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WASHINGTON — The Obama administration has decided to begin publicly walking away from what it once touted as key deadlines in the war in Afghanistan in an effort to de-emphasize President Barack Obama's pledge that he'd begin withdrawing U.S. forces in July 2011, administration and military officials have told McClatchy.

The new policy will be on display next week during a conference of NATO countries in Lisbon, Portugal, where the administration hopes to introduce a timeline that calls for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan by 2014, the year when Afghan President Hamid Karzai once said Afghan troops could provide their own security, three senior officials told McClatchy, along with others speaking anonymously as a matter of policy.

The Pentagon also has decided not to announce specific dates for handing security responsibility for several Afghan provinces to local officials and instead intends to work out a more vague definition of transition when it meets with its NATO allies.

What a year ago had been touted as an extensive December review of the strategy now also will be less expansive and will offer no major changes in strategy, the officials told McClatchy. So far, the U.S. Central Command, the military division that oversees Afghanistan operations, hasn't submitted any kind of withdrawal order for forces for the July deadline, two of those officials told McClatchy.

The shift already has begun privately and came in part because U.S. officials realized that conditions in Afghanistan were unlikely to allow a speedy withdrawal.

"During our assessments, we looked at if we continue to move forward at this pace, how long before we can fully transition to the Afghans? And we found that we cannot fully transition to the

Afghans by July 2011," said one senior administration official. "So we felt we couldn't focus on July 2011 but the period it will take to make the full transition."

Another official said the administration also realized in contacts with Pakistani officials that the Pakistanis had concluded wrongly that July 2011 would mark the beginning of the end of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan.

That perception, one Pentagon adviser said, has convinced Pakistan's military — which is key to preventing Taliban sympathizers from infiltrating Afghanistan — to continue to press for a political settlement instead of military action.

"This administration now understands that it cannot shift Pakistani approaches to safeguarding its interests in Afghanistan with this date being perceived as a walk-away date," the adviser said.

Last week's midterm elections also have eased pressure on the Obama administration to begin an early withdrawal. Earlier this year, some Democrats in Congress pressed to cut off funding for Afghanistan operations. With Republicans in control of the House of Representatives beginning in January, however, there'll be less push for a drawdown. The incoming House Armed Services chairman, Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., told Reuters last week that he opposed setting the date.

The White House vehemently denies that there is any change in policy. "The president has been crystal clear that we will begin drawing down troops in July of 2011. There is absolutely no change to that policy," said Tommy Vietor, a White House spokesman.

On Tuesday, a White House official who spoke with reporters in a conference call arranged to discuss the December review, said the administration might withdraw some troops next July and may hand some communities over to Afghan authorities. But he said a withdrawal from Afghanistan could take "years," depending on the capability of the Afghan national security forces.

He also said the December review would measure progress in eight areas, though he declined to specify what those are. Congress will get a report by early next year, but Army Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of U.S.-led international forces in Afghanistan, will not testify.

"This is designed to be an inside the administration perspective," he said, adding it will "set the policymaking calendar" for the Obama administration's first six months of next year.

De-emphasizing deadlines also allows the administration greater flexibility in responding to conditions in Afghanistan, officials said.

While the Taliban are facing increasing coalition airstrikes, they have no driving incentive to negotiate with an unpopular government. Officials here quietly worry that while they, too, are seeing some drops in violence and the Taliban's hold in pockets of Afghanistan, those limited improvements aren't leading to better governance.

A U.N. report issued in August showed that civilian casualties rose 31 percent during the first half of the year compared with the previous year, 76 percent were caused by the Taliban, it said. So far, more than 400 U.S. troops have been killed this year.

Many officials here privately worry that talk of a withdrawal without results will cost the military credibility, with Americans and Afghans alike.

"What we ultimately need in Afghanistan is good governance," said one senior military officer. "Right now there is a gap" between security gains and governance.

Christopher Preble, the director for foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, said he's not surprised that the scope of the December review has narrowed and that Obama administration officials are no longer highlighting the July 2011 date.

"The very players who were arguing so strenuously for a deepening of our involvement in

Afghanistan a year ago are unlikely to now declare that their earlier recommendations were faulty," he said.

*(Warren P. Strobel and Jonathan S. Landay contributed to this article.)*