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Telegraph

Defence chiefs draw up plans for faster withdrawal from Afghanistan

By James Kirkup

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The Daily Telegraph has learnt that at a recent Whitehall meeting on withdrawal, the Chancellor questioned the purpose of continuing Britain's Afghan mission for another two years.

David Cameron has promised that British combat operations will be over by the end of 2014.

Ministers and military commanders are in discussions over how quickly to reduce troop numbers as the deadline approaches, with Armed Forces chiefs having to draw up new options for a bigger withdrawal next year than was being considered.

No decisions about withdrawals in 2013 are now expected to be made until the new year.

The Chancellor challenged the Army's presence in Afghanistan at a meeting of the National Security Council last month, attended by senior ministers, military commanders and intelligence chiefs.

At the meeting, commanders briefed ministers on the operations that will involve thousands of troops over the next two years.

Mr Osborne is understood to have responded to the military presentation by calling into question the proposed plan for withdrawal, asking why British forces should not come home now.

One source described the Chancellor's response to the defence chiefs as "deliberately provocative". A second witness to the exchange said the intervention was characteristic of Mr Osborne's style in security council meetings. "He likes to challenge, to provoke debate," the source said.

Ministers and military chiefs are debating the timetable for removing the last 9,000 British troops from Afghanistan. Mr Osborne's scepticism is helping to prolong the decision-making process on how many to withdraw next year.

An initial security council meeting on the decision is not expected to be held until December, as new options are drawn up for discussion.

The final decision may not be made until February.

The Prime Minister this week promised that "nearly all" troops would be home by the time combat operations are completed at the end of 2014.

A total of 433 British service personnel have died in Afghanistan since the 2001 operation that toppled the Taliban. Despite receiving billions of pounds in international aid, Afghanistan remains desperately poor and its government is regarded as fragile and prone to corruption.

The Nato strategy for withdrawing from Afghanistan rests on the ability of Afghan security forces to police the country and prevent the spread of the same extremists who were behind the September 11 attacks on the US. The competence and reliability of the Afghan forces has been called into question by a series of incidents in which Afghan personnel have killed Western troops working alongside them.

At the security council meeting, Mr Osborne is said to have asked how the British deployment can be justified to the the public for the next two years, amid continuing casualties and doubts about the Afghan government.

A source close to the Chancellor said his question was largely rhetorical, a "debating point" meant to test the strategy, and not a serious suggestion of an immediate withdrawal.

Mr Osborne does not want an immediate withdrawal and "totally supports the position of the Prime Minister and the Government," the source said.

The intervention is not Mr Osborne's first challenge to Afghan policy, as he has pushed previously for the withdrawal to be hastened.

In the talks that led to the decision to withdraw 500 troops over this year, Mr Osborne is said to have pressed for more to come home.

Nor is he the only minister advocating a faster pull-out. Oliver Letwin, the Cabinet Office minister who is in charge of government policy, is also said be sceptical about continuing the Afghan mission.

Mr Osborne's latest contribution to the Afghan debate has increased speculation that he is worried about the financial cost of the deployment. By the end of March this year, Afghan operations had cost taxpayers a total of £17.3 billion, on top of the core defence budget.

Philip Hammond, the Defence Secretary, last month raised speculation about a major withdrawal next year when he said that defence chiefs could see "more flexibility" for removing troops and said that commanders' "view of force levels is evolving".

Downing Street declined to expand on details of the discussion at the September meeting of the security council, but insisted that Mr Cameron's 2014 deadline was unchanged.

A spokesman said: "At their last discussion of Afghanistan in September, all members of the National Security Council agreed that our strategy in Afghanistan is the right one and reaffirmed our commitment to work alongside Afghan forces in a combat role until the end of 2014."