

Will Obama Really Get Us out of Afghanistan in 2011?

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The Obama administration began qualifying the President's proposed timeline for beginning the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan almost immediately after his speech last week. Administration officials such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Bob Gates have since then made it clear that the July 2011 date for beginning the drawdown is only a target. A closer reading of Obama's speech suggests that Obama did not really commit to a withdrawal date, only to a date to [begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan](#)." This could mean anything because the extent and speed of the withdrawal remains unspecified.

It is no surprise that Obama is trying to play down expectations regarding the withdrawal date because there is so much uncertainty regarding the war. Success is far from guaranteed, especially in the next 16 months. If the withdrawal date is not firm, however, Obama will inevitably find himself in a very difficult political situation in spring of 2011, when he has to make a decision. Bringing the troops home and moving towards a rapid conclusion to U.S. involvement in Afghanistan will be an easy decision to make if the newest effort has been so successful that Afghanistan is a secure and functioning state or if the war is going so badly that even the generals no longer want more troops to try to make one last try. However, both of these scenarios are extremely unlikely.

It is far more likely that in spring of 2011, as the date for beginning the drawdown approaches, the situation in Afghanistan will be mixed with some signs of success and hope, but also signs of defeat and despair, in other words as ambiguous as it is today. If the balance is tipped towards the former, there will be enormous pressure on Obama to keep troops in Afghanistan so that the successes of recent months do not unravel. If, on the other hand, the balance is tipped toward the latter, there will be equally strong pressure on Obama to keep troops in Afghanistan so that the country does not descend any further into instability.

Given the likelihood of one of these two scenarios being in place in spring of 2011, only 16 or so months from now, by setting, and undermining, a timeline, Obama has done little more than postponed a decision which will not be easier in April of 2011 than it would have been in November of 2009. He has put himself in an unwinnable situation in what critics are calling an unwinnable war.

A firm timeline would raise some obvious problems because terrorists and other enemies could simply wait out the period until the timeline kicks in. However, if the timeline were understood by the Afghan government to be serious it would provide an incentive to cooperate more fully with the U.S. troops so that they can accomplish as much as possible before the troops leave. By backtracking from the timeline the administration has removed this incentive from an already difficult and weak Afghan government. A

clear timeline would be a risky strategy, but one with a possible upside. However, a weak timeline is like having no timeline at all, creating little urgency from our Afghan allies and almost guaranteeing another round of difficult decisions a year and a half from now.

The timeline reflects the extent to which the challenge facing Obama is almost insurmountable. The logic of the timeline is a microcosm of the logic of the war. It is bad to stay and worse to leave-or maybe the reverse.