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## US to focus on 2014 Afghan withdrawal at NATO meet

By Tangi Quemener (AFP) – 9 hours ago

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama will be walking a fine line at the upcoming NATO summit between upholding his pledges to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan and domestic opposition to a strict calendar, experts said.

At the meeting in Lisbon that kicks off Friday, Obama and his NATO partners are expected to formally endorse a plan to hand over security duties to Afghan forces by 2014.

A year ago, Obama boosted the number of US troops in Afghanistan to 100,000 troops but promised to begin transferring security responsibility to Afghan forces by July 2011.

But while the Obama administration continues to defend this date, it insists flexibility is required for an effective transition -- a move backed by Lisa Curtis, an Asia specialist at the The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.

"Just as we had a counterinsurgency strategy in place, just as we had the additional troops in place, we simply needed more time to make this strategy work," Curtis told AFP.

The timetable for withdrawal has had to adapt to conditions on the ground, in the face of a fierce and persistent Taliban insurgency.

Mid-2011 "was a nice goal to have one year ago," said Stephanie Sanok, a senior fellow on security issues at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"I think the progress hasn't been made as quickly as the president would have liked," she said.

Even if the combat mission comes to an end by 2014, observers stress that some US military presence in Afghanistan is likely beyond that point -- similar to Iraq.

The allied mission in Afghanistan, insisted top US commander General David Petraeus last week, requires a "sustained, substantial commitment" to weather the insurgency.

The White House stressed the handover to Afghan forces would move at a gradual pace.

"This won't happen overnight, it won't be a single event," said Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, special assistant to the president for Afghanistan and Pakistan. "It will be a steady, progressive process."

"The goal however, that President Karzai enunciated and the international community endorsed in Kabul in July, is that this process across the 34 provinces will aim to be completed by the end of 2014," Lute said.

In Lisbon, Obama will appeal for alliance partners -- like his predecessor George W. Bush -- to provide "trainers, more logistic forces" to aid in the US-led Afghan mission, said Sanok.

"If they don't want to contribute to combat forces, there are a lot of ways those nations can contribute to the mission," she added.

More than nine years since the conflict began, and in the deadliest year so far for NATO forces, US efforts to highlight the 2014 date are meant "to assure a skeptical European public, and an increasingly skeptical American public as well, that, 'look, this is not going to last forever, we have a strategy in place,'" Curtis said.

Analysts said the emphasis also reflects a bid to shift the focus to accommodate a wary new Republican majority in the House of Representatives, which has been eager to avoid any early deadline for a troop withdrawal.

"The Obama administration kind of saw the writing on the wall, and that is why we're seeing the shift in the focus from 2011 to 2014, in anticipation of greater pressure from the House Republicans on the issue," Curtis added.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president of the Cato Institute think tank, insisted however that the new majority in the House "will have little substantive impact" on Afghan policy.

The opposition "will snipe at some aspects of the president's policy (especially his pledge to begin a troop withdrawal next summer), but it will be little more than political posturing," Carpenter said, adding Obama would likely "regard their criticism as an annoyance, not a threat to his policy."

John McCain, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, acknowledged Monday that by next summer there would likely be areas in northern Afghanistan and elsewhere where the United States could begin withdrawing troops.

But he maintained that in Lisbon, Obama should give a "very, very strong statement that we're in this thing to win, that withdrawal to the middle of 2011 is notional, but 2014 is really the year that



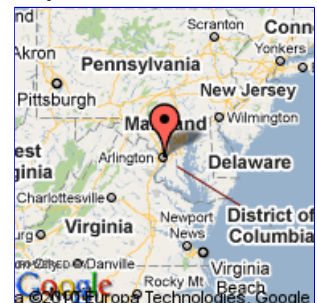
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Barack Obama boosted the number of US troops in Afghanistan to 100,000 troops



Map



we would expect to have significant withdrawals."

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