

US Afghanistan commander requested as many as 60,000 more soldiers

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The top-end request for an increase in US troop levels presented to President Barack Obama by Gen. Stanley McChrystal, US and NATO commander in Afghanistan, is substantially larger than the 40,000 previously reported, according to anonymous government sources.

McChrystal has presented Obama with three scenarios for troop deployments in Afghanistan. In one, the US would commit 60,000 more soldiers. In the second—that for which McChrystal has publicly campaigned—the US would deploy 40,000 additional troops. In the third scenario, Obama would send only marginally more soldiers than the 68,000 who will occupy Afghanistan by January 1. McChrystal says that this choice would lead to “mission failure”—i.e., defeat.

Obama is in the midst of a series of cabinet-level meetings in which McChrystal’s request is being discussed, along with a competing proposal that would maintain the current troop levels while relying more on aerial bombardment, targeted assassinations, and a deeper intervention in neighboring Pakistan. Vice President Joe Biden reportedly favors this option.

The anonymous leaks that McChrystal has requested as many as 60,000 more soldiers appear to be aimed at conditioning public opinion for a deployment well beyond the 21,000 soldiers Obama ordered to Afghanistan soon after his inauguration.

McChrystal had been scheduled to meet with Obama in Washington on Friday, but the White House delayed his return to continue deliberations. He has participated in the “strategy review” sessions via teleconference.

The debate within the Obama administration over troop levels has reportedly been joined to a larger discussion over whether or not to refocus the mission in Afghanistan from defeating the Taliban to preventing the return of Al Qaeda.

“The Obama administration has concluded that the Taliban cannot be eliminated as a political or military movement,

regardless of how many combat forces are sent into battle,” the *Washington Post* reported on Friday.

“The Taliban is a deeply rooted political movement in Afghanistan, so that requires a different approach than al-Qaeda,” a senior administration official said. The *Post* reported that government officials have compared the Taliban to Hezbollah, the popularly based Shiite movement in Lebanon, which “has political support [and] is not a threat to the United States.”

On Thursday, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs appeared to affirm this outlook. “I think the Taliban are, obviously, exceedingly bad people that have done awful things,” he said. “Their capability is somewhat different, though, on that continuum of transnational threats.”

Elsewhere in the article, the *Post* describes the Taliban as “made up of a variety of groups united by an opposition to the international military presence.” It adds that Washington’s goal of “weakening the Taliban politically...has been undermined by widespread allegations of electoral fraud appearing to benefit President Hamid Karzai.”

These are extraordinary admissions that invalidate both the *causus bellum* for invading Afghanistan in 2001 and the rationale for the ongoing occupation.

Whereas Washington has long presented the Taliban as a dangerous terrorist organization bent on attacking the US in tandem with its Al Qaeda allies, now senior White House officials acknowledge that the “Taliban insurgency” is the military wing of a popular political movement against the US-led occupation—and one that has nothing to do with the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the US.

In spite of these admissions, the two options being debated in Obama’s “strategy review” entail no let-up in military action against the insurgency. The debate is whether the next phase of the war should be based on a vast increase in “boots on the ground” that would meet insurgents in Afghan population

centers, or on Biden's proposal for greater reliance on air power and a cross-border special forces assassination campaign. Both approaches share the goal of weakening the Taliban "to the degree that it cannot challenge the Afghan government or reestablish the haven it provided for al-Qaeda," the *Post* said.

The *Post* reports, however, that a consensus has emerged in the Obama administration in favor of relinquishing vast parts of Afghanistan to anti-US forces and shifting forces toward population centers, an approach consonant with McChrystal's strategy, and one that is, in fact, already underway.

A significant increase in the US occupation force appears likely, with the outstanding questions being how much and how soon. Asked by the *Post* "how many troops would be needed to weaken the Taliban to an acceptable degree," a top official responded, "That's the question. That's the sweet spot we're looking for."

Yet there remain major obstacles to any new "surge" in Afghanistan—beyond mounting popular opposition in the US and NATO countries.

According to a new study by the Institute for the Study of War, a national security think tank, the US has available only three brigades, numbering between 11,000 and 15,000 soldiers, who could deploy to Afghanistan by the end of 2009. By the summer, a maximum of 20,000 could be deployed, it concluded. These and other calculations about troop availability are based on the assumption that the diminution of violence in Iraq will hold. The US continues to maintain a much larger military presence in Iraq than in Afghanistan.

Military operations have also been hindered by basic facts about Afghanistan's geography and infrastructure. Because it is landlocked, material must be sent in from Pakistan via the Khyber Pass, supply lines subject to insurgent attacks and harassment, or else via a cumbersome northern route through Russia and the Central Asian states that border Afghanistan.

The overland vehicles currently available to the Army do not function well on Afghanistan's primitive roads, and vast areas of the largely mountainous nation are impassable in the winter months. For these reasons, the movement of US and NATO troops over an area roughly the size of Texas is dependent on helicopters—of which there is an acute shortage, military sources told the *Wall Street Journal*.

There are also fears that the military could be crippled by a substantial intensification of its Afghanistan mission, a position reputedly held by Army Chief of Staff George Casey. Casey implicitly rebuked McChrystal on Monday, telling reporters he

would not comment publicly on troop proposals, but would speak "directly to the president and do it privately."

Anthony Cordesman, a strategist with close ties to the military, rebutted concerns about depleting the army in chilling fashion. "You maintain peacetime assets precisely so you can consume them in war," he told the *Journal*.

The United Nations on Thursday reaffirmed its backing of the war, the 15-member Security Council voting unanimously to extend by one year its endorsement of the NATO occupation, and called upon member nations to provide more support.

Meanwhile, attacks in Afghanistan suggest that the US position continues to erode.

NATO announced Friday that the US has abandoned its base at Kamdesh, which hundreds of Taliban fighters attacked last week, leaving eight American and three Afghan soldiers dead. The Taliban claimed victory and raised its flag over the town, but NATO claimed that the base was shut down as part of McChrystal's shift to populated areas.

Remarking on the fact that the US destroyed the base before abandoning it, a Taliban spokesman said "this means they are not coming back. This is another victory for Taliban. We have control of another district in eastern Afghanistan."

NATO said a coalition soldier was killed in combat on Friday, but it offered no details. So far this month, 24 coalition soldiers have been killed.

Also on Friday, about 100 insurgents attacked a number of checkpoints and police headquarters in Kunar province, which borders Pakistan. Seven insurgents were killed and several policemen were wounded in the fighting.

In Paktia province in eastern Afghanistan, also on the Pakistani border, a suicide car bomber attacked a convoy of construction workers, killing five.

And in Pakistan, a car packed with explosives blew up at a busy outdoor market on Friday, claiming 49 lives and injuring dozens more. Islamabad was quick to seize on the tragedy to justify a widely anticipated military campaign demanded by Washington in South Waziristan province.



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