

Trump Speaks With a Taliban Leader

The direct contact between an American president and a top Taliban official would once have been unthinkable, showing President Trump's drive to make a peace deal stick.



By Michael Crowley

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WASHINGTON — President Trump spoke on Tuesday with the deputy leader of the Taliban, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, in the latest sign of his determination to see that a peace deal signed Saturday with the Afghan insurgent group holds, allowing him to withdraw thousands of American troops in an election year.

"I spoke to the leader of the Taliban today. We had a good conversation," Mr. Trump told reporters at the White House, slightly inflating Mr. Baradar's position.

"They're looking to get this ended and we're looking to get this ended," Mr. Trump said later in the day. "The relationship is very good that I have with the mullah."

Mr. Baradar was the Taliban official who, along with Mr. Trump's envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, signed the peace agreement in Doha, Qatar, to begin the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and start talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which was not a party to the agreement.

The direct contact between an American president and a top Taliban leader would once have been unthinkable. But in his drive to end the war in Afghanistan, Mr. Trump has shown a willingness to engage with the leaders of a Sunni fundamentalist group that first harbored Osama bin Laden while he planned the Sept. 11 attacks and then battled American troops for more than 18 years.

At the outset of a coronavirus briefing at the White House on Saturday, Mr. Trump said he would be "meeting personally with Taliban leaders in the not-too-distant future," but offered no further details.

Mr. Trump also credited the Taliban for "killing terrorists."

During an earlier round of peace talks, in September, Mr. Trump invited those leaders to the presidential retreat at Camp David in Maryland, but abruptly called off the meeting — and the talks — after a Taliban attack killed an American service member.

Since then, the United States has pounded the Afghan insurgents with airstrikes, and 11 American military personnel have been killed in the country, according to the website iCasualties.org.

But Mr. Trump, who boasts at campaign rallies that he is ending "endless wars," is eager to reduce, and possibly end, America's presence in Afghanistan. And the bloodshed of recent months and years did not prevent either Saturday's deal or what Mr. Trump described as a positive call on Tuesday.

"We had a good, long conversation today," Mr. Trump said.

In a statement, the Taliban said Mr. Baradar spoke to Mr. Trump for 35 minutes, and told him to stand firm in his commitment to withdraw from the country. The statement said Mr. Trump told the Taliban leader that the Afghan people were strong and that the American withdrawal would be good for all involved.

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Mr. Trump "emphasized the need to continue the reduction in violence" that preceded the agreement and "urged the Taliban to participate in intra-Afghan negotiations," the White House said in a statement. The United States, the statement continued, "stands ready to continue its support for the Afghan people as they pursue a peace settlement."

Afghanistan's president, Ashraf Ghani, has complained about elements of the deal, rejecting a provision that said his government would release 5,000 Taliban prisoners before talks with the militant group.

In their statement on Tuesday, the Taliban said Mr. Trump assured Mr. Baradar that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo would speak to Mr. Ghani to remove hurdles to the so-called intra-Afghan talks.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Speaking to reporters, Mr. Trump signaled frustration with members of Congress, including some senior Republicans, who have complained that he did not win sufficient concessions from the Taliban. Mr. Trump said it was “not easy to get out of these conflicts.”

“Very complex in terms of all of the people you have to deal with, including, frankly, people in the Senate, people in the House,” he added.

More than 20 House Republicans, led by Representative Liz Cheney of Wyoming, sent a letter on Feb. 26 to Mr. Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper questioning whether the agreement with the Taliban was stringent enough to justify an American troop withdrawal.

It was unclear which “terrorists” Mr. Trump was referring to in his remarks on Saturday. The Taliban have been allied in the past with Al Qaeda — the reason for the initial American invasion of Afghanistan. But they have also battled against the Islamic State, which has sought a foothold in the country.

“They will be killing some very bad people,” Mr. Trump said at the time. “They will keep that fight going.”

Since signing the deal on Saturday, the Taliban have renewed their attacks on Afghan forces after a weeklong reduction in violence across the country.

Asked whether the conversation had been his first with the Taliban leader, Mr. Trump demurred. “I don’t want to say that,” he replied.

Mujib Mashal contributed reporting from Kabul, Afghanistan.