

# WebMemo



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## Administration Must Unequivocally Drop Afghanistan 2011 Withdrawal Date

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There are signs that the Obama Administration is backing away from the date it set for the beginning of withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. The July 2011 withdrawal date, first announced by President Obama last December, signaled a lack of U.S. commitment to the mission and complicated U.S. efforts to inspire confidence among the Afghans, convince the Pakistanis to crack down on Taliban insurgents in their territory, and break the will of the Taliban who have calculated that they simply must wait America out.

Recent U.S. media reports indicate that the Obama Administration intends to de-emphasize the plan to begin withdrawing U.S. troops next summer and focus instead on a strategy that will turn security of the country over to Afghan forces by the end of 2014. A formal announcement of the change in policy is expected next week at a NATO conference in Lisbon.

Senior Administration officials should be unequivocal in their statements on dropping the 2011 withdrawal date to fully dispel the perception in the region and among coalition partners that America is losing its will to fight. They should demonstrate full support for NATO and U.S. forces Commander in Afghanistan General David Petraeus's counterinsurgency strategy in order to undo the damage caused by the specter of a premature U.S. withdrawal that has lingered in the region over the last 11 months.

**A Welcome Shift.** The Administration had sought to justify its 2011 withdrawal date by arguing that it would put pressure on the Afghans to step up

their game and prepare themselves on a more urgent basis for the transition to locally led security operations. However, announcing the withdrawal date before U.S. and coalition forces had reversed Taliban momentum on the ground succeeded only in disheartening the Afghans and undermining confidence in U.S. and coalition forces' ability to prevent the Taliban from retaking power. The uncertainty created by the timeline also complicated U.S. efforts to work closely with President Hamid Karzai, who lost faith in the U.S. as a reliable partner.

The Administration seems to have finally accepted that talking about a July 2011 date for withdrawal has been unhelpful to the overall strategy and is thus looking for a way to gracefully reverse course.

The Administration will almost certainly find support for such a course correction from the new Republican leadership that will take control of the House of Representatives next year. Key Republican congressional leaders, including Senator John McCain (R-AZ), Representative Buck McKeon (R-CA), and incoming House leader Representative John Boehner (R-OH) have raised objections to the withdrawal deadline and called on President Obama to focus on a successful strategy, not "arbitrary deadlines."

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The new focus on 2014 as a projected timeframe for transitioning to Afghan-led security operations contrasts sharply with statements made by President Obama from the Oval Office in late August. In that speech, marking the end of combat operations in Iraq, Obama said that U.S. forces would be in place only for a limited time in Afghanistan and that “wars cannot go on forever.”

**Influencing Pakistani Strategy.** One of the most harmful effects of the July 2011 drawdown announcement has been to weaken Pakistani resolve in its fight against extremists in its territory. The announcement of a withdrawal date discouraged Pakistan from breaking ties with its Taliban proxies, on whom it believes it will need to rely in the event that coalition forces depart the region prematurely.

Revoking the July 2011 drawdown date would provide political space in Afghanistan and thus an opportunity to convince Pakistan to shift its calculations on how best to ensure its own regional security interests. This would be no easy task, however, even with more time on the clock in Afghanistan. Pakistan plays for high stakes with its Afghanistan policy, and it knows the U.S. is still highly dependent on supply lines that run through Pakistan for U.S. troops in Afghanistan. Pakistani leaders are also aware that the U.S. relies on Pakistan for intelligence cooperation and the ability to conduct drone strikes on Pakistani territory to weaken terrorists hiding in the ungoverned border areas.

**Moving Forward.** Stepping back from the July 2011 date for withdrawal is a move in the right direction. It would provide more time for General Petraeus’s counterinsurgency strategy to take root and provide an opportunity to shape the political environments in both Afghanistan and Pakistan in a way that is more conducive to a genuine process of reconciliation and stabilization. While U.S. and coalition forces seek to make decisive gains against Taliban insurgents on the battlefield, the U.S. should also:

- Develop and invigorate local political processes that meet the immediate needs of the people and at the same time inspire confidence in the central government. Military operations in Afghanistan alone will not prevent the Taliban from returning to power. The U.S. needs an effective Afghan

partner that has enough legitimacy with the people to compel them to support the government over Taliban insurgents.

- Take a proactive role in guiding any negotiations aimed at ending the war and be more forthright about what a political settlement in Afghanistan should involve. The Obama Administration should actively counter the perception that the U.S. is war-weary and ready to strike a grand bargain with the Taliban. The Obama Administration’s lack of a clear policy on reconciliation is contributing to Karzai’s unhelpful approach to the process and the Pakistani confidence that it will be the final arbiter in an Afghan peace settlement.
- Work with other regional players interested in Afghan stability, particularly the central Asian states, India, Russia, and China. Some analysts argue that a regional solution involving these nations is the only way to guarantee stability in the country over the long run, given the history of outside interference.
- Continue to build up the Northern Distribution Network in order to reduce U.S. dependence on Pakistani territory as a supply route for U.S. troops in Afghanistan.
- Make Pakistan understand that its continued support for the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani network would be at its own peril. The U.S. must be willing to use its leverage with Pakistan—both American influence on global opinion toward Pakistan and its substantial economic and military aid—to convince the Pakistan military to shift its pro Taliban strategy to more acceptable and positive political alternatives. Washington should make it clear to Islamabad that it is prepared to devote substantial military, economic, and diplomatic resources to ensure that Kabul is kept free of Taliban domination.

**A Good Start.** While dropping the July 2011 withdrawal deadline is a good start, the Administration should now make sure that both its allies and its adversaries understand that America is committed to ensuring Afghanistan becomes stable, secure, and terrorist-free.

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