CIA boss held secret meeting with Taliban leader in Kabul

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director William Burns held a secret meeting with top Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar in Kabul on Monday in what is being seen as the highest level contact between President Joe Biden’s administration and Afghanistan’s new rulers.

While details of Burns’ discussion with Baradar were not released, the secret meeting represented an extraordinary moment for the CIA that for two decades had targeted the Taliban in paramilitary operations. And it gives a sense of the extent of the wrangling happening ahead of the end of America’s two-decade war in the country.

The CIA partnered with Pakistani forces to arrest Baradar in 2010. He spent eight years in a Pakistani prison before the Trump administration persuaded Islamabad to release him in 2018 ahead of peace talks.

The Washington Post first reported Burns’ meeting with Baradar in Kabul. A US official later confirmed the report on condition of anonymity. A Taliban spokesman said he was not aware if Baradar met the CIA chief.

In Moscow, President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday Russia would not interfere in Afghanistan and that Moscow had learned from the Soviet occupation of the country.

“We’re not going to meddle in Afghanistan’s domestic affairs or involve our military in a conflict where everyone is against each other,” Putin said at a gathering of officials from the ruling United Russia party. “The Soviet Union had its own experience in this country. We have learned the lessons we needed,” he said.

Moscow had invaded Afghanistan in late 1979 to support a communist government. The decade-long war there left up to two million Afghans dead and forced seven million more from their homes.

Putin’s comments about Afghanistan came after Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said that US forces were “pawning off” Afghans fleeing the Taliban to Moscow-allied Central Asia.