

Gates opens door to possible Afghan troop increase

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An outside adviser to McChrystal, Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, said last month that between 15,000 and 45,000 new U.S. combat troops – the equivalent of three to nine brigades – may have to be sent to Afghanistan above the 21,000 additional forces that Obama approved earlier this year.

A former CIA chief who helped mujahideen rebels drive the Soviets from Afghanistan, Gates has previously expressed concern that if the U.S. and NATO presence becomes too large, Afghans will see it as an occupying force.

WASHINGTON: U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said on Thursday the military resources needed to stem Taliban gains were arriving in Afghanistan but signaled he would be open to sending additional troops, asserting the war was not “slipping through the administration’s fingers”.

Gates appeared to tone down his personal reservations about a troop increase, saying his long-standing concerns about the U.S. and NATO presence becoming too large could be “mitigated” if Afghans viewed any additional Western troops as partners rather than occupiers.

A classified assessment of the war by U.S. Army General Stanley McChrystal, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, has intensified debate within the administration over sending additional troops into the fight with the Taliban.

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A willingness by Gates to accept a larger U.S. and NATO “footprint” in Afghanistan could influence Obama’s decision-making. Gates will meet the president next week to discuss McChrystal’s assessment and the administration’s options, Pentagon officials said.

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Gates said any request for additional resources would be submitted after consultations between military chiefs and the White House. He did not put a timeframe on that process.

McChrystal has about 103,000 troops under his command, including 63,000 Americans, half of whom arrived this year as part of an escalation strategy that was started by former President George W. Bush and ramped up under Obama.

STRETCHED MILITARY

The Western force is set to rise to 110,000, including 68,000 Americans, by year’s end, stretching the U.S. military to its limits, military officials said.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, said McChrystal spelled out to

the chain of command in “frank and candid” terms the state of the war in Afghanistan, adding that the Pentagon had a “sense of urgency” and understood that “time is not on our side.”

Military commanders and administration and congressional leaders have held preliminary discussions about future troop options, including sending a second 5,000-member Marine Regimental Combat Team to southern Afghanistan, a Taliban stronghold, participants said. This would boost the number of Marines in the country to 15,000-18,000 from just over 10,000.

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(Editing by Vicki Allen and Mohammad Zargham)

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