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U.S. May Stay in Afghanistan After '16

By MATTHEW ROSENBERG and MARK MAZZETTI

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A White House official on Friday appeared to leave open the possibility that American troops could remain in Afghanistan after President Obama leaves office, in what would be a marked shift from the administration's insistence that only a small force based at the embassy in Kabul would remain after 2016.

With the Taliban insurgency still raging, the administration has been weighing options to slow the pullout of the roughly 10,000 American troops and thousands of contractors in Afghanistan. The number of troops was supposed to be cut by almost half at the end of this year, but officials have said in recent days that Mr. Obama was nearing a decision to keep much of the current force in place well into next year to continue training and advising Afghan forces.

While most officials have said that the 2016 deadline for a pullout remains firm, Jeff Eggers, a senior National Security Council official, said Friday that discussions about what to do in the next year or so would lead to a decision about what to do in 2017, "given the intent to maintain this ongoing dialogue" with the Afghan government.

However, he added, "it still remains the intent to consolidate and complete the retrograde down to a Kabul-based security cooperation office mission in 2017." Retrograde is a military term for the withdrawal of troops and matériel.

Separately, Bernadette Meehan, a spokeswoman for the council, said, “President Obama has not opened the door to anything larger than an embassy force after 2016.”

Mr. Eggers’s comments are in line with what other officials say is being debated within the administration, even if Mr. Obama’s focus is currently on what to do next year, not afterward.

Like so many of the plans for Afghanistan laid out in Washington since the war’s outset in 2001, realities on the ground appear to again be forcing American officials to consider revamping their strategy for ending the war.

Peace talks appear to be a far-off possibility after a stretch in February and early March in which it appeared that the Taliban might be willing to meet with the Afghan government. So instead of talking about how to end the war, Afghan and American officials are preparing for violence to intensify as the snow melts in the high passes that separate the insurgents from their safe havens in Pakistan and what is known as the fighting season gets underway.

Afghan forces, which have done the bulk of the fighting and dying over the past two years, are still very much a work in progress. They managed to keep the Taliban from making significant gains last summer only with help from the American-led coalition.

The resilience of the remaining fighters from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan has also surprised the Obama administration. Officials say that many of the roughly 2,000 troops currently dedicated to counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan are going to be needed well into next year, and that a larger force will allow for bases crucial to combating Al Qaeda and collecting intelligence in southern and eastern Afghanistan to remain open.

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The decision to slow the withdrawal in 2016 — and the debate about what to do in 2017 — is not being driven solely by grim battlefield assessments. Afghanistan’s new president, Ashraf Ghani, has proved to be a far more willing partner with the United States since he took over from Hamid Karzai in September, and American officials say they want to give him as much help as they can.

Mr. Ghani is making his first trip to Washington as president next week, and plans for the coming years are expected to be the focus of his meetings with Mr. Obama and other officials.

There is “a clearly positive vision now for Afghanistan that President Ghani holds,” Mr. Eggers said Friday. American officials are determined to “seize the qualitatively different relationship and that more positive vision,” he said.

Mr. Eggers added that Mr. Obama and Mr. Ghani have begun discussing Afghanistan’s desire for more “flexibility” in the American drawdown plans for 2016.

“It’s a wise move not to be boxed into a corner and commit to leaving,” said Seth Jones, an Afghanistan expert at the RAND Corporation.

Still, former officials close to the Obama administration have sought to portray any residual presence in Afghanistan as in line with the president's desire to leave office having ended the two wars he inherited in 2009.

"The president wants his legacy to be ending overly long, overly costly and inadequately effective wars," Vikram Singh, a former Pentagon official in the Obama administration.

Mr. Singh said that having a longer-term troop presence in the country does not necessarily mean that the United States would be "at war" in Afghanistan, citing American military training missions in Uganda and the Philippines that have gone on for years.