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## Obama Leaves Door Open to Long-Term US Afghan Combat

By Gareth Porter

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President Barack Obama's speech announcing that the 33,000 "surge" troops in Afghanistan will be withdrawn by "summer" 2012 indicates that he has given priority to the interests of the military and the Pentagon over concerns by key officials in his administration over the impact of the war's costs on domestic socioeconomic needs.

And in a section of [the speech](#) that must be interpreted in the context of his past policy decisions on Iraq, Obama appeared to support the desire of Defense Secretary Robert Gates and General David Petraeus to keep a substantial number of combat troops in Afghanistan beyond the publicly announced "transition" in 2014.

Gates and Petraeus got most of what they wanted from Obama in regard to the withdrawal of the "surge" troops.

Petraeus had argued that he needed two more full "fighting seasons" with the bulk of the surge troops still remaining in the country to wear down the Taliban before the start of the "transition" in 2014, according to a [report in The Guardian](#).

Published reports had indicated that Petraeus wanted the withdrawal next month to be limited to 5,000 troops. Obama said the first phase of the withdrawal would consist of 10,000 troops to start in July but would be completed only at the end of the year.

The Obama decision gives Petraeus the first full season with all or almost all of the troops he had wanted.

Petraeus's preferred option was to delay the withdrawal of the bulk of the remaining surge troops until the end of 2012, but he got most of the second fighting season with troop levels that were well within his recommendations, according to a briefing for reporters by senior officials.

Although the speech says "we will bring home a total of 33,000 troops by next summer...", an official stated clearly at the press briefing that the withdrawal of the surge troops would be carried out by September 2012.

Obama also left the door open in the speech to leaving a significant proportion of the combat troops to remain in Afghanistan after the 2012 withdrawal for an indefinite period beyond the 2014 "transition" to Afghan responsibility for security.

"After this initial reduction, our troops will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan Security Forces move into the lead," Obama said. "Our mission will change from combat to support. By 2014 this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security."

That language parallels the language used in regard to U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq. In fact, a senior U.S. official who briefed reporters Wednesday afternoon drew attention to the parallel between the two withdrawal processes, saying the administration would "pursue the same type of responsible effort to wind down the war that we've undertaken in Iraq the last two years."

One of the key features of the Iraq model is Obama's retention of U.S. brigade combat teams in Iraq under the label of "non-combat troops" until the present, despite his pledge in February 2009 that they would be withdrawn.

U.S. troops continue to carry out unilateral combat patrols in Iraq, and Gates has continued to push Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for a request to keep U.S. combat troops there beyond the deadline for withdrawal under the November 2008 agreement.

The language of the speech thus laid the groundwork for the retention of combat troops in Afghanistan even after declaring that all combat troops have been withdrawn.

Gates and Petraeus have assumed that the military must have the flexibility to continue the military engagement in Afghanistan indefinitely in order to avoid a collapse of the U.S.-NATO position and of the Hamid Karzai regime. Based on that presumption, Gates and Petraeus effectively maneuvered Obama last year into abandoning his initial decision identifying July 2011 as a crucial date for the transition to Afghan responsibility for security.

Even after 2014 was set as the date for completing U.S. combat operations and turning responsibility over to the Afghan government, Gates and Petraeus regarded the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces as only an "aspirational goal," as Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morell put it.

That was the same phrase used by the George W. Bush administration in July 2008 to indicate that the United States had no intention of agreeing to a demand by Maliki for the complete withdrawal of all U.S. troops.

Even after the Bush administration signed the agreement with Maliki in November 2008, Pentagon and military officials made no secret of their intention to keep combat troops in the country indefinitely.

The "domestic" faction, led by Vice-President Joe Biden, had hoped Obama would withdraw the full 30,000 troops by the end of this year and continue to withdraw substantially more next year – mainly on the ground that the United States cannot afford the cost of a continued military presence.

Biden and others had argued that funding the troop levels in Afghanistan desired by Petraeus and Gates would mean further draconian cuts to domestic programs, even as the war has clearly become unpopular.

"Money is the new 800-pound gorilla," the *Washington Post* quoted a "senior administration official" as saying in a [front page May 31 story](#) headlined, "Afghan war cost to be big factor in troop drawdown."

Obama made a rhetorical bow to the issue of the war's costs, recalling "We have spent a trillion dollars on war, at a time of rising debt and hard economic times," but the timing of the final withdrawal of the surge troops was eight months later than the Biden faction had wanted.

Gates has explicitly argued that failure in Afghanistan is unacceptable, regardless of the costs of the war. Visiting Kabul in early June, he said, "The most costly thing of all would be to fail."

For officials like Gates and Petraeus, the idea that considerations of cost should play a role in war policy is so unfamiliar as to make it nearly impossible to accept. Gates [told Newsweek](#) last weekend, "I've spent my entire adult life with the United States as a superpower, and one that had no compunction about spending what it took to sustain that position."

Gates added, "[F]rankly, I can't imagine being part of a nation, part of a government... that's being forced to dramatically scale back our engagement with the rest of the world."

The Gates-Petraeus posture assumes that troop levels for the next two years will be a crucial determinant of whether the war will be a failure or not, on the argument that relentless pressure on the Taliban is the only thing that will cause its leadership to negotiate an acceptable agreement.

But few independent specialists on the Taliban believe that any conceivable amount of military pressure in 2012 and 2013 could force the Taliban agree to what is widely understood to be an unrealistic U.S. demand for acceptance of a semi-permanent foreign military presence in the country.

And as a U.S. official in the regional command headquarters at Khost [pointed out](#) to *Washington Post* reporters Joshua Partlow and Greg Jaffe last week, "The insurgents can win just by hanging on. And I think we're all aware of that."

Gates is retiring in a few days, but Petraeus will become director of the Central Intelligence Agency – a post that will give him a continuing role in war policy.