

US warned it may lose Afghan war

Alex Spillius, Washington
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The war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan will be lost by the end of the northern summer without dramatic changes in counter-insurgency strategy, according to a US military expert.

The assessment of Colonel John Nagl, who is consultant to the US Government as it conducts four policy reviews on Afghanistan, comes amid fears that unless the insurgents' advance is halted, Afghanistan will become President Barack Obama's Vietnam.

Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he expected to announce the deployment of a further 30,000 US troops soon, even though President Obama's Administration is waiting to evaluate the reviews.

Earlier, US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said Mr Obama would make a decision about sending additional troops to Afghanistan in the next few days.

He said a decision must be made before an Obama-ordered review of US strategy in Afghanistan was completed because of the need to give sufficient notice to units that might be deployed.

Mr Gates has been considering a request from his commander in Afghanistan to add up to 30,000 troops over the coming year. Army General David McKiernan has asked for the new forces to beat back a renewed Taliban insurgency.

There are about 37,000 US troops in Afghanistan and another 32,000 from

other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Colonel Nagl, an Iraq veteran who helped devise the strategy, said the gains made by the Taliban needed to be reversed by the end of the fighting season, around late September or early October, or else the Taliban would establish a durable base that would make a sustained Western military presence futile.

During his election campaign, Mr Obama committed to sending extra resources to Afghanistan and was bullish about the chance of success.

But at a news conference this week, he played down expectations of ushering in a Western-style democracy and instead set a more modest goal of preventing the country from becoming a haven for terrorists to "act with impunity".