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Despite statements by Vice President Joe Biden, the State Department is about to begin formal negotiations over the extension of U.S. troops past 2014, a top State Department official said Tuesday. Last week, U.S. and Afghan negotiators met in Kabul to talk about the Bilateral Security Agreement that will govern the extension of U.S. troops past 2014, when President Barack Obama said the combat mission in Afghanistan will end and the U.S. will complete the transition of the entire country to Afghan government control.

Also last week, Biden told Americans during his Oct. 11 debate with Republican vice-presidential nominee Paul Ryan that U.S. troops were leaving Afghanistan by 2014.

"We are leaving in 2014, period, and in the process, we're going to be saving over the next 10 years another \$800 billion," Biden said. "We've been in this war for over a decade. The primary objective is almost completed. Now all we're doing is putting the Kabul government in a position to be able to maintain their own security. It's their responsibility, not America's."

Marc Grossman, the State Department's special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, explained today that's not the whole story.

Grossman said Tuesday that the point of the upcoming negotiations is to agree on an extension of the U.S. troop presence well past 2014, for the purposes of conducting counterterrorism operations and training and advising the Afghan security forces.

In May, Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement that promised an ongoing U.S. commitment to Afghanistan through 2024. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced Oct. 3 that Grossman's deputy, James Warlick, will be the lead U.S. negotiator for the Bilateral Security Agreement that will follow. Karzai's Ambassador to

Washington Eklil Hakimi will lead the negotiations for the Afghan side.

Grossman said that while meetings on "how we will manage our forces going forward in Afghanistan," have already taken place, formal negotiations have not yet begun. Once the negotiations formally start, the Bilateral Security Agreement must be completed within one year, according to the Strategic Partnership agreement, Grossman explained.

Some U.S. military officials have said the plan is to keep 25,000 American troops in Afghanistan past 2014, but Grossman insisted that there is no number yet and the 25,000 figure quoted in reports is speculative. NATO announced Monday that it will also keep international troops in Afghanistan past 2014 alongside U.S. troops, not for combat but strictly for the mission of training and advising the Afghans.

Grossman was speaking on a panel at the annual summit of the International Stability Operations Association in Washington. Also on the panel was Under Secretary of State for Management Patrick Kennedy, who said that the State Department would need U.S. military troops in Afghanistan to protect them and help them well past 2014.

"Rather than developing our own capabilities, we will be depending on DOD support for functions such as a quick reaction force, personnel recovery, fuel support, explosive ordinance disposal, and medical assistance, by 2015," Kennedy said.

The Cable also asked Kennedy why he testified in a hearing last week that he was "inclined" to support the requests for more security in Libya before the Sept. 11 attack in Benghazi that killed Amb. Chris Stevens and three other Americans. Kennedy declined to comment.