

Obama administration backtracks on Afghanistan withdrawal date

By [Patrick Martin](#)

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The July 2011 date for beginning a withdrawal of US forces in Afghanistan, announced by President Obama in his speech to West Point military cadets Tuesday night, is neither irreversible nor even a deadline, top US national security officials said Wednesday.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified before Senate and House committees throughout the day, defending Obama's decision to send an additional 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan.

Gates revealed that some of these new troops would arrive in Afghanistan before Christmas, and that most would be in place in time to join in the spring fighting after the winter snows melt in Afghanistan's rugged mountain regions.

During the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing Wednesday morning, every Republican senator and most Democrats voiced support for the escalation of the war, but several of the Republicans pressed the trio of witnesses on Obama's one-sentence reference to July 2011 as the beginning of a drawdown of US forces.

In response, Gates, Clinton and Mullen each made statements effectively declaring the July 2011 deadline meaningless, and emphasizing that the Obama administration was committed to a long-term military presence in Central Asia.

Senator John McCain of Arizona, Obama's opponent in the presidential election, declared his support for the dispatch of 30,000 more troops, and then asked: "How we can say, as the president did last night, that our withdrawal will begin in July 2011, no matter what, but that this arbitrary date will also take into account of conditions on the ground? That seems logically incoherent to me."

Gates revealed that the administration was planning a full review of US policy in Afghanistan in December, 2010, one year from now. "I think we will be in a position then to evaluate whether or not we can begin that transition in July," he said.

Admiral Mullen went on to state that what would begin in July 2011 was a transfer of secured districts from US to Afghan government control. "The July 2011 date is a day we start transitioning—transferring responsibility and transitioning," he said. "It's not a date that we're leaving. And the president also said that...will be based on conditions on the ground."

Independent Democrat Joseph Lieberman, a fervent advocate of escalation of the war,

pounced on this statement and asked Gates to confirm it. He asked Gates "...if I'm correct in concluding that what will definitely begin in July of 2011 is a transfer of security responsibility to the Afghans, but may not include immediately a withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan."

Gates replied, "That is correct. I think, as we turn over more districts and more provinces to Afghan security control, much as we did with the provincial Iraqi control, that there will be a thinning of our forces and a gradual drawdown."

Republican Lindsey Graham of South Carolina walked Gates, Mullen and Clinton through the same issue, extracting from each a confirmation that Obama was not committed to a July 2011 withdrawal timetable. The exchange with Clinton went as follows:

Graham: The question is, have we locked ourselves into leaving, Secretary Clinton, in July 2011?

Clinton: Well, Senator Graham, I do not believe we have locked ourselves into leaving.

There were two other substantive issues raised in the day's testimony. Gates explained that Obama had not set a specific target for the growth of the Afghan national army and police, as proposed by Democrats like Senator Carl Levin, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, because "we're also looking, as I suggested in my remarks, at local forces as well, partnering with local security forces. So there are—there is more than just the Afghan national police and the Afghan national army in this mix."

In plain language, this means that the strategy of the US occupation in Afghanistan will include the classic imperial strategy of "divide and rule," with local strongmen armed and bankrolled by Washington, independently of the puppet regime of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul. This is modeled on the effort carried out by the US military in Anbar Province in Iraq, where local Sunni warlords switched from fighting the US occupation to working for it.

Clinton went out of her way to salute Gen. David Petraeus, the advocate of a similar strategy in Iraq, and Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who ran US military assassination squads in Iraq and Afghanistan before Obama named him the overall commander of the Afghanistan war. She called Petraeus and McChrystal "probably the two experts in the world right now on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism."

Admiral Mullen laid emphasis in his prepared testimony on the escalation of the war in Pakistan, waged by a combination of ground offensives by US-financed Pakistan army troops and aerial strikes by US drones and missiles. He said the US would encourage further ground attacks like those in the districts of Swat and South Waziristan, which have turned nearly a million people into refugees. He described the goal in Pakistan as "seeking out and eliminating all forms of extremism and terrorism," a task that would require a colossal death toll.

According to a report Wednesday in the New York Times, "Mr. Obama has authorized an expansion of the war in Pakistan as well." The newspaper revealed that in the recent weeks "the CIA delivered a plan for widening the campaign of strikes against militants by drone aircraft in Pakistan, sending additional spies there and securing a White House commitment to bulk up the CIA's budget for operations inside the country. The expanded operations could include drone strikes in the southern province of Baluchistan, where senior Afghan

Taliban leaders are believed to be hiding, officials said.”

The congressional hearings are continuing this week, but the first day has already demonstrated that there is no serious opposition to the Obama war policy within the bourgeois political spectrum. There is no “left” or “antiwar” faction in either big business party or in the corporate-controlled media.

Those Democratic senators and congressmen who expressed reservations about escalating the war did so entirely within the framework of support for Obama and the American military. There will undoubtedly be choreographed displays of opposition to military appropriations, but the congressional Democratic leadership knows in advance that when push comes to shove, there will always be enough votes to finance the war.

There was near-unanimous support for Obama’s decision in the American media. The three most prominent newspaper editorial voices—the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal—all backed Obama’s decision to send 30,000 more troops. The Post expressed concerns about the July 2011 “deadline,” while the Journal noted Obama’s failure to use the word “victory” in his West Point speech.

Most significant was the unreserved praise and support of the Times, the semi-official voice of US liberalism, which declared that in defying popular antiwar sentiment, “President Obama showed considerable political courage by addressing that pessimism and despair head-on. He explained why the United States cannot walk away from the war.”

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs sounded the same theme, boasting at a press briefing that the administration’s lengthy Afghanistan policy review process took no note of “political polls.”

This is a brazen declaration of the administration’s indifference to and contempt for public opinion and democratic concerns, in which, as in so many other spheres, it simply follows in the footsteps of Bush.

Obama’s decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan, in addition to being a crime against the people of that tortured country, is a major blow against democracy in America itself. One thing is completely excluded from the White House policy review, the congressional hearings and debates, and the discussion in the capitalist media—the actual sentiments of the American people, who oppose the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan and support a withdrawal of US forces as quickly as possible.

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