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U.S. Military Seeks Slower Pace to Wrap Up Afghan Role

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WASHINGTON — American military officials are building a case to minimize the planned withdrawal of some troops from Afghanistan starting next summer, in an effort to counter growing pressure on [President Obama](#) from inside his own party to begin winding the war down quickly.

With the administration unable yet to point to much tangible evidence of progress, Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#), who assumed command in Afghanistan last month from Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), is taking several steps to emphasize hopeful signs on the ground that, he will argue, would make a rapid withdrawal unwise. Meanwhile, a rising generation of young officers, who have become experts over the past nine years in the art of counterinsurgency, have begun quietly telling administration officials that they need time to get their work done.

“Their argument,” said one senior administration official, who would not speak for attribution about the internal policy discussions, “is that while we’ve been in Afghanistan for nine years, only in the past 12 months or so have we started doing this right, and we need to give it some time and think about what our long-term presence in Afghanistan should look like.”

Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) signaled the military’s position recently when he said that the initial troop withdrawals next summer “will be of fairly limited numbers.” General Petraeus, who has kept a low profile for the past six weeks while conducting a countrywide assessment, is expected to amplify the message during the media offensive he will begin on Sunday, when he is to appear on the NBC News program “Meet the Press.” He is expected to say that the last of the 30,000 additional troops Mr. Obama ordered to Afghanistan last December will not arrive until later this month, and that the counterinsurgency strategy has not been given enough time to succeed.

Administration officials said they were hopeful that General Petraeus’s stature in Congress and in allied capitals in Europe and the Middle East would buy him the time and flexibility

to try to make the counterinsurgency strategy he devised — and carried out in Iraq — work in Afghanistan.

A senior officer at NATO headquarters in Kabul said the full force of the buildup deployment would allow “substantially more activity in every area of the comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign plan” — including commando missions to kill or capture Taliban leaders, plans to improve local governments and efforts to reintegrate former Taliban fighters into the Afghan security forces.

Another senior American officer in Afghanistan said General Petraeus would seek more advice and participation from allies in hopes that NATO members and other coalition partners would feel they had a bigger stake in the outcome. General Petraeus is also making the fight against corruption and efforts to improve the rule of law top priorities.

“These are both long-term objectives that won’t get solved in the next year or maybe not in the next decade,” said the senior American officer. “But if the public perception is that the government is moving toward more legitimacy, that supports the short-term counterinsurgency” objectives of having greater confidence in a civilian-led government than in the Taliban.

For now, White House officials say that they are sticking to their plan for a conditions-based withdrawal starting in July 2011, and that in areas where counterinsurgency operations just began this year, their plan still calls for giving American forces roughly two years to show results and transfer control to Afghan security forces.

Mr. Obama will make a formal assessment of progress in Afghanistan in December. But administration officials said they did not expect major changes in the Afghan strategy to emerge from the review, suggesting that the White House would not move swiftly to resolve the tension between the military’s pleas for patience and the demands from Democrats for substantial troop withdrawals starting next summer.

Mr. Obama has been vague about how rapidly he might reduce the American presence starting in July, the target date he set when he decided late last year to send more troops. But at the time, White House officials say, he made it clear to the military that he planned to take the July 2011 date seriously — and that while he had no plans to “turn out the lights” in Afghanistan, he would not allow what one of his senior aides recently called “an open-ended commitment.”

At the core of the timetables, they say, is what White House officials call the “two-year rule.” During the review of Afghanistan and Pakistan strategy, Mr. Gates made the argument,

according to one participant in the White House Situation Room discussions, that “in any particular location you should be able to clear, build, hold and transfer” to the Afghan forces within two years. Military officials said two years was roughly how long it took to make headway in difficult places, once troops were in place.

“If it takes longer than that,” the official said, “there’s a problem, and you have the temptation to drift.”

Obama administration officials said that in their first review of Afghan policy during the Bush years, the conclusion was that a failure to provide adequate resources was worsened by a failure to set deadlines for results.

The two-year clock, officials say, started in June 2009 when the first additional forces, more than 20,000 troops long requested by American commanders, arrived in Afghanistan. Those troops will have been in place for two years by next summer, the deadline for the beginning of the withdrawal under Mr. Obama’s plan.

In areas where operations began this year — like Marja, where results have been disappointing, and Kandahar, where [American Special Operations forces](#) are now conducting night raids to diminish the middle ranks of the Taliban — the two-year clock started later, and the work there could continue well into 2012.

Democrats in Congress are in no mood to hear about two-year clocks. In a vote last month to continue financing the war, those in the House were deeply split, with 102 — more than a third of the caucus — voting against the measure.

“The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have come at tremendous cost to the American people,” said the House speaker, [Nancy Pelosi](#), who is pressing for substantial troop reductions beginning in July 2011. “Members of Congress and the administration will have to assess whether the sacrifices of our men and women in uniform, and the resources we must invest to continue these efforts, are the best way to protect our national security.”

Some House Democrats are demanding that Mr. Obama and his national security advisers spell out a much more detailed timetable for withdrawal — something the military has steadfastly opposed, saying it aids the enemy — and narrow the strategy to combating [Al Qaeda](#), in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“There’s a lack of a clear endgame,” said Representative Gerald E. Connolly, Democrat of Virginia and a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The brewing dispute over timelines and objectives was inevitable, many national security experts contend. The goals Mr. Obama announced — securing Afghan population centers so that Al Qaeda could not use the country again as a launching pad for attacks on the United States, promoting good government, anticorruption and rule-of-law measures — usually take years to bear fruit.

But he put a sharp time limit on his “surge,” just 18 months, making it clear that 100,000 troops would be the high-water mark for the American mission in Afghanistan.

“Of course there are conflicting timetables,” said David Rothkopf, a national security expert and a former official in the Clinton administration. “But the reality is that the broader strategy is not achievable in the context of the politics of the United States.”