



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on December 8, 2009

No Deadline for U.S. Exit From Afghanistan

Obama administration officials on December 6 made it perfectly clear that American military forces will remain in Afghanistan for a long time, playing down President Barack Obama's announcement last week that U.S. withdrawal could begin in July 2011.



Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and other top officials appeared in a coordinated series of television interviews. A key message was that any reduction starting in July 2011 would be slow, and this would only be the beginning of the transfer of responsibility to Afghan forces. The appearances of Obama's senior staff members seemed geared toward easing the concerns of not only some U.S. officials but also officials in Afghanistan and Pakistan that the United States could be withdrawing too abruptly.

"We have strategic interests in South Asia that should not be measured in terms of finite times," General James Jones, Obama's national security adviser, stated on CNN's *State of the Union*. "We're going to be in the region for a long time."

Defense Secretary Gates mimicked General Jones when he appeared on CBS's *Face the Nation*. "There isn't a deadline," Gates said. "What we have is a specific date on which we will begin transferring responsibility for security district by district, province by province in Afghanistan, to the Afghans."

Gates also appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press*, where he said the current plan is that 100,000 American troops would be in Afghanistan in July 2011, and "some handful, or some small number, or whatever the conditions permit, will begin to withdraw at that time."

This flurry of activity by administration officials was apparently to quiet the fears of U.S. allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan, who became concerned that American forces might pull out before Afghan troops were prepared to stand on their own. The reassurances were also meant to quell Republican criticism that Obama was arbitrarily pulling out U.S. forces with no consideration for how the Taliban might use this to their advantage.

Thus the theme running through all the public appearances of Obama's staff members was that July 2011 was just the beginning, not the conclusion, of a measured and lengthy process. General Jones called July 2011 that start of a "ramp" rather than the edge of a "cliff."

The administration faces the daunting task of trying to please all segments of its audience, something that is inherently incredibly difficult, if not impossible. While Republicans and some foreign governments want to hear about U.S. commitment to staying the course, the American people have grown increasingly unhappy with a war that is dragging on at great cost in U.S. lives and U.S. dollars



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while the economy stagnates and the nation goes further and further into debt.

The original intent of President Obama's remark about July 2011 seemed to be to show the Afghan government that the clock was ticking, intending to motivate them to hasten preparing their forces to assume full responsibility for their own country. The 2011 date also showed Democratic legislators and the American public that the United States did not intend to remain in Afghanistan indefinitely.

All in all, a strange balancing act for a president who has won the Nobel Peace Prize. One would expect him to exclusively favor peace, if he were truly deserving of a "peace" prize.

It is a shame that Obama considers the opinion of foreign governments equally weighted with that of the American public. As the American public and the U.S. military grow more and more war-weary, the president may find the timetable for his withdrawal from office coinciding with the 2012 election.



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