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9,800 US Troops to Cost \$20B; Pentagon Afghan Spending Request Will Be Higher

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The Obama administration estimates that keeping 9,800 troops in Afghanistan in 2015 would cost about \$20 billion, but the Pentagon is still expected to request tens of billions of dollars more for additional security operations in the region, according to sources and experts.

The White House said Wednesday that it was finalizing its 2015 overseas contingency operations (OCO) spending plan, one day after a senior administration official revealed a troop-cost estimate.

US President Barack Obama on Tuesday announced he would keep 9,800 American troops in Afghanistan in 2015 to train Afghan soldiers and support counterterrorism operations.

Those 9,800 troops would cost about \$20 billion, Tony Blinken, Obama's deputy national security adviser, said Tuesday in an interview with CNN.

"We're looking at probably in the vicinity of about \$20 billion, when you factor everything in," Blinken said. There are about 32,000 American troops in Afghanistan today.

The \$20 billion estimate is consistent with cost-per-troop calculations conducted by Todd Harrison, a budget analyst with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments think tank.

“Twenty billion [dollars] is a reasonable estimate for what it will cost for 9,800 troops in Afghanistan next year,” he said. “It’s a legitimate number. In fact, it’s a little above the trend line, but pretty close to it.”

Historically, it has cost DoD about \$1.3 million per year for each troop it has in Afghanistan, Harrison said. But the trend was bucked in 2014 when DoD submitted an OCO request that was nearly double of what it should have needed based on troop numbers.

This is because DoD has shifted billions of dollars from its base budget, which is subject to federal spending caps, to the unconstrained OCO budget, Harrison said.

Harrison estimates that about \$30 billion of the DoD’s \$85 billion 2014 OCO budget is money that was moved out of the base budget. DoD shifted about \$20 billion and Congress moved the additional \$10 billion from the base to OCO accounts, he said.

Since 2008, Pentagon officials have said they would migrate billions of dollars in funding from the war budget to the base budget. However in recent years, since the federal spending caps were put in place, DoD has moved money the other way — from the base budget to the war budget — to soften the blow, analysts say.

In March, the Pentagon sent Congress a \$79 billion “placeholder” for OCO, saying it could not develop a formal spending request until US troop levels for Afghanistan were finalized.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has refused to sign a security agreement that would allow US troops to operate in the country after 2014; however, his two potential successors have said they would sign the pact if elected president later this year.

An administration official said the Pentagon’s 2015 OCO budget request will be lower than the \$79 billion placeholder.

"[T]his year's request will include costs incurred inside Afghanistan, certain expenses in the theater more broadly, and various related support costs," the official said. "For example, these costs include returning personnel and equipment from theater to their home stations, repairing and replacing equipment and munitions, and resetting our military forces as they return from war."

In addition, the request "will include funding for the US military mission in Afghanistan and DoD's supporting presence in the broader region in [fiscal] 2015, and it will reflect a continued downward trajectory of war-related spending," the White House said in a statement on Wednesday.

The 2015 OCO proposal will include up to \$5 billion in a "counterterrorism Partnerships Fund" that would go toward US training and partner-building of foreign troops.

"[T]hese resources will give us flexibility to fulfill different missions, including training security forces in Yemen who have gone on the offensive against al-Qaida; supporting a multinational force to keep the peace in Somalia; working with European allies to train a functioning security force and border patrol in Libya; and facilitating French operations in Mali," Obama said Wednesday in his commencement address to graduating cadets at West Point.

The new fund announced by Obama would become the fifth counterterrorism account in the DoD budget, said Gordon Adams, an analyst with the Stimson Center and a professor at American University, who oversaw defense budgeting in the Clinton administration.

In a statement, the White House said the new account would allow DoD to:

"Conduct expanded train and equip activities.

"More effectively facilitate and enable the counterterrorism efforts of our partners on the front lines.

"Together with the State Department, provide security and stabilization assistance, as well as support efforts to counter violent extremism and terrorist ideology."