

## Trump says he canceled secret meetings with Taliban leaders, Afghan president

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U.S. President Donald Trump on Saturday said he had canceled secret meetings with Taliban leaders and the Afghan president set to take place this weekend at Camp David, while also calling off the ongoing peace negotiations with the Taliban, after the Islamist militia admitted responsibility for a recent attack in which a U.S. soldier died.

The announcement, delivered on Twitter, astonished much of Washington and raised questions about the future of the U.S. in Afghanistan if the peace talks do not get back on track. But the fact that the talks were in the works at all underscored Trump's belief that he's a master one-on-one negotiator and can strike great deals with even the toughest of U.S. enemies.

"Unbeknownst to almost everyone, the major Taliban leaders and, separately, the President of Afghanistan, were going to secretly meet with me at Camp David on Sunday. They were coming to the United States tonight," Trump tweeted.

"Unfortunately, in order to build false leverage, they admitted to an attack in Kabul that killed one of our great great soldiers, and 11 other people. I immediately cancelled the meeting and called off peace negotiations. What kind of people would kill so many in order to seemingly strengthen their bargaining position?"

Trump continued: "They didn't, they only made it worse! If they cannot agree to a ceasefire during these very important peace talks, and would even kill 12 innocent people, then they probably don't have the power to negotiate a meaningful agreement anyway. How many more decades are they willing to fight?"

The talks, had they happened, would have been an extraordinary moment in the history of the United States and Afghanistan. The U.S. invaded Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001, attacks — the anniversary of which is Wednesday — overthrowing the Taliban government there because it was harboring al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Plans for the secret talks were held very tightly inside the Trump administration, and officials reached Saturday night would not say who would have attended.

Attendees would likely have included Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy for Afghan reconciliation. It's not clear if John Bolton, Trump's hawkish national

security adviser, would have attended given a recent report that he's been largely sidelined on the issue.

The peace talks had been moving toward a "framework agreement" intended to lead to a broader peace process involving the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Trump's cancellation follows nine rounds of talks over the past 10 months in Doha, Qatar, between Taliban representatives and a U.S. negotiating team led by Khalilzad.

Trump has often undercut Khalilzad and the other negotiators by broadcasting his desire to pull all U.S. troops out of the country, according to current and former defense officials and Afghanistan experts. A scare last December and January when Trump directed aides to halve the force in Afghanistan, but was then talked out of it, may have prolonged the negotiations, POLITICO reported last month.

The U.S. currently has around 14,000 troops in Afghanistan.

Given the challenging environment, and the fact that the U.S. spent many years trying to negotiate peace with the Taliban, Khalilzad's diplomatic efforts have made significant inroads. At the same time, there are rising bipartisan concerns in Washington that the U.S. may be giving up too much in the process.

The news that the Taliban were invited to Washington drew immediate reaction in foreign policy circles. Many were appalled at the idea of bringing the Taliban to a prestigious venue like Camp David. The timing didn't help, either.

A former defense official said: "It's just insane. Whether it [Trump's tweet] is accurate or not, it's a crazy idea. Having the Taliban here over 9/11, then announcing you aren't letting them come ... it's just all a little nuts."

"Negotiate a deal? Heck yes. Invite them to Camp David close to September 11th? Insane and incredibly thoughtless," tweeted Emma Ashford, a research fellow with the Cato Institute.

A former U.S. official who has dealt extensively with Afghanistan said Trump's tweets do not bode well for the future of the negotiations. "I'm not sure that anybody is giving up altogether, but it's certainly dead for now," the former official predicted.

Trump has a long history of saying the U.S. should leave Afghanistan, although at times he's made contradictory statements. During his election campaign, he cast himself as something of an isolationist, saying he'd get U.S. troops out of foreign conflicts.

But in his first year as president, he was convinced by advisers to instead expand the U.S. troop presence by a few thousand, in the hopes that the modest surge could turn the tide against the Taliban.

There's significant exhaustion with the war effort across Washington and beyond. Some Democratic presidential candidates are running on the idea of pulling the U.S. out of Afghanistan, calling it an "endless war."

Some members of Congress believe the U.S. troop presence cannot go down to zero, and that at least a counter-terrorism force needs to stay. At the same time, many lawmakers are upset that they're not getting more details about the negotiations.

This past week, House foreign affairs committee Chairman Eliot Engel (D-N.Y.) threatened to subpoena Khalilzad to testify before his panel if he wouldn't do so voluntarily.

Trump described the latest scheduled talks as "secret." But if they were ever made public, perhaps after a deal was inked, they could have given the president another chance to brag about his negotiating skills.

But those supposed skills have yielded few victories in his foreign policy so far, and, as he faces reelection, Trump has appeared keen on conjuring up some success on that front, even offering to meet with the president of Iran, a longtime U.S. nemesis. He has already met three times with North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un, but he's made little progress on getting Kim to give up his nuclear weapons.

Previous U.S. efforts to negotiate with Taliban have faltered and eventually failed. In 2010, at the height of U.S. military commitment to Afghanistan, Obama administration representatives began secret talks with the Taliban, but the negotiations collapsed the following year. During that 2010-2011 round of talks, one of the most senior Taliban representatives was eventually revealed to be an impostor.

Later negotiation efforts were canceled in 2012 and 2013. Among the biggest sticking points have been the Taliban's long-standing refusal to talk directly with the Afghan government — as it has now agreed to do — and its insistence on being treated as a government in exile.

The Camp David talks also could have given the Taliban another talking point when it comes to their claims of legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people, whom they brutally oppressed during their rule in 1990s and early 2000s.

The Taliban control vast stretches of Afghanistan still and style themselves as a true government. Many Afghans fear they will again gain power, and will again impose their harsh vision of Islamic law on the population, including severely restricting women's rights.

The Taliban have long demanded that all U.S. troops must eventually leave Afghanistan.

Much would have depended on the conduct of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, who is very wary of the ongoing talks between U.S. officials and the Taliban. The U.S. has repeatedly assured Ghani that it will never fully abandon Afghanistan, and that it will support his government's efforts to reach its own deal with the Taliban. But Ghani and other observers appear skeptical, especially because it's still not clear what U.S. troop presence, if any, there will remain as part of that relationship.

Ghani also faces an election later this month. The election has already been delayed multiple times, and the Taliban have vowed attacks if it were to go forward.

At the peak of the war, which has cost the lives of more than 3,500 American and allied military personnel and spanned three U.S. presidential administrations, nearly 100,000 U.S. troops were in the country along with 40,000 other foreign troops.

Sixteen U.S. troops have died in combat in Afghanistan this year, marking the highest U.S. death toll in the country since 2014. In 2010, the costliest year of the war for international troops, 499 Americans and 212 other international troops were killed in the country. The Afghan government

does not release casualty figures for its own troops, but in January, Ghani said that 45,000 Afghan soldiers and police have been killed since U.S. forces ended their combat role in 2014.

A Taliban car bomb exploded and killed a U.S. soldier, a Romanian service member and 10 civilians in a busy diplomatic area near the U.S. Embassy in Kabul on Thursday, the second major attack this week, the Associated Press reported.