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## Obama to face new defense battles

By: **Jen DiMascio**

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Heading into a new year and the start of his reelection campaign, President Barack Obama faces two major battles with Congress and the military on the defense front: one over Afghan war policy, the other over the size of the Pentagon's budget.

The administration has pledged to begin drawing down of forces in Afghanistan this summer, but the question will be how many will actually leave — and how hard the military and congressional Republicans will resist any substantial withdrawal. The administration will also find itself pinched from the left, with war opponents eager for results and weary of what they see as Obama's acquiescence to the right.

"The major dispute is whether up to 20,000 troops can withdraw from Afghanistan," said John Isaacs, executive director of the anti-war Council for a Livable World. "That's where I think there will be a flash point."

Of anyone in the administration, Vice President Joe Biden has leaned furthest forward in his statements about troop withdrawals, telling David Gregory on NBC's "Meet the Press" that they would not be "token."

"We're starting this process, just like we did in Iraq. We're starting it in July of 2011, and we're going to be totally out of there come hell or high water by 2014," Biden said.

During a White House briefing on the recent Afghan strategy report, Defense Secretary Robert Gates was more circumspect about the pace of withdrawal.

"In terms of when the troops come out, the president has made clear it'll be conditions-based," Gates said. "In terms of what that line looks like beyond July 2011,

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I think the answer is we don't know at this point. But the hope is that as we progress, that those drawdowns will be able to accelerate."

The Republican House majority is already mobilized to seize on any ambiguity among members of the administration. Rep. Buck McKeon (R-Calif.), the incoming chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, plans to travel to Afghanistan in January, and he told reporters in December that he wants to hear about the conditions on the ground from Gen. David Petraeus.

"We intend to hear directly from Gen. Petraeus early next year on the conditions on the ground, where progress is being made, what challenges exist and where he believes we can begin transitioning security responsibilities from our troops to Afghanistan's security forces," McKeon said. "We will also focus on whether our military forces have the tools, support and training they need to win in Afghanistan."

No doubt, McKeon and other congressional Republicans will pick at the pre-existing divisions within the administration laid bare in Bob Woodward's "Obama's Wars" and Jonathan Alter's "The Promise" — books that showed Petraeus, Adm. Michael Mullen and Gates on the side of adding more forces for a counterinsurgency fight in Afghanistan and Biden, Gen. James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and war czar Lt. Gen. Douglas Lute advocating a more limited counterterrorism campaign.

In June, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and

others were asking about those divisions when a dehydrated Petraeus collapsed during a Senate hearing.

Pressure to show results rather than pulling out will remain.

"There's a feeling among Republicans that the military now should not be withdrawing

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precipitously,” said John Ullyot, a Republican strategist and former aide to former Sen. John Warner (R-Va.), who added that the elections will certainly add to the calculus.

“Going into 2012, the president is not going to want to create an issue on Afghanistan,” Ullyot said.

But the anti-war left, which has given Obama a year to see how the surge in forces has worked, may be running out of patience. As Obama ramps up his campaign fundraising drive, his liberal base will now be looking for the president to make good on his promise to start a withdrawal in 2011— with some help from Republicans such as Sen.-elect Rand Paul of Kentucky and his father, Rep. Ron Paul of Texas.

“I would expect rising opposition in the House and the Senate,” said Isaacs, adding that the voices clamoring for a drawdown will increase, pulling Obama at the extremes. “It’ll be controversial no matter what Obama does.”

The same can be said with regard to the Pentagon budget.

The deficit commission Obama created has proposed \$100 billion in cuts to the Pentagon, including limits on war spending, freezing salaries of Defense Department civilians and a suggestion that the defense secretary head a congressional Base Realignment and Closure-style commission to kill or cut underperforming weapons systems.

Adopting those recommendations would put Obama at odds with his own defense secretary, who is determined to keep defense near level under his watch. And they’ll be a tough sell on Capitol Hill — especially among newly empowered Republicans.

“It’s clear there are rough waters ahead

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with respect to the Pentagon's budget," Isaacs said.

In May, Gates sold military leaders on a plan to find \$100 billion in savings that the Pentagon would redirect to higher priorities. But in the final months of the year, pressure for the administration to take that savings away from the Pentagon has mounted. If the generals find that the money they were counting on is headed back to the Treasury, defense insiders expect the brass to appeal to Congress to save prized programs.

The military will certainly find friends on the Hill. McKeon cast it in stark terms during a November speech to the Foreign Policy Initiative. "A defense budget in decline portends an America in decline," he said. "It will undermine our ability to project power, strengthen our adversaries and weaken our alliances."

But at the same time, fervor for reductions to defense spending is building. It's not just Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and others who have outlined nearly \$1 trillion in potential trims to the defense budget.

Incoming Republican senators such as Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania and House leader Rep. Eric Cantor have said defense cuts should be on the table.

"It is unrealistic to expect that the Pentagon's budget will escape scrutiny for another year and going forward," said Chris Preble, a director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Even with a new breed of anti-earmark appropriators taking control of the nation's purse strings, Congress can pick and choose what it deems wasteful and what it considers necessary. And members, ever bound by parochial considerations, often make real reductions on defense near impossible.

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One solution, according to Preble, lies in Afghanistan.

By drawing down forces in Afghanistan, he said, the size of the military can eventually be reduced. "You can start making not just programmatic reforms but also real savings. Not just \$100 billion over five or six years, but real savings," he said. "What's interesting to me is that so few Republican members of Congress seem to be ... sensing an opportunity to say Obama has doubled and tripled down on this war, his war, and how has it improved our security?"

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