

Gates Says Obama to Decide Soon on More Afghan Troops

By Ken Fireman, Feb. 10, 2009, Bloomberg

Defense Secretary [Robert Gates](#) said President [Barack Obama](#) will likely decide in the “next few days.” whether to send more troops to Afghanistan.

Gates told a Pentagon news conference today he has already made a recommendation to the president about an additional deployment to Afghanistan.

“He has several options in front of him” about adding to the 37,000 U.S. troops now in Afghanistan, Gates said. The options involve both the size and pace of new deployments, he said.

Army General [David McKiernan](#), the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, has asked for as many as 30,000 more troops over the next year to beat back a renewed Taliban insurgency.

Gates said a decision must be made before an Obama-ordered review of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan is complete to give sufficient notice to units that may be deployed.

At the same time, Gates said, a “constructive, deliberative” process is under way to sort through the options.

“This is the first time that this president has been asked to deploy large numbers of troops overseas, and it seems to me a thoughtful and deliberative approach to that decision is entirely appropriate,” Gates said.

Review Team

The strategic review of Afghanistan and Pakistan will be headed by former CIA

officer [Bruce Riedel](#); [Richard Holbrooke](#), Obama’s special representative for the two countries; and [Michele Flournoy](#), the undersecretary of defense for policy, White House press secretary [Robert Gibbs](#) said today.

The president wants the review completed before a scheduled April summit of NATO leaders in Strasbourg, France, Gibbs told reporters traveling with Obama to an event in Florida.

Obama said at a news conference last night that the U.S. needs “more effective coordination” of military, diplomatic and development efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan to wipe out havens for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The U.S. also is seeking more assistance in the region from allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

The additional forces would be part of a shift of emphasis under Obama to make Afghanistan the main focus of U.S. efforts to combat terrorism. Insurgent attacks there last year rose to the highest level since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001.

There are about 32,000 troops from other NATO members in Afghanistan, in addition to the U.S. forces.

‘Long-Term Presence’

Gates said the first contingent of additional American troops would likely be sent to Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban insurgency is especially intense. He said they would be used to establish a “long-term presence, rather than flying out by

helicopter for a day's operations" and then returning to their base.

Such a shift in tactics would mirror the change implemented in Iraq by Army General [David Petraeus](#) when he took command of U.S. forces in that country in 2007. Petraeus now commands all American forces throughout the Middle East and Central Asia, including Afghanistan.

Gates said a planned review of options for a further drawdown of forces in Iraq hasn't yet begun in earnest because of the new administration's focus on Afghanistan.

He said he expects the Iraq review to take place soon. He said the improved security situation there may facilitate withdrawals that would, in turn, free up more forces for Afghanistan.

'Greater Flexibility'

"The situation on the ground in Iraq allows us to make the next series of decisions with respect to Afghanistan with greater flexibility," Gates said.

There are currently about 146,000 U.S. troops in Iraq.

The U.S.-NATO effort in Afghanistan suffered a potential setback last week when Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced plans to end American access to an air base in his country. The base at the Manas airport near the capital of Bishkek is a prime transit point for personnel and cargo moving in and out of Afghanistan.

Gates called Manas "important but not irreplaceable." He said the U.S. is studying the possibility of increasing

compensation to Kyrgyzstan for the use of the base, given its importance, while adding that "we're not prepared to stay there at any price."

Bakiyev announced his decision in Moscow on Feb. 3 shortly after receiving a Russian pledge for more than \$2 billion in aid. A U.S. State Department official, [Patrick Moon](#), is in Moscow today and tomorrow to discuss joint efforts in Afghanistan.

Negotiating With Russia

Moon, a deputy assistant secretary for South and Central Asia, hopes to firm up details of the Russians' offer to allow the transport of supplies through their territory, according to State Department spokesman [Mark Toner](#).

The Kyrgyz Parliament is currently considering legislation to renounce the agreement allowing American use of the base. U.S. officials have said they are exploring alternative supply routes through other Central Asian countries.

About 15,000 U.S. and NATO personnel and about 500 tons of cargo pass through Manas each month, according to Defense Department spokesman [Bryan Whitman](#). He said the U.S. currently pays \$17.4 million annually to use the base.

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