

Tillerson Creeps in to Afghanistan under Cover of Darkness and News Black Out

By [Brian Cloughley](#)

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US and NATO representatives keep trying to convince the world that Afghanistan is not a corruption-ridden quagmire of violence, and US Defence Secretary, General Mattis, [told reporters](#) in Kabul on September 28 that “uncertainty has been replaced by certainty” because of new US policy, [and that](#) “the sooner the Taliban recognizes they cannot win with bombs, the sooner the killing will end.”

At the same press conference NATO’s Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [said](#) that following a Taliban attack on Kabul airport that day, which he described as “a sign of weakness, not of strength,” he “would like commend the Afghan Security Forces which are handling these kind of attacks and it is yet another example of how professional they are, how committed they are and how they are able to handle this kind of security threat.” (In September the US Air Force [dropped more bombs](#) on Afghanistan “than in any other month for nearly seven years.”)

In the following month, from October 17 to 23, there were six [major insurgent attacks](#) which demonstrated that the militants are far from weak:

At least 71 people were killed and hundreds wounded in suicide and gun attacks on police and soldiers in Ghazni and Paktia Provinces... Some 50 soldiers were killed in a Taliban assault on a military base in Kandahar province... A suicide bomber blew himself up in a Shiite mosque during evening prayers in Kabul, killing 56 people and wounding 55 others and another suicide bombing killed at least 33 people at a mosque in the central province of Ghor... A further suicide bomber killed 15 army officer cadets travelling in a bus in Kabul, and four policemen were killed in a Taliban attack on a security post in Ghazni province.

So the carnage continues, as do the visitors, and the *New York Times* [reported](#) that on October 23, the same day as the Ghazni policemen were killed, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson “made a secret two-hour visit” and the *Washington Post* [noted](#) he “flew from Doha to Bagram [the massive US base]” while “a total news blackout was imposed until after they left the country and returned to Qatar.”

The *Times* was [forthright](#) in stating how shocking it is “that top American officials must sneak into this country after 16 years of war, thousands of lives lost and hundreds of billions of dollars spent” and considered the furtive two-hour stopover to be “testimony to the stalemate confronting the United States because of a stubborn and effective Taliban foe

that is increasingly ascendant.” But deception capers went further than disguising the visit itself.

It was [noted](#) by the BBC that both the Afghan and US governments said the meeting between Mr Tillerson and Afghanistan’s President Ghani took place in Kabul, as [tweeted](#) by the State Department (“Today, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with #Afghanistan’s President @ashrafghani in Kabul”). And this was right and proper, because visiting foreign government representatives should call on heads of state and not vice versa, and it seemed that appropriate civility had been [observed](#).

Except that it hadn’t, because Tillerson didn’t go to the President’s office in Kabul, but spent his entire two hours at the heavily guarded US air base at Bagram. He didn’t dare travel the 50 kilometres from Kabul to Bagram to meet President Ghani, but President Ghani had to travel to Bagram to meet with him, which tells us a great deal about how Washington regards Afghanistan and its elected president. And then the attempt to have the world believe that the meeting took place in Kabul didn’t work out.

The deception collapsed because of a difference in a photograph of the meeting. [According](#) to the Times, “a press release from the US embassy in Afghanistan includes a photo with the wall above the two men’s heads cropped out” by photoshopping, but another photograph showed a clock on the wall displaying international time, which indicated that the photograph was taken at the US base and not in the President’s [office](#) in Kabul. (A helpful State Department spokesperson [suggested](#) that “the Afghan Government changed those photos probably to make it aesthetically more pleasing” which at least added a little humour to an otherwise gruesome farce.)

It isn’t clear what the visit was supposed to achieve, given that the Tillerson-Ghani meeting lasted less than an hour, although there was an eight-minute “media availability” at which [four questions](#) were asked by the six American journalists who were travelling with Tillerson in his aircraft. No Afghan reporters were permitted to be present, a decision indicative of the character of the visit as a whole, and it can hardly be expected that their exclusion would be regarded with approval by the Afghan government or media. The conduct of this visit gave the Taliban and all other anti-American elements in the country a boost that is unquantifiable but is bound to be substantial.

Which takes us to another disastrous episode in US-Afghanistan relations, in May 2014, at which there were no aesthetically displeasing clocks in photographs when President Obama visited Afghanistan, because there was no meeting between him and the then Afghan Head of State, President Karzai.

Like Mr Ghani with the Tillerson visit, Mr Karzai had not been told in advance that Obama was coming to Afghanistan, but when eventually he was informed of his arrival he refused to travel to Bagram to call on him. A US official [said](#) that President Karzai had been “offered a meeting with Mr Obama during the brief visit but declined... We did offer him the opportunity to come to Bagram, but we’re not surprised that it didn’t work on short notice.”

The condescending contempt of that statement and the arrogance of the US attitude did not escape the citizens of Afghanistan, and the *Wall Street Journal* [observed](#) that “Afghans praised President Hamid Karzai for refusing to meet with President Barack Obama during a brief visit to their country.” But it is disgraceful that the President of the United States (and any Washington administration official, such as Tillerson) can visit Afghanistan without

informing its president beforehand. It wouldn't work with France or China or Tahiti — but it seems that Afghanistan isn't important enough to matter.

The ultimate insult of the Obama visit was that he [brought](#) “country music star Brad Paisley with him to provide entertainment for the troops,” which may have added to the vexation of President Karzai whose office issued a [statement](#) that “The president of Afghanistan said he was ready to warmly welcome the president of the United States in accordance with Afghan traditions but had no intention of meeting him at Bagram.”

Three years ago the president of Afghanistan made it clear that the president of the United States had failed to observe international custom and common courtesy and would be treated appropriately for his patronising conduct. But things have changed since then, and when a US official now visits Afghanistan, and scorns custom and courtesy, the current president of Afghanistan has to ignore the condescension and bow his knee by obeying orders to go to the visitor's security cocoon in the Bagram base.

It is a sad commentary on the state of affairs in Afghanistan that after sixteen years of US military operations and expenditure of over 800 billion dollars it is unsafe for the Secretary of State to visit the place unless his travel is kept entirely secret from the world — including the president of the country he is visiting. But it is even more appalling that the United States treats Afghanistan like a US colony, as evidenced by the fact that the US Secretary of State can summon the Afghan president to meet him in a US military base, rather than paying him basic respect as he would to a national leader anywhere else in the world.

Washington has not yet learned that winning wars and influencing people takes more than brute force. Trump [declared](#) in August that “Our troops will fight to win. We will fight to win. From now on, victory will have a clear definition... preventing the Taliban from taking over Afghanistan.” But he'll never do that if the United States continues to behave like a colonial master.

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Articles by: [Brian Cloughley](#)

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