

McChrystal outlines 'maximalist' option

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By Daniel Dombey in Washington

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Gen Stanley McChrystal, the US and Nato commander in **Afghanistan**, has outlined a 'maximalist' option of dispatching many more than 40,000 extra troops to the conflict, western officials say.

In a request handed to **President Barack Obama** a week ago, Gen McChrystal set out his preferred option of 40,000 more troops to regain the initiative against the Taliban, partner with Afghan soldiers and move into areas under the insurgents' sway.

But in a development first reported by ABC News, the request is now known to also include a more ambitious option of an even bigger force, together with a third, "high risk" option of leaving US troops at their current level of 68,000. When other Nato members and partner states are counted, there are about 100,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan.

Officials emphasise that Gen McChrystal's request is designed to build support for the 40,000 option, which Mr Obama was set to discuss with his top aides in the latest of a series of strategy sessions at the White House on Friday. Gen McChrystal was due to appear at the meeting by video conference.

Vice-President Joe Biden has pushed for greater focus on strikes on al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan, while some Democrats say another alternative to more combat troops would be to step up already ambitious plans to increase the total size of the Afghan national army and police.

But in a strategic assessment leaked last month, Gen McChrystal warned that without more resources the US could effectively lose the war over the next year.

Rejecting the notion of a simple choice between training and combat troops, he says US and Nato troops should partner their Afghan counterparts in real-life operations to help the local forces become self-sufficient.

"It's a much deeper level of partnership - working with Afghans to greatly expand the forces," says Jeremy Shapiro, an expert at the Brookings Institution who recently advised Gen McChrystal. "In a pretty major shift, it would re-orient US forces to being the incubator of Afghan forces rather than just fighting the insurgency."

Gen McChrystal is also pushing for Nato to re-establish itself in areas where the insurgents are growing in influence.

He says in his assessment that the Taliban have a long-term goal of regaining control of their traditional base of Kandahar, adding that already the group's "influence over the city and neighbouring difference is significant and growing." He argues the US and its allies have to make a priority of such "critical areas where the population is most threatened."

But in an indication of possible resistance to such plans, the White House has recently highlighted the distinction between al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which some officials see as much less of a threat to US interests.

This week, Robert Gibbs, Mr Obama's spokesman, described al-Qaeda as "a global network - versus the Taliban, something that's located exclusively in Afghanistan."

He added that Mr Obama's current review of Afghanistan policy - and eventual decision on Gen McChrystal's request - would still seek to prevent al-Qaeda from using Afghanistan to plan and execute attacks.

Mr Gibbs said a final decision on troops and strategy was still probably several weeks away.

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