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Obama lays out strategy for exiting Afghanistan

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WASHINGTON - President Obama, in a carefully orchestrated surprise trip to Afghanistan Tuesday, signed an agreement with Afghan President Hamid Karzai outlining the withdrawal of US combat troops but affirming the United States' continuing commitment to the country.

After the unconventional midnight signing, Obama delivered a 10-minute live address from Bagram Air Base outside Kabul, laying out an exit strategy that would make Afghans wholly responsible for the security of their country by the end of 2014.

"I recognize that many Americans are tired of war," said Obama, speaking in front of two armored military vehicles adorned with the American flag. "I will not keep Americans in harm's way a single day longer than is absolutely required for our national security. But we must finish the job we started in Afghanistan, and end this war responsibly."

Obama used the powers of his office to create a dramatic and high-profile news event at prime viewing time in the United States. He took the opportunity to link his presence in Afghanistan to the one-year anniversary of the Navy SEAL raid that killed Osama bin Laden - an achievement his campaign often notes.

"One year ago, from a base here in Afghanistan, our troops launched the operation that killed Osama bin Laden," Obama said. "The goal that I set - to defeat Al Qaeda, and deny it a chance to rebuild - is within reach."

Senior administration officials denied the charge of critics, including Republican Senator Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, that the president was exploiting the event for political gain. Negotiations with the Afghans for a strategic partnership agreement have been in the making for 20 months, and were finally completed in recent weeks, they said. The timing of the trip was driven by the desire of both presidents to sign the agreement on Afghan soil before the NATO summit in Chicago later this month, they said.

Obama had always planned to spend the anniversary thanking US troops, they said.

"Given that window of time, it is certainly a resonant date for both of our countries," one administration official said. "This was a unique opportunity to achieve a core objective of our policy in Afghanistan . . . and to do so at a point in time that helped put Al Qaeda on a path to defeat."

Since US forces invaded Afghanistan in 2001 to remove the Taliban government that was harboring bin Laden, 1,957 American troops have lost their lives - 381 of them since bin Laden's death.

Douglas Brinkley, a presidential historian at Rice University, said Obama's choice to go to Kabul - particularly on the anniversary of bin Laden's killing - achieves several objectives that might have proved elusive if he signed the agreement with Karzai and gave his speech on American soil.

"Barack Obama is the first global president. When he ran for president he held a rally in Berlin," Brinkley said. "If he were here he would just be talking to Americans. By going to Afghanistan in many ways he is speaking to the world."

There is also a domestic political impact. As Obama seeks a second term, the battle zone venue is a not-so-subtle way to remind the American electorate that "your number one objective was to get Osama bin Laden and I did it," Brinkley added. "But there is also a risk of appearing to be grandstanding."

Obama called the signing of the 10-page agreement a "historic moment for our two nations."

“Neither Americans nor the Afghan people asked for this war. Yet for a decade, we’ve stood together,” he said. “Today, with the signing of the strategic partnership agreement we look forward to a future of peace. Today, we’re agreeing to be long-term partners.”

The 10-year agreement outlines how security will transition to Afghan-led forces by 2014, plans for regional stability including the role of Pakistan, and how the Taliban can play a part in rebuilding Afghanistan if they abide by Afghan laws and break from Al Qaeda.

After 2014 and until 2024, US troops will have a very narrow mission in Afghanistan: counterterrorism and the continued training of Afghan forces, Obama said. But the United States will not seek permanent military bases in Afghanistan, and Afghans will have full responsibility for their country’s security.

The agreement does not commit the United States to any specific troop level or level of funding after 2014, but the United States will seek funding from Congress each year to train and equip Afghan security forces.

For some close observers of US policy in Afghanistan, the president raised more questions than he answered in announcing a long-term US commitment beyond 2014, when combat troops are expected to be withdrawn.

“The question I hope Congress asks is ‘Will we have a say in this?’ ” said Christopher A. Preble, vice president of defense and foreign policy at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. “Where does he get the authority to bind future Congresses?”

Preble noted that when President George W. Bush signed a similar pact with Iraq in 2008, “they didn’t even consider whether it needed to be ratified in the US.”

Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican opponent for Obama in November, said, “I am pleased that President Obama has returned to Afghanistan. Our troops and the American people deserve to hear from our president about what is at stake in this war.”

Obama’s whirlwind trip also included a speech to US troops stationed at Bagram and a hospital visit at the base during which he awarded 10 Purple Hearts.

“We don’t go looking for a fight. But when we see our homeland violated, when we see our fellow citizens killed, then we understand what we have to do,” he said, according to a White House transcript. “And because of the sacrifices now of a decade, and a new Greatest Generation, not only were we able to blunt the Taliban momentum, not only were we able to drive Al Qaeda out of Afghanistan, but slowly and systematically we have been able to decimate the ranks of Al Qaeda, and a year ago we were able to finally bring Osama bin Laden to justice.”

The crowd responded with “Hooah!” and applause.

The Pentagon, in a quarterly report to Congress on Tuesday, painted a mixed picture of the progress in stabilizing the country since Obama took office.

Stepped-up military operations have significantly damaged the Taliban and its followers, and the Al Qaeda terror network that prepared for the 9/11 attacks from Afghan training camps has been virtually run out of the country to neighboring Pakistan and elsewhere.

The military campaign “has severely degraded the Taliban-led insurgency, limiting their operating capacity and undermining their popular support,” the Pentagon reported to Congress.

But commanders also acknowledged that serious questions remain about whether the gains can be sustained after most of the 90,000 US and 40,000 NATO troops leave.

The mission “faces long-term challenges,” according to the Pentagon assessment. “The insurgency draws strength from safe havens and support from within Pakistan and garners popular support by exploiting areas where the Afghan government has failed to provide sufficient governance, rule of law, and economic opportunity.”