



Zalmay Khalilzad will try to pave way for Taliban talks with Afghanistan

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Zalmay Khalilzad speaks about foreign policy at the Mayflower Hotel on April 27, 2016, in Washington, DC. Photo: Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

On September 5, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed that Zalmay Khalilzad will join the State Department as President Trump's special adviser on Afghanistan. His main mission will be to facilitate talks between the Afghan government and Taliban.

The big picture: Appointing Khalilzad as a special advisor indicates that the Trump administration is serious about an Afghan-led peace process, and about maintaining its hardline approach toward Pakistan. But what remains unclear is how the Pakistani government, now led by first-time prime minister Imran Khan, will work with Khalilzad.

Khalilzad is a known neoconservative figure in the U.S. war in Afghanistan, which has entered its eighteenth year. He previously served as the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan and Iraq and later as the UN ambassador during the George W. Bush administration. As an Afghan-American, Khalilzad has a unique understanding of Afghanistan that President Bush tried to capitalize on when Hamid Karzai was sworn in as Afghanistan's president in 2004.

Yes, but: His strong connection with Karzai and the visibility of his extended family's involvement in the Afghan government, which included seeking contracts, raised some concerns within American diplomatic circles about his conflicting interests. In 2008, there was a rumor that Khalilzad might even run as a presidential candidate in Afghanistan's elections.

The central question is, what happens if Khalilzad is unable to deliver? He has often advocated for creating avenues of mutual understanding between the Afghan government and the Taliban. But he has also been very critical of Pakistan's sponsorship of the group, even as the Trump administration has asked Pakistan to facilitate talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

The bottom line: There's no way to know whether Khalilzad will be successful, but it's safe to say that the Afghan peace process just got trickier.

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