

US exit strategy from Afghanistan faces many challenges

US President Barack Obama has announced that US troops will be pulled out of Afghanistan quicker than many experts feel makes sense. Short-term domestic motives are outplaying the long-term consequences for Afghanistan.

General David Petraeus told the Senate Intelligence Committee earlier this week that he firmly backed President Barack Obama's withdrawal plans for Afghanistan. Petraeus, as the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, is the man who has to put those plans into practice.

The four-star general had presented Obama with several options, but Obama eventually chose a different model. US media report that Petraeus favored a slower drawdown.

But now it's set: Of the some 100,000 US soldiers, 10,000 are supposed to leave Afghanistan by the end of the year. A further 23,000 will follow by September 2012. By 2014, Afghan forces should take over the country's security, according to the agreement with NATO allies. Officially, July 1 was set as the beginning of the withdrawal. But at the Senate hearing, Petraeus said the military could decide for itself which troops would be pulled out where.

"There are already some [soldiers] that are coming home without replacement, decisions that were already made and others identified," Petraeus said. He said the situation would be continually reassessed based on the conditions of the mission.

"We're constantly refining and updating our campaign plan and we'll do another round of that needless to say with the decision [by the president] having been made," Petraeus said.

Good-bye battlefield

In the next 15 months, a further 70,000 Afghan security forces will be trained, the US military estimates. They are to replace the US soldiers and enable the withdrawal. If the circumstances on the ground were to change, Petraeus said, he or rather his deputy and successor, General John Allen, would present the president with a clear analysis of the situation. But he didn't say whether this would lead to a change in the drawdown.

Petraeus himself doesn't have to grapple with the issue for much longer. He will shortly be moving to a new post, as head of the CIA.

With his departure leaves a man who advocated a successful strategy in Iraq: protecting the civilian population and, at the same time, fighting insurgents. But Petraeus was less successful with this approach in Afghanistan. Therefore, a quicker troop withdrawal and a change at the helm is being matched with an increase in anti-terror efforts, such as those demanded by Vice President Joe Biden.



There would be fewer soldiers in the country who are trying to protect the population and win their hearts, and instead more well-directed attacks on terrorist leaders through drones or Special Forces.

More work for fewer soldiers?

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, appearing separately before a Senate committee on foreign affairs, would have none of this. There is no either-or, she said.

"We've been doing both," Clinton said. "Every night, special operation teams go out, every night we are targeting people in our counter-terrorism effort and we're holding territory. So we'll continue doing both."

But with the troop withdrawal, it will get significantly more difficult - if not even impossible - to do so, said James Carafano, senior research fellow for national security at the conservative Heritage Foundation. The original plan for troop reinforcement involved putting pressure on the Taliban in both southern and eastern Afghanistan.

"By giving them essentially half the number of forces that they asked for, the plan was to do that sequentially," said Carafano, a former army officer. "So first they were going to do the south and the Helmand province, and then they were going to go do the east."

In the south, the strategy was successful. Now the forces wanted to turn to the east. But because the troops are being reduced, the success in southern Afghanistan is also in danger because too many soldiers have to be moved to the east, he said.

Of course, there will still be 70,000 US troops stationed in Afghanistan in September 2012. Yet Carafano doubts that they will be able to cope with all of their tasks. Clinton, however, sees the situation differently.

"They will be continuing training, they will be continuing mentoring the Afghans who are going to be taking the lead responsibility, they will continue in combat to some extent, but in a much more limited field," she said. "It is the assessment of the president and those of us in the administration, along with our military commanders, that this is the right pace of withdrawal."

Point of no return?

One thing is certain, though. Once the Americans have pulled their troops out of Afghanistan, they won't be returning quickly, said Carafano. His sentiments are shared by defense expert Steven Biddle from the Council on Foreign Relations, who called the troop withdrawal a "one-way street."



"If things get bad, it's very hard to imagine an American president doing a second surge, if it looked like the first one had failed because things have gotten worse," Biddle said. "So I don't see troops coming back and I think NATO is even less prone to do that than the United States would be."

The Americans are apparently determined to continue following their plan. This also includes a handover of government control to the Afghans, which is supposed to proceed as planned. But the US administration is careful to avoid suggestions that it is forcing its will on the Afghans. Still, Secretary of State Clinton said the US is satisfied with the success of its support for Afghan leaders on all levels.

"Our assessment is that about 75 percent of the governors now that have been appointed in the last year or two are actually performing well," Clinton said. "That was not the case two-and-a-half years ago. And part of the reason we think they're performing well is that they have been mentored by both military and civilian personnel."

Domestic policy taking the lead

General Petraeus said he also assumes that the handover of government responsibility can begin in July as planned. The first steps have already been taken, he said.

"It will be conducted in seven different locations, three provinces, one of which is Kabul, less one district, and then four different municipal districts," he said. "It will begin this summer and it will include a substantial number of Afghan citizens." Nearly 25 percent of the population will then be under Afghan administration.

However, Vanda Felbab-Brown, an Afghanistan expert at the Brookings Institution, views this development with skepticism. She is worried that there could be no stable government following the US drawdown.

"I am very concerned that we are not going to leave behind a stable government," Felbab-Brown said. "I am also very worried that an unstable Afghanistan will be like an ulcer bleeding into an already extremely unstable, extremely hollowed out-Pakistan and will encourage only the worst tendencies in Pakistan. This will severely compromise our strategic objectives."

But at the moment, the US administration is looking increasingly inside its borders than abroad. The next presidential election is just over a year away. Obama wants to keep his promise to his voters: troop withdrawal not just from Iraq, but also by 2014 from Afghanistan. The latter should already be noticeable on Election Day in November 2012.

In view of the debt-ridden nation, the debate is focusing on the costs of the Afghanistan mission. In the public's perception, the war's financial costs play an enormous role. Clinton explicitly mentioned the cost-saving effects of the withdrawal in her Senate testimony.



THE CSS POINT
Yes We Can Do It!

"As the defense department will tell you, we're on a downward trajectory of military spending because of the drawdown in Iraq, and because of the drawdown now in Afghanistan," Clinton said. "So, the defense department will be spending many billions of dollars less, even in the next 18 to 24 months."