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Bad timing for Obama on any troop buildup in Afghanistan

Drumbeat of opposition grows louder as antiwar movement looks to ramp up in the fall – and as some in Congress start talking of planning for the US exit.

By **Howard LaFranchi** | Staff writer/ September 1, 2009 edition

WASHINGTON

The commanding American general in Afghanistan is expected to follow up soon on his review of the war there by asking for additional troops and other resources – a request that could hardly come at a worse time for President Obama.

Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal is likely to seek from two to four additional brigades – or as many as 20,000 more US soldiers beyond the 65,000 already in Afghanistan – as part of a “revised strategy” to better protect the Afghan population and accelerate the training of Afghan security forces, sources at the Pentagon and elsewhere say.

But such a request will come amid signs of faltering domestic support for the Afghanistan effort and as Mr. Obama, facing a worrisome overall erosion of public confidence, hopes to focus attention on his drive for healthcare reform.

Growing doubts about the US commitment in Afghanistan and noisy opposition to the war may be the last things the White House needs, but increasingly that looks to be what the administration is going to get.

- The antiwar movement, deflated by a quieter Iraq and the programmed withdrawal of US forces there, plans to ramp up public opposition to the Afghanistan war this fall.
- Frustration with the course of the war is bubbling in Congress, with Democratic Sen. Russell Feingold of Wisconsin – notably the first senator to call four years ago for a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq – announcing he favors setting a “flexible timetable” for drawing down US forces in Afghanistan.

The war in Afghanistan never faced the degree of public opposition that the war in Iraq did, in part because of the direct link between the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Afghanistan.

In addition, the level of war opposition in the US often correlates with casualties and violence levels, some defense analysts note, but Iraq war casualties – both for US troops and Iraqi civilians – always eclipsed those in Afghanistan. With more troops being sent to Afghanistan and with the relegation of US troops in Iraq to large bases, however, that picture has flipped. Last month, US casualties in Afghanistan reached the highest level of the war there.

The higher-profile casualties and a worry that US troops in Afghanistan are being asked to undertake an unclear or impossible task are feeding the nascent opposition to the war, some war analysts say.

“We’re moving beyond the clear objective of shutting down Al Qaeda, but the goal of stabilizing Afghanistan and liberalizing the central government is a much broader policy that Americans are saying they never signed up for,” says Malou Innocent, an Afghanistan-Pakistan expert at the Cato Institute, a libertarian Washington think tank.

This “mission creep,” as she calls it, has led Ms. Malou, in a recent report she co-authored on US Afghanistan policy, to advocate a withdrawal of most US troops over the next 12 to 18 months. Enough troops could be left in Afghanistan, she says, to fulfill the limited objective of training Afghan security forces, while an “intelligence-based” fight against Al Qaeda, more akin to international crimefighting, could be pursued largely from offshore.

Senator Feingold, who does not specify the length of the “flexible timetable for withdrawal” he recently proposed, says his framework would allow the US to refocus on the core objective of battling Al Qaeda, without turning the US into the “foreign occupier” that has never fared well in Afghanistan.

Leaders in the US antiwar movement say an affection in their ranks for Obama has until now stifled the kind of boisterous opposition that President Bush faced. But Feingold is a liberal Democrat. At the same time, signs are growing that the “get out of Afghanistan” camp, while small, is expanding into a broader ideological band. Writing in the Washington Post Tuesday, conservative columnist George Will says the US effort in Afghanistan should be called “Operation Sisyphus” and concludes that US presence should be “substantially reduced” to a focus on battling Al Qaeda with drones, missiles, and special-forces units concentrating on the Pakistan border.

“Instead of adding troops, the administration should narrow the objectives,” says Malou. With Congress’s summer recess ending and “the focus returning to Washington,” she adds, “I think [the administration] will hear more about how that’s what Americans want.”

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