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New Afghan peace talks expected in Oman but Taliban participation unclear

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Representatives of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States will meet in Oman next week to discuss reviving peace talks with Afghan Taliban militants, an Afghan official and a Pakistani foreign ministry source said on Wednesday.

But it was not clear if Afghan Taliban representatives would join the talks. Taliban sources said they had not yet received an invitation and plan to skip Monday's discussions in Muscat, casting doubt on efforts to revive long-stalled negotiations.

The four-nation Quadrilateral Coordination Group, comprising Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States, has been trying to ease the path to direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, with little success.

The Taliban, ousted in a US-led military intervention in 2001, has been gaining territory in recent years through a violent insurgency in an effort to topple Afghanistan's Western-backed government and re-establish a fundamentalist Islamic regime.

US President Donald Trump has urged Afghanistan to close the Taliban's office in Qatar. The issue was raised in a meeting between Mr Trump and Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani in Washington. Mr Ghani is expected to agree to the closure but a final decision has not been made.

The office in Doha opened in 2013 as the US looked for an avenue through which it could conduct talks with the Taliban to end the conflict in Afghanistan.

But the Afghan government says the office has done little to help progress the talks and gives the Taliban political legitimacy. Mr Trump sees it as a failed project of Barack Obama, the report said.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have also pointed to the office as an example of Qatar's willingness to play host to extremist groups. The two countries, along with Bahrain and Egypt, are boycotting Doha over its links to terror groups.

Amin Waqad, a close aide to the Afghan president and a senior member of the High Peace Council (HPC), said, "HPC and government representatives will participate [in the Oman meeting], and it is an important one because the Taliban representatives will be there. We will go with a clear plan."

A senior Pakistani foreign ministry official confirmed the talks would take place on Oct 16. Last week, foreign minister Khawaja Asif told Voice of America the "quadrilateral arrangement will again be in operation" in Muscat in October.

Talks and efforts to kick start negotiations have failed following the 2015 announcement of the death of the Taliban's founder and long-time leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, in 2013.

The United States wants Pakistan, which it accuses of harbouring Afghan Taliban commanders, to exert more influence on the group to bring them to the negotiating table. But Pakistani officials deny sheltering Taliban militants and say their influence on the group has waned.

Two senior Afghan Taliban leaders, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters the group's leadership council met on Tuesday and decided it would not send a delegation to Muscat.

"Until now we have not been invited, but even if we received an invitation, our senior members have decided not to participate in the meeting," said one of the Taliban leaders.