

WORLD NEWS

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Trump gets update from aides on Afghan peace plan with troop pullout possible

Steve Holland, Jonathan Landay

By Steve Holland and Jonathan Landay

U.S. President Donald Trump arrives aboard Air Force One at Manchester-Boston Regional Airport in Manchester, New Hampshire U.S. August 15, 2019. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

BRIDGEWATER, N.J./WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Donald Trump was briefed on Friday by top national security advisers on the status of talks with the Taliban on a U.S. troop pullout from Afghanistan and the potential for a political settlement between the warring sides.

There was no indication that any conclusions were reached at the session, which took place in a secure conference room at Trump's golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey.

“Just completed a very good meeting on Afghanistan. Many on the opposite side of this 19 year war, and us, are looking to make a deal - if possible!” a tweet after the session.

Trump, who has repeatedly questioned the billions of dollars spent in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has made no secret of his desire for a U.S. pullout of Afghanistan after 19 years of war triggered by the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

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But there are deep concerns among national security aides about negotiations led by U.S. special representative to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, with Trump and others on the status of the talks.

A pullout has raised fears within the U.S. military and among some lawmakers that Afghanistan could plunge into a new civil war that could see a retreating rule and give al Qaeda and other militants a sanctuary in which to expand and plot new attacks on U.S. and allied targets.

A U.S. defense official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said significant differences remained between the United States and the Taliban after another round of talks ended in Qatar on Monday.

Some 14,000 U.S. troops remain engaged in America's longest war, training and advising Afghan security forces and conducting counterinsurgency operations against militant groups such as al Qaeda and Islamic State's local affiliate.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement issued after the meeting that the United States remains committed “achieving a comprehensive agreement, including a reduction in violence and a ceasefire” in Afghanistan.

Trump and Pompeo were joined for the talks by Vice President Mike Pence, national security adviser John Bolton, Defense Secretary Mike Esper, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman General Joseph Dunford and CIA Director Gina Haspel.

“The meeting went very well, and negotiations are proceeding,” the White House said in a statement.

The U.S. military presence dates to 2001 when then-President George W. Bush invaded in pursuit of al Qaeda and ousted the Taliban rulers who had provided Osama bin Laden and his followers a safe haven in which they plotted the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, a Trump ally, said any deal should allow the United States to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan to pursue security goals.

“Any peace agreement which denies the U.S. a robust counter-terrorism capability in Afghanistan is not a peace deal,” he said in a statement. “Instead, it opens the way for another attack on the American homeland and attacks against American interests around the world.”

A senior administration official said a decision was not necessarily expected from the Bedminster meeting, but Trump “has been pretty clear that he wants to bring the troops home.”

Both sides had raised expectations of being close to finalizing an agreement prior to convening the latest round of talks.

The U.S. defense official, however, said differences remained over U.S. demands that the insurgents publicly renounce ties to al Qaeda and other militant groups and agree to a nationwide ceasefire, the official said.

Khalilzad also is seeking the Taliban's agreement to hold direct negotiations on a political settlement with Kabul government officials who would be part of a delegation that included opposition leaders and civil society representatives.

Taliban leaders to date have refused to hold official talks with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's government, which they denounce as a U.S. puppet.

Reporting by Steve Holland and Jonathan Landay; Additional reporting by Idress Ali; Editing by Leslie Adler and Diane Craft

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