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## Experts: Drawdown plans leave an ambiguous military mission

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WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama offered numbers and a timeline but little strategic reasoning for his Afghanistan troop drawdown plans, analysts across the political spectrum said.

As a result, they say, there is no clarity about what troops will be fighting for in the years to come.

“He failed to offer a strategic rationale for what the U.S. is doing in Afghanistan from this point forward,” said Nora Bensahel, who studies counterinsurgency and stability operations at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank from which the Obama administration has plucked a number of policy officials.

Under the announced timetable — faster than top military leaders recommended — it appears the U.S. will switch from a hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency strategy to a more starkly antiterrorist campaign, Bensahel said. But the president didn’t make that explicit.

“Whether you support the war and think the troops are being withdrawn too quickly ... or you’re an American who supports a faster withdrawal, there really wasn’t anything in the speech that explained the numbers being withdrawn, or why we need to keep 68,000 troops there after that,” she said.

Lisa Curtis, an analyst for the conservative Heritage Foundation, based in Washington, D.C., said pulling troops out faster than the military wanted puts hard-won gains against the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan’s southern regions at risk.

“I’m not sure we can say this means those sacrifices were in vain, but it certainly puts at risk the progress that was made through those sacrifices made by the troops,” Curtis said.

For some troops in Afghanistan, the idea of fewer forces on the ground brings the welcome thought of fewer deployments and more time at home.

“I think it’s a good thing,” said Marine Staff Sgt. Garrick Morgenweck, a flight medic with Company C, 1st Battalion, 52nd Aviation Regiment, operating out of Forward Operating Base Pasab. “I think it will give the troops the rest they need from back-to-back deployments.”

Yet the drawdown of 10,000 troops this year and an additional 23,000 next summer casts a pall over a planned campaign in mountainous eastern Afghanistan, said Ahmad Majidiyar, senior researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative Washington think tank.

“If you’re a tribal leader — most of them are now sitting on the fence — you now see clearly the troops are leaving, so you won’t risk your life to support them and work with them,” Majidiyar said. “It is going to make life harder for [servicemembers] in Afghanistan.”

Obama needs to make clear the administration’s strategy for winning the Afghan war, he said.

“The military strategy in Afghanistan is not counterterrorism, it’s counterinsurgency, where you build relationships and earn the trust of the local people, and convince them to cut ties with the enemy,” he said. “Even though the president didn’t announce a change in strategy ... it seems clear the counterinsurgency plan can’t be implemented now.”

A new realism may be dawning about what can be accomplished in Afghanistan, said Chris Preble, military analyst for the libertarian Cato Institute, who opposed Obama’s 2009 troop surge.

“It’s been hard for the Washington policy community to move away from the mindset that counterterrorism is about fixing failed states and buttressing weak ones, but that’s where we’re arriving,” he said.

Reducing the scope of the U.S. mission doesn’t mean — as Sen. John McCain and other war supporters have suggested — troop injuries and deaths may be in vain, Preble said.

“I’ve never believed a strategic redeployment of forces somehow invalidates those sacrifices,” Preble said. “Thinking strategically is not surrender or capitulation.”

In his speech, Obama said the goal would not be to leave Afghanistan a perfect place. That likely means the danger will outlast the U.S. presence, but troops will see success if an Afghan force is in place to address it.

“It’s all about building up the local nationals to fight for themselves,” said medevac pilot Chief Warrant Officer 3 Scott Macke. “We do care about how they live, and want them to have a better life.”

*Stars and Stripes reporter Laura Rauch contributed to this report.*

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