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## Withdrawal timeline raises questions of election politics

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WASHINGTON — If the withdrawal strategy outlined by President Barack Obama on Wednesday night goes according to plan, tens of thousands of troops will return home just a few weeks before voters head to the polls for the 2012 election.

Administration officials insist the two events are in no way connected, but critics have already charged Obama of playing politics with deployment schedules and questioned that timeline. The move pulls thousands of U.S. combat troops off the battlefield in the middle of the anticipated “fighting season,” before harsh winter weather forces a lull in enemy attacks.

Retired Lt. Gen. David Barno, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, called that timing inexplicable and said it “opens questions about the nature of the calculus.” Republicans in Congress said the move disregards recommendations from military commanders in favor of pandering to anti-war voters.

U.S. forces are poised to completely withdraw from Iraq by the end of this year, fulfilling one of the promises of Obama’s first presidential campaign. When he outlined the surge of troops into Afghanistan two years ago, the president pledged that the increase in military would be the first step in ending U.S. involvement in that war as well.

Under the plan outlined Wednesday night, U.S. forces will bring home about 10,000 troops by January 2012 and an additional 23,000 by September 2012. Those 33,000 troops represent the total combat and support forces sent in under the Afghanistan surge.

On Thursday, White House officials dismissed any connection between the 2012 election and troop withdrawals, saying that Obama had maintained all along that extra forces would not stay in Afghanistan more than 18 months.

In testimony before the House Armed Services Committee on Thursday, Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen said the September 2012 target date is based on sound military strategy, with anticipated growth in Afghan security forces and flexibility among U.S. Forces.

“There is no jumping ship here,” he said. “We will have at our disposal the great bulk of the surge forces through this -- and most of the next -- fighting season.”

But Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, pressed Mullen for military reasons behind a September date, stating that he thought politics played a larger role than military strategy. Other critics questioned how much money and personnel stress could be saved by bringing troops back in September, as opposed to a few weeks later.

Malou Innocent, foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said part of the push to get troops out as quickly as possible can be attributed to the death of Osama bin Laden and the distaste among Americans for the decade-old war.

This week, a new Pew Research Center poll found that 56 percent of those surveyed believe that troops should be brought home “as soon as possible.” Only 39 percent backed leaving troops in Afghanistan until the situation is better stabilized.

But, Innocent said, that’s clearly not the only reason for the September date.

“Obama is a political creature, and having those extra 23,000 troops home by the end of next summer is a consideration for him,” she said. “Most voters don’t vote on foreign policy ... but it certainly could be him throwing a bone to a liberal, anti-war base.”

The drawdown will still leave more U.S. troops in Afghanistan next fall than were deployed there when Obama took office. However, the total number of troops fighting overseas will drop sharply, from 180,000 in Iraq and Afghanistan in early 2009 to about 70,000 troops in September 2012.

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