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Plan to Boost Afghan Forces Splits Obama Advisers

By [PETER BAKER](#) and [ELISABETH BUMILLER](#)

WASHINGTON — As [President Obama](#) weighs sending more troops to Afghanistan, one of the most consequential decisions of his presidency, he has discovered that the military is not monolithic in support of the plan and that some of the civilian advisers he respects most have deep reservations.

Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#)'s troop request, which was submitted to the Pentagon on Friday, has reignited a longstanding debate within the military about the virtues of the counterinsurgency strategy popularized by Gen. [David H. Petraeus](#) in Iraq and now embraced by General McChrystal, the top American and [NATO](#) commander in Afghanistan.

General McChrystal is expected to ask for as many as 40,000 additional troops for the eight-year-old war, a number that has generated concern among top officers like Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the [Army](#) chief of staff, who worry about the capacity to provide more soldiers at a time of stress on the force, officials said.

The competing advice and concerns fuel a pivotal struggle to shape the president's thinking about a war that he inherited but may come to define his tenure. Among the most important outside voices has been that of former Secretary of State [Colin L. Powell](#), a retired four-star Army general, who visited Mr. Obama in the Oval Office this month and expressed skepticism that more troops would guarantee success. According to people briefed on the discussion, Mr. Powell reminded the president of his longstanding view that military missions should be clearly defined.

Mr. Powell is one of the three people outside the administration, along with Senator [John F. Kerry](#) and Senator [Jack Reed](#), considered by White House aides to be most influential in this current debate. All have expressed varying degrees of doubt about the wisdom of sending more forces to Afghanistan.

Mr. Kerry, Democrat of Massachusetts and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, has warned of repeating the mistakes of Vietnam, where he served, and has floated the idea of a more limited counterterrorist mission. Mr. Reed, Democrat of Rhode Island and an Army veteran, has

not ruled out supporting more troops but said “the burden of proof” was on commanders to justify it.

In the West Wing, beyond Vice President [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#), who has advocated an alternative strategy to the troop buildup, other presidential advisers sound dubious about more troops, including [Rahm Emanuel](#), the chief of staff, and Gen. [James L. Jones](#), the national security adviser, according to people who have spoken with them. At the same time, Mr. Obama is also hearing from more hawkish figures, including Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) and [Richard Holbrooke](#), the special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

General McChrystal’s troop request, which has not been made public, was given to Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), by the general in a meeting in Germany on Friday. Admiral Mullen arrived back in Washington on Friday night with one paper copy for himself and one for Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#).

Mr. Gates has not endorsed General McChrystal’s request yet, viewing the situation as “complicated,” said one person who has spoken with him. But Mr. Gates, who will be an influential voice in Mr. Obama’s decision, has also left open the door for more troops and warned of the consequences of failure in Afghanistan.

Although Mr. Obama has called Afghanistan a war of necessity, he has left members of both parties uncertain about the degree of his commitment to a large and sustained military presence. Even some advisers said they thought Mr. Obama’s support for the war as a senator and presidential candidate was at least partly a way of contrasting it with what he saw as a reckless war in Iraq.

His decision to send 21,000 more troops to Afghanistan early this year, which will bring the number of American troops there to 68,000 this fall, was made hurriedly within weeks of coming into office to stanch the tactical erosion on the ground and provide security during Afghan elections.

But with those elections now marred by [fraud allegations](#), the latest troop request is forcing Mr. Obama to decide whether he wants to fully engage in Afghanistan for the rest of his term or make a drastic change of course. Some advisers said the varying views reflected the complicated nature of a debate. The troop request follows the strategy unveiled by Mr. Obama in March to focus more on protecting the Afghan population, building infrastructure and improving governance, rather than just hunting the [Taliban](#). On Friday, a [United Nations](#) report said that from January to August, 1,500 civilians were killed, about two-thirds of them by militants.

Admiral Mullen has endorsed the idea of more troops and will be at the table representing the military. General McChrystal and ambassadors from the region will get a chance to participate in

meetings with the president through a secure video hookup.

Other officers, who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan and say they admire General McChrystal nonetheless, have privately expressed doubt that additional troops will make a difference. Others question the broader impact of such a buildup on the overall armed forces.

“If a request for more forces comes to the Army, we’ll have to assess what that will do in terms of stress on the force,” said an Army official, who asked not to be identified because General McChrystal’s troop request had not been made public.

General Casey, whose institutional role as Army chief is to protect his force, has a goal to increase by 2012 a soldier’s time at home, to two years at home for every year served, from the current one year for every year of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Advisers who have Mr. Obama’s ear have raised other questions. Mr. Powell spoke with Mr. Obama about a variety of topics, but his remarks on Afghanistan resonated in the White House. “The question the president has to answer is, ‘What will more troops do?’ ” Mr. Powell told reporters before a speech in California last week. “You have to not just add troops. You need a clear definition of your mission and then you can determine whether you need more troops or other resources.”

In an interview, Senator Kerry, who met with Admiral Mullen last week, said that he had not made up his mind about the troop buildup, but that in Vietnam, “the underlying assumptions were flawed, and the number of troops weren’t going to make a difference.”

Senator Reed, who met with Mr. Biden, was more measured, but said the president needed to look at the capacity of Afghan forces and the prospects of reconciliation with moderate Taliban members. “You want to make sure you have the best operational plan to carry out the strategy,” he said.

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