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## Obama at a crossroads on Afghanistan

Some lawmakers are reluctant to send more troops

By [Leo Shane III](#), Stars and Stripes  
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WASHINGTON — The new Afghanistan assessment calling the fight there fragile and under-resourced leaves President Barack Obama with a thorny decision: ignore military commanders' request for more troops, or spar with a Congress increasingly reluctant to send more servicemembers overseas.

The report by the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal — which was leaked to The Washington Post this weekend — does not specify how many more U.S. troops may need to be committed to Afghanistan. But it does make clear that not enough fighters are in the country right now.

"Proper resourcing will be critical," the report states. "The campaign in Afghanistan has been historically under-resourced and remains so today — [International Security Assistance Force] is operating in a culture of poverty. Consequently, ISAF requires more forces."

McChrystal's predecessor, Gen. David McKiernan, had publicly stated that another 10,000 U.S. troops beyond the 70,000-troop force in the country now would be needed to make sure NATO efforts do not fall behind the growing Taliban threat.

White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters on Monday that the president would not hasten his evaluation simply because the assessment had been made public. He added that a formal request for more troops in Afghanistan still has not come before the president, but such a request is expected in the next few weeks.

But even before the assessment was leaked, lawmakers were lining up on both sides of another Afghanistan troop increase.

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich., have publicly opposed any such move. Members of the "Out of Iraq" caucus have shifted their attention to Afghanistan and expressed doubt about the growing troops levels there.

Meanwhile, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., ranking member on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said on Monday that any further delays in sending additional troops could endanger forces already there.

"As soon as the decision is made, the sooner we can implement a strategy that will allow us to reverse the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan," he said in a statement.

Even though McChrystal's report warns that a lack of progress in next 12 months "risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible," experts said the assessment alone is unlikely to sway lawmakers.

"I don't know if any minds can be changed with this," said Michael Kugelman, an analyst at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars' Asia program. "We've all known for a while the situation is getting worse and worse. This report really just crystallizes that.

"For those in Congress already focused on leaving Afghanistan, this just confirms their concerns. For those who want to send more troops, this gives them a reason we need more."

Michael Noonan, director of the National Security Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, stressed that the assessment doesn't provide a practical exit strategy for troops

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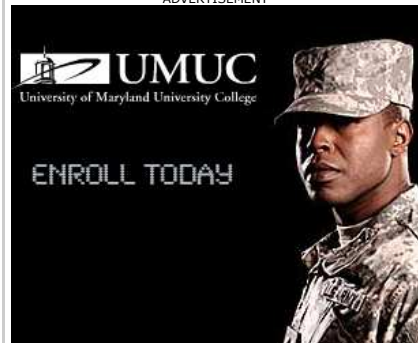
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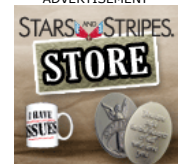
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already in the country.

"There have been a lot of airy discussions about that, but we still don't know how this ends," he said.

Gibbs said developing that strategy is precisely why the president hasn't already weighed in on the troop levels issue.

"We're going to conduct that strategic assessment and do that in a way that lays out the best path forward before we make resource decisions, rather than having this go the other way around where one makes resources decisions and then finds a strategy," he told reporters.

The 12-month window outlined in the report could provide some cover for lawmakers on the fence, said Foreign Policy Analyst Malou Innocent of the libertarian Cato Institute.

If more troops are approved and still by September 2010 no progress is seen, lawmakers can more forcefully stand up against future surge requests.

"As a collective body, Congress is probably willing to send more troops now, to avoid the 'cut-and-run' accusations," she said. "So I hope they hold McChrystal to his word about the next year."

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