administration holds back on expanding the relationship until there is sufficient progress with Afghan peace efforts. If the peace process ...

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### China to launch...

than represented in the Apollo-Luna sample collections, he said.

“Lunar scientists have been advocating for robotic sample return missions to these many different critical areas in order to address a host of fundamental questions remaining from earlier exploration,” Head said.

The Chang’e-5 mission may help answer questions such as how long the moon remained volcanically active in its interior and when its magnetic field - key to protecting any form of life from the sun’s radiation - dissipated.

#### THE MISSION

Once in the moon’s orbit, the probe will aim to deploy a pair of vehicles to the surface: a lander will drill into the ground, then transfer its soil and rock samples to an ascender that will lift off and dock with an orbiting module.

If this is successful, the samples will be transferred to a return capsule that will return them to Earth.

China made its first lunar landing in 2013. In January 2019, the Chang’e-4 probe touched down on the far side of the moon, the first by any nation’s space probe.

Within the next decade, China plans to establish a robotic base station to conduct unmanned exploration in the south polar region.

It is to be developed through the Chang’e-6 7 and 8 missions through the 2020s and expanded through the 2030s ahead of manned landings.

#### Slideshow (3 images)

China plans to retrieve samples from Mars by 2030. In July, China launched an unmanned probe to Mars in its first independent mission to another planet.

### Biden to seek...

The Afghan government and the US have sought comprehensive ceasefire or at least reduction in violence. However, the Taliban refused to accept the demand, insisting that the ceasefire would be part of the overall agreement to be reached through intra-Afghan talks.

The intra-Afghan dialogue has yet to make any serious headway as the two sides have yet to agree on the rules of engagement and the agenda of the talks.

The Biden foreign policy team had been in contact with concerned authorities in Pakistan in the run-up to the US presidential elections

The Biden team was given a briefing by Pakistani authorities about the peace process and the way forward.

The sense these officials got from the interactions is that the Biden administration, unlike Trump, may review the February 29 US-Taliban deal by seeking more concessions from the Taliban.

# Paktia pine nut harvests up by 1,000 tons this year

Agriculture officials in southeastern Paktia province say this year's pine nut harvest reached around 13,000 tons — up about 1,000 tons compared to last years.

Bahadur Mangal, a pine nut trader in Paktia province, told Pajhwok Afghan News that modern agriculture methods should be adopted for a higher harvest of the fruit.

He said pine nut harvesting was income source for many people and the fruit production could increase by expanding its plantation area.

"We may harvest a much higher

amount of the fruit but it requires more care and more plantation of pine nut trees," he said.

Tahir Gul Zadran, another trader, said a limited amount of the fruit was still smuggled to Pakistan compared to large scale in the past.

He complained about low price of the fruit and said, "In the past, 50 kilograms of pine nut was sold for 150,000 afghanis but now its price has dropped to 90,000 afghanis, which is a big loss."

However, Ajmal Masoudzai, a resident of Gardez, capital of Paktia, said that

the price of pine nut was very high and most of Afghans could not afford buying it.

"The price is not low but high. I have long wished to buy some of it but cannot. The traders think only about exporting the fruit abroad and increasing its price. The price should not be increased from what is now," he said.

On the other hand, Paktia agriculture officials also said pine nut yield was higher in the province this year.

Mohammadin Momand, Paktia agriculture director, said that

Afghanistan's pine nut has better quality and high demand and there was need for more efforts to find better market for the fruit. "Fortunately pine nut production has increased this year, we collected 13,200 tons of the fruit this year compared to around 12,000 tons last year," he said.

About two years back, President Ashraf Ghani had promised to convert Paktia into an economic zone and open a pine nut processing factory besides launching other economic activities, but no steps have so far been taken on the regard.

### Ghani Says...

end state for a political settlement in Afghanistan, endorse Afghanistan's posture of multi-alignment, cooperate with us to develop a regional framework to guarantee peace and political stability and engage with a medium-to-long-term strategy of cooperation based on mutual interest.

He suggested five initiatives to help improve regional connectivity and enhance trade between regional partners and Afghanistan. He said the initiatives include support for speeding up regional projects, secure agreement either by the adoption of global standards or creation of regional standards on trade, transit, and transport, examine the gaps in critical infrastructure in Afghanistan, help Afghanistan become a hub of green energy and industry; and cooperate with Afghanistan on its agenda of digital transformation. Ghani said the foundation for improving regional cooperation and connectivity is now firmly in place.

Ghani said some of the measures that will enable Afghanistan to accelerate and expand its common efforts are taking advantage of the consensus among regional leaders on the centrality of regional cooperation and connectivity and adopting regional asset management.

Ghani said that a sovereign, united, democratic Afghanistan will be an asset to the region and the world.

"The violence that Afghans suffer is beyond endurance," Ghani concluded.

### Geneva Conference:...

bring hope, but challenges remain. She says violence remains high and that reducing violence and reaching a ceasefire is urgent.

Sweden's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Robert Rydberg addressing the side event of the Geneva conference said women's rights must be protected in the peace efforts in Afghanistan.

He said progress in Afghanistan is still limited and fragile, adding that Sweden welcomes the start of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

"We urge the parties to put an end to violence and reach a ceasefire and protect gains made in the last two decades," he said.

Shahrazad Akbar chairperson of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in an address to the side event of the Geneva conference says Afghanistan needs an immediate reduction in violence.

The human rights chairperson says the peace process needs to be inclusive and that everyone's voices should be heard in it.

Peace negotiator Habiba Sarabi in an address to the side event of the Geneva conference says Afghanistan needs long-term support by the international community.

### Biden expected...

Although the department escaped massive proposed cuts of more than 30% in its budget for three consecutive years, it has seen a significant number of departures from its senior and rising mid-level ranks, from which many diplomats have opted to retire or leave the foreign service given limited prospects for advancements under an administration that they believe does not value their expertise.

A graduate of Harvard University and Columbia Law School and a longtime Democratic foreign policy presence, Blinken has aligned himself with numerous former senior national security officials who have called for a major reinvestment in American diplomacy and renewed emphasis on global engagement.

"Democracy is in retreat around the world, and unfortunately it's also in retreat at home because of the president taking a two-by-four to its institutions, its values and its people every day," Blinken told The Associated Press in September. "Our friends know that Joe Biden knows who they are. So do our adversaries. That difference would be felt on day one."

Blinken served on the National Security Council during the

Clinton administration before becoming staff director for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when Biden was chair of the panel. In the early years of the Obama administration, Blinken returned to the NSC and was then-Vice President Biden's national security adviser before he moved to the State Department to serve as deputy to Secretary of State John Kerry. Biden has pledged to build the most diverse government in modern history, and he and his team often speak about their desire for his administration to reflect America. He is being watched to see whether he will make history by nominating the first woman to lead the Pentagon, the Treasury Department or the Department of Veterans Affairs or the first African American at the top of the Defense Department, the Interior Department or the Treasury Department.

Ron Klain, Biden's incoming chief of staff, said Sunday the Trump administration's refusal to clear the way for Biden's team to have access to key information about agencies and federal dollars for the transition is taking its toll on planning, including the Cabinet selection process. Trump's General Services Administration has yet to acknowledge that Biden won

the election — a determination that would remove those roadblocks.

"We're not in a position to get background checks on Cabinet nominees. And so there are definite impacts. Those impacts escalate every day," Klain told ABC's "This Week."

Even some Republicans have broken with Trump in recent days and called on him to begin the transition. Joining the growing list were Sens. Kevin Cramer of North Dakota, Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. Former Republican Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey, a longtime Trump supporter, told ABC that it was time for the president to stop contesting the outcome and called Trump's legal team seeking to overturn the election a "national embarrassment."

Meanwhile, planning was underway for a pandemic-modified inauguration Jan. 20. Klain said the Biden team was consulting with Democratic leadership in the House and the Senate over their plans.

"They're going to try to have an inauguration that honors the importance and the symbolic meaning of the moment, but also does not result in the spread of the disease. That's our goal," Klain said.

### Pak-US ties...

falters, and Washington believes Islamabad is a reason why, the relationship could suffer.

Additionally, deepening US-India security partnership means Mr Biden's White House will likely limit its criticism of India on Kashmir, and intensify demands about Islamabad's actions against India-focused terror groups allegedly on its soil.

The 'do more' mantra of the Obama years may return. Tellingly, in an October op-ed Mr Biden framed US-India cooperation first as a CT partnership, second as an effort to counter China.

Because of the strength of US-India relations, Islamabad will struggle to get Mr Biden's ear on the issue of India-sponsored terrorism.

Mr Biden, like his predecessors, will view this as something that doesn't directly threaten US interests, thereby exacerbating

the disconnect on terror threat priorities that has long bedevilled the relationship.

For all the talk of Mr Biden being a friend of Pakistan, he's no pushover. He's had difficult conversations with Pakistani military and intel chiefs about the country's policies towards militants. He has viewed Pakistan as a key driver of the Afghan Taliban insurgency. When Mr Biden told Hamid Karzai that Pakistan is 50 times more important than Afghanistan, he didn't mean it as a compliment.

He was referring to the seriousness of the threat posed by Pakistan to America - volatile politics, alleged terrorism, nuclear weapons, and problematic policies in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has changed since Mr Biden made that comment in 2009. The question is if his views have as well. The answer will help shape the relationship's trajectory.

Either way, Pak-US ties are approaching an inflection point. The relationship has long been viewed in Washington through the lens of Afghanistan. But with US troops headed for the exit, it will need a new basis. With Mr Biden's broader Asia policy likely to revolve around countering China, Pakistan risks being left on the outside looking in.

Still, there's an opportunity to recast relations as a stripped-down, but ultimately happier partnership: one fuelled by more cooperation in tension-free spaces like education, IT, and clean energy; pursued more robustly through non-official channels like business communities and the diaspora; and unburdened by unrealistic expectations about security cooperation.

Recalibrating ties in this way would ensure Pakistan remains important for Mr Biden's America - this time for the right reasons.

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# Biden expected to nominate Blinken as secretary of state

President-elect Joe Biden is expected to nominate Antony Blinken as secretary of state, according to multiple people familiar with the Biden team's planning.

Blinken, 58, served as deputy secretary of state and deputy national security adviser during the Obama administration and has close ties with Biden. If nominated and confirmed, he would be a leading force in the incoming administration's bid to reframe the U.S. relationship with the rest of the world after four years in which President Donald Trump questioned longtime alliances. In nominating Blinken, Biden would sidestep potentially thorny issues that could have affected Senate confirmation for two other candidates on his short list to be America's top diplomat: Susan Rice and Sen. Chris Coons.

Rice would have faced significant GOP opposition and likely rejection in the Senate. She has long been a target of Republicans, including for statements she made after the deadly 2012

attacks on Americans in Benghazi, Libya. Coons, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, lacked the granular experience in managing day-to-day foreign policy issues that Blinken would bring to the job.

Biden is likely to name his Cabinet picks in tranches, with groups of nominees focused on a specific top area, like the economy, national security or public health, being announced at once. Advisers to the president-elect's transition have said they'll make their first Cabinet announcements on Tuesday.

If Biden focuses on national security that day, Michèle Flournoy, a veteran of Pentagon policy jobs, is a top choice to lead the Defense Department. Jake Sullivan, a longtime adviser to Biden and Hillary Clinton, is also in the mix for a top job, including White House national security adviser.

For his part, Blinken recently participated in a national security briefing with Biden and Vice



President-elect Kamala Harris and has weighed in publicly on notable foreign policy issues in Egypt and Ethiopia.

Biden's secretary of state would inherit a deeply demoralized and depleted career workforce at



the State Department. Trump's two secretaries of state, Rex Tillerson and Mike Pompeo, offered weak resistance to the administration's attempts to gut the agency, which were thwarted only by congressional intervention. ... **P3**

### A look at the world

#### China lashes out at U.S. withdrawal from open skies treaty

China on Monday lashed out at Washington over its withdrawal from the "Open Skies Treaty" with Russia, saying the move undermined military trust and transparency and imperiled future attempts at arms control.

The treaty, to which China is not a signatory, had allowed each country overflight rights to inspect military facilities.

That leaves only one arms-control pact still in force between the former Cold War foes, the New START treaty, which limits the number of nuclear warheads each may have. That treaty will expire in February and the Trump administration had said it wasn't interested in extending it unless China also joined, something Beijing says it will not do.



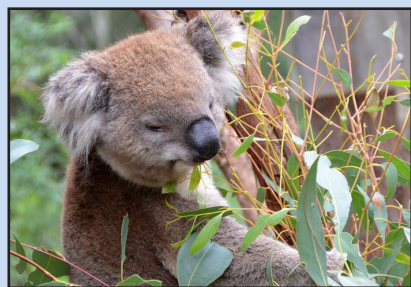
"This move by the U.S. undermines military mutual trust and transparency among relevant countries, is not conducive to maintaining security and stability in relevant regions and will also have a negative impact on the international arms control and disarmament process," Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said at a daily briefing Monday.

Critics complain that Beijing has urged other major countries to reach arms control agreements while refusing to take part in any such arrangements, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, or INF, that expired last year.

Meanwhile, it has taken advantage of limitations set by Russia and the U.S. on each other to keep itself safe and engage in unrestricted development of weapons such as intermediate-range ballistic missiles, bolstering its military's capabilities in the event of a conflict over Taiwan, the Indian border, the South China Sea and other Asian hotspots, critics say.

The INF Treaty "acted as a security guarantee for China: Beijing successfully made use of the mutual limitations imposed by the treaty on Russia and the United States to minimize the military threat to itself," Russian consultant Andrey Baklitskiy wrote in a commentary for the Carnegie Moscow Center last year.

#### Australia announces \$18M koala protection fund



The Australian government on Monday announced an \$18 million package to protect koalas around the country.

In a statement, Minister for Environment Sussan Ley said that under the new strategy a national audit of iconic marsupial's populations would be a key component of a \$18 million package to help protect the species endemic to Australia.

"The landmark koala package will include funding for health research and medical support, as well as the restoration of key habitat sites through on-ground actions such as revegetation, weed control, fencing, managed grazing and tailored fire planning and implementation," Ley said.

Launching the initiative at Sydney's Taronga Zoo, she said the koala audit would help direct commonwealth, state and private funding to where they would achieve the most good for the species.

"For all our focus on koalas, scientists are telling us that there is a serious lack of data about where populations actually are, how they are faring and the best ways to help them recover after the devastating bushfires," she said.

According to the minister, it will be mandatory for all state's governments to report on koala populations and conservation strategies on an annual basis. Under the new move, \$2 million will be invested in koala health research and veterinary support, tackling challenges such as Chlamydia and other diseases that are second only to car strikes in the normal causes of koala mortality recorded in veterinary hospitals.

The remaining \$14 million will help restore impacted koala habitat in both bushfire and non-bushfire affected areas and provide targeted funding for koala habitats in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland.

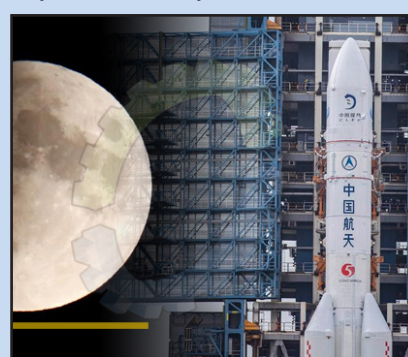
Meanwhile, the threatened species commissioner, Sally Box, said this funding boost came at a critical time for the ... **P2**

#### China to launch moon probe, seeking first lunar rock retrieval since 1970s

China plans to launch an unmanned spacecraft to the moon this week to bring back lunar rocks in the first attempt by any nation to retrieve samples from Earth's natural satellite since the 1970s.

The Chang'e-5 probe, named after the ancient Chinese goddess of the moon, will seek to collect material that can help scientists understand more about the moon's origins and formation. The mission will test China's ability to remotely acquire samples from space, ahead of more complex missions.

If successful, the mission will make China only the third country to have retrieved lunar



samples, following the United States and the Soviet Union decades ago.

Since the Soviet Union crash-landed the Luna 2 on the moon in 1959, the first human-made object to reach another celestial body, a handful of other countries including Japan and India have launched moon missions.

In the Apollo programme, which first put men on the moon, the United States landed 12 astronauts over six flights from 1969 to 1972, bringing back 382 kg (842 pounds) of rocks and soil.

The Soviet Union deployed three successful robotic sample return missions in the 1970s. The last, the Luna 24, retrieved 170.1 grams (6 ounces) of samples in 1976 from Mare Crisium, or "Sea of Crises".

China's probe, scheduled to launch in coming days, will attempt to collect 2 kg (4 1/2 pounds) of samples in a previously unvisited area in a massive lava plain known as Oceanus Procellarum, or "Ocean of Storms". "The Apollo-Luna sample zone of the moon, while critical to our understanding, was undertaken in an area that comprises far less than half the lunar surface," said James Head, a planetary scientist at Brown University. Subsequent data from orbital remote sensing missions have shown a wider diversity of rock types, mineralogies and ages ... **P2**



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