



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on March 7, 2013

## USCENTCOM Commander Wants 13,600 U.S. Troops to Remain in Afghanistan

Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis (shown), commander of the U.S. Central Command ([USCENTCOM](#)) — the U.S. military command responsible for operations in 20 countries in the Middle East — has [recommended that 13,600 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan](#) after the White House-mandated 2014 withdrawal date for American and NATO troops. Mattis presented his recommendation in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 5 and the House Armed Services Committee on March 6.



[Bloomberg News](#) cited statistics from Mattis that NATO would probably provide a force of about 50 percent of the U.S. strength, bringing the number of troops remaining in Afghanistan to more than 20,000. That figure is considerably more than the 8,000 to 12,000 U.S. and NATO troops that former Defense Secretary [Leon Panetta](#) discussed with his European NATO counterparts in Brussels last month. There are currently about 66,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

“Our mission is succeeding,” Mattis’ statement to the Senate Committee was quoted as saying in a report by the [Armed Forces Press service](#). “The Afghan campaign is on track. It is, obviously, a combination of progress and violence, but I would say when it comes down to the [Afghan] security forces, they are proving themselves capable.”

“Obviously, when we were looking at the drawdown numbers, there was a certain amount of forecasting that the Afghan forces would be capable,” the general added.

Mattis continued his remarks before the House Committee the next day, expressing concern that the United States might fail to show its “commitment” to the Middle East region. “The drawdown of our forces can be misinterpreted as a lack of attention, a lack of commitment to the region,” he said. “Obviously that’s a misinterpretation of what we’re doing. Those forces were sent there for missions that are going away.”

General Mattis, during his House testimony, also praised President Obama’s plan to reduce the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan between now and December 2014, reported the Armed Forces Press service. “The way we are drawing down right now with the president’s plan allows us to keep our troop strength in the field for the next year,” Mattis said. “[This] sends a message in itself, and we will then draw down after this fighting season.”

“Further, we’re going to maintain about half the troops we have there now through the [Afghan] election,” he continued. “[This] shows a commitment to an election that will get the country on the right path, I think, in terms of showing a sustained commitment to democracy and solving our problems through the democratic process rather than picking up AK-47s.”

Mattis said that there will be “approximately a 34,000-person drawdown [in U.S. military personnel in



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Afghanistan] between now and February of 2014. So that will keep the bulk of our troops there through the fighting season this year.”

The general said that another drawdown in troop numbers “will probably commence after the Afghan election in April or May to help them get through their election in April-May of 2014.”

On March 5, the Senate confirmed Army Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, currently the vice chief of staff of the Army, to succeed Mattis as the next commander of U.S. Central Command following Mattis’ retirement this year. Austin is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, an influential organization that has long helped steer U.S. foreign policy in an interventionist direction.

A report from [DefenseNews](#) noted that Iran and Syria were also major topics at the hearing, and several senators questioned Mattis about the U.S. policy of providing American assistance to the rebels fighting to remove the Assad regime.

“The situation is so complex that I have to get some degree of confidence that the weapons ... do not go to the enemy,” answered Mattis. “We don’t want to inadvertently arm people who are basically sworn enemies” of the United States. At this moment, “I do not” have that level of confidence, Mattis concluded.

Mattis also confirmed that Iran has sent its [Quds Force](#), who are tasked with “exporting” Iran’s Islamic revolution, to Syria to assist government troops, and that the Iranians “continue to bring in foreign fighters.” The general predicted that if the rebels prevail, in his opinion, “the collapse of the Assad regime will be the biggest strategic setback for the Iranian regime in 25 years.”

In an article published here last October 17, “U.S. Negotiating to Keep Troops in Afghanistan Past 2014,” Michael Tennant quoted Marc Grossman, the State Department’s special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, who, while appearing on a panel at the annual meeting of the International Stability Operations Association in Washington last October 16, said that “the State Department is about to begin formal negotiations over the extension of U.S. troops past 2014.” These negotiations, wrote Tennant, were a follow-up to the Strategic Partnership Agreement that President Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed last May.

That pact “promised an ongoing U.S. commitment to Afghanistan through 2024,” Josh Rogin wrote in an article in *Foreign Policy* magazine.

The United States initially sent troops to Afghanistan on October 11, 2001, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, launched in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Bush administration did not seek a declaration of war from Congress to initiate the war in Afghanistan, but instead based its authority for the invasion on the [Authorization for Use of Military Force](#), passed by Congress on September 14, 2001, authorizing the use of military force against those responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

Following the defeat of the Taliban, many members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban fled to the mountainous regions of the Afghan-Pakistan border, from which they have waged an ongoing insurgency against the U.S.-supported central Afghan government, currently headed by Hamid Karzai.

Osama bin-Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda generally held to be responsible for the 9/11 attacks, was killed in Pakistan on May 2, 2011, by a U.S. special forces unit.

One might think that with the demise of bin Laden, the security of the United States might best be accomplished through greatly enhanced internal and border security measures, rather than near-



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perpetual overseas military engagements.

However, considering that 28,500 U.S. troops still remain in South Korea, nearly 60 years after the cease-fire that ended fighting (but not the state of war) on the Korean peninsula, prospects for a complete removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in the foreseeable future are not promising.

*Related article:* [U.S. Negotiating to Keep Troops in Afghanistan Past 2014](#)



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