

The top U.S. officer in Afghanistan talks with the Taliban almost every day.



By Eric Schmitt

Aug. 23, 2021

WASHINGTON — On the ground in Kabul, Rear Adm. Peter G. Vasely, a former member of the Navy SEALs who is now the top U.S. military officer in Afghanistan, talks daily or near daily with his Taliban counterparts regarding security measures at the airport, Pentagon officials said on Monday.

As the Pentagon rushes to evacuate tens of thousands of people before President Biden's Aug. 31 deadline for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, the discussions between Admiral Vasely and Taliban commanders have helped set the rules of engagement to allow Americans and some Afghan allies to reach Kabul's airport. At the same time, the U.S. has been sending helicopters and troops beyond the airport to extract people who can't get there on their own.

Other American officers down the military chain of command in Kabul have also engaged with Taliban commanders on specific security and threat reduction issues, the officials said — a partnership of necessity between parties that spent 20 years on opposite sides of a war.

The regular discussions between American and Taliban commanders yielded an agreement in which Taliban fighters expanded the security perimeter outside the airport, pushing back the massive crowds of Afghans and others seeking access to flights out.

Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military's Central Command, first spoke to senior Taliban commanders on Aug. 15 when he was in Doha, Qatar, to help get the evacuation effort off the ground.

Al Udeid Air Base, a sprawling airfield outside Doha, has become the main receiving station for thousands of Afghans arriving on American military flights from Kabul.

Eric Schmitt is a senior writer who has traveled the world covering terrorism and national security. He was also the Pentagon correspondent. A member of the Times staff since 1983, he has shared three Pulitzer Prizes. @EricSchmittNYT

Biden, Afghanistan and the Taliban >

- [U.S. is turning some Afghan allies away from the Kabul airport, an official says.](#)
- [The Pentagon deploys helicopters and special forces in Kabul for evacuations.](#)
- [The violence at Kabul's airport fuels calls to prolong the U.S. withdrawal.](#)
- [‘No home to return to’: Fear, shock and displacement for one Afghan who escaped.](#)
- [The Taliban holds first meeting of religious leaders since taking Kabul.](#)
- [Videos show a rush to destroy U.S. equipment as Kabul fell.](#)
- [Forced to leave his home, former President Hamid Karzai remains in Kabul despite the risks.](#)