

After Nobel nod, Obama convenes Afghan war council

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WASHINGTON — Hours after being named a Nobel peace laureate, President Barack Obama Friday shouldered his duties as commander in chief of the US armed forces and convened his war council for crucial talks on Afghan strategy.

Obama gathered his top political, military, and security aides in the secure Situation Room of the White House for the fourth in a series of in-depth consultations on rescuing the US mission in the unpopular eight-year war.

“The president had a robust conversation about the security and political challenges in Afghanistan and the options for building a strategic approach going forward,” an administration official told AFP.

Obama “looks forward to continued discussion on Wednesday,” the official said.

Obama was scheduled to be briefed by Afghan war commander General Stanley McChrystal on his report warning that the US counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan could fail within a year without more troops.

The meeting came amid more suggestions of tension between the White House and top military brass on the best way forward.

On Thursday, the White House made a clear distinction between Al-Qaeda and the lesser threat they say is posed to US security by the Taliban, fueling suspicion that Obama was leaning away from sending tens of thousands more troops to Afghanistan to escalate the counter-insurgency.

Hours later, in a leak to the Wall Street Journal, it emerged that McChrystal had offered the president several alternative options, including a maximum injection of 60,000 extra troops.

That figure is more than the previously reported 40,000-strong deployment that McChrystal apparently prefers.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said that Friday’s meeting could be followed by more than one meeting before the president makes a decision on strategy, still several weeks away.

The Taliban scoffed at Obama’s shock Nobel prize award on Friday, suggesting his policy towards Afghanistan barely differed from that of ex-president George W. Bush.

"We have seen no change in his strategy for peace," said Zabihullah Mujahid, a spokesman for the Islamic fundamentalist militants.

"He has done nothing for peace in Afghanistan," Mujahid told AFP. "He has not taken a single step for peace in Afghanistan or to make this country stable."

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who has seen his stock diminish in the United States amid election fraud allegations, immediately congratulated Obama on Friday, saying he was the "appropriate" person to win the peace prize.

"His hard work and his new vision on global relations, his will and efforts for creating friendly and good relations at global level and global peace make him the appropriate recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize," Karzai spokesman Siamak Hirai told AFP.

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Officials denied a policy shift, saying that as far back as March, Obama had made a distinction between core Taliban fighters allied with Al-Qaeda and forces loyal to local commanders who had been coerced or paid to fight.

The United States and its allies launched air strikes eight years ago against the Taliban in Afghanistan....

The United States has stepped up strikes by unmanned drones on top Al-Qaeda targets in lawless areas of Pakistan in recent months.

Those who advocate a strong counter-insurgency believe any return to prominence by the Taliban would inevitably mean a new haven for Al-Qaeda.

Obama's meeting Friday included Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, McChrystal via video link, top military officers and the US ambassadors to Islamabad and Kabul.

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