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Trump Expected to Nominate a New Ambassador to Afghanistan

Rebecca Ballhaus

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President Trump is expected to nominate William Ruger, a foreign-policy expert who has called for withdrawing all U.S. troops from Afghanistan, as ambassador to the country, according to people familiar with the matter.

Officials view the pick, which could be announced as soon as this month, as the president's way of signaling his intent to make good on his campaign promise to sharply reduce the U.S. presence in the region, the people said.

The State Department earlier this week alerted the Afghan government that Mr. Ruger was the pick for the job, one of the people familiar with the matter said. Mr. Ruger has undergone vetting for the job for at least three months, the person said.

The U.S. currently has about 8,000 troops in Afghanistan. The Pentagon plans to bring that number down to about 5,000 or fewer by this fall, The Wall Street Journal has reported. The U.S. would like to withdraw all troops from the conflict, which started about 19 years ago, but doing so is predicated on a peace deal.

The White House declined to comment on Mr. Ruger's expected nomination. The ambassador post requires Senate confirmation. The Senate only has a few more weeks in session before the presidential election in November.

Mr. Ruger, a Naval Reserve officer who served for nearly a year in Afghanistan, is vice president for research and policy at the Charles Koch Institute. He didn't respond to requests for comment.

In a May column in the National Interest titled "President Trump Is Right on Afghanistan," Mr. Ruger wrote: "President Trump has correctly concluded that a full and speedy withdrawal of our troops is imperative. Our national interest isn't served by continuing to wage a futile battle but by exiting it."

After the U.S. told Afghanistan in September 2019 that it would start withdrawing 5,000 troops from the country, Mr. Ruger said in a statement that he was encouraged but that the president "should not allow a withdrawal deal to be bogged down by conditions that aren't necessary for America's safety."

A total withdrawal of troops would likely lead several American allies who also have troops in Afghanistan to abandon the mission, U.S. officials have said. Top Pentagon officials are leery of

drawing all troops out of Afghanistan, arguing that such a move would repeat a mistake under President Obama in Iraq in 2011, which led to the birth of Islamic State in the region. U.S. troops help Afghan and other forces fight Islamic State in Afghanistan, creating a rationale for maintaining a small troop presence there, officials have said.

John McEntee, the president's former personal aide who now heads the White House personnel office, suggested Mr. Ruger to the president for the ambassador post in recent months, one of the people familiar with his expected nomination said. Mr. McEntee pointed to Mr. Ruger's record of calling for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, which he viewed as aligned with the president's goals, the person said. Mr. McEntee didn't respond to a request for comment on his conversation with the president.

Since his 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump has called for reducing the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, saying the U.S. was never meant to be a police force and calling for the end to what he calls America's "endless wars." The issue has taken on greater urgency in the months before the presidential election.

"We've been there 19 years, and we're basically policemen," Mr. Trump said in an Aug. 19 briefing. "They're going to have to police their own states."

The planned nomination comes as talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban—part of the U.S.-brokered peace deal that paved the way for a reduction of forces—are set to begin soon. The talks had been delayed, mostly because of disagreements over an exchange of prisoners.

The Afghan government has released the remaining 400 Taliban detainees in its custody, "except the few for which our partners have reservations," Javid Faisal, spokesman for Afghanistan's national security council, said Thursday, without providing details. He tweeted that diplomatic efforts were ongoing and that direct talks were expected to start promptly in Qatar, where the Taliban maintains a political office.

Politico reported in July that Mr. Ruger was under consideration for the ambassador post.

The previous U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, John Bass, left his post in January after two years in the role. The State Department said at the time that his departure had been long planned.