

U.S. lacks enough troops for low-risk' Afghan option

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. military can send only about 30,000 more troops to Afghanistan in the next three months without putting excessive strains on the Army and Marine Corps, but the top Afghanistan commander has said he needs more than twice that number to have the best chance of success, military and administration officials told McClatchy Newspapers.

Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal has said that even if it sent 30,000 additional troops, the U.S. would risk failure in Afghanistan under the current strategy. His resourcing plan offers President Barack Obama three options based on the estimated risk, said two U.S. military officials, who requested anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly and because the proposal remains classified.

The low-risk option, which McChrystal has said offers the best chance to contain the Taliban-led insurgency and stabilize Afghanistan, calls for 80,000 additional U.S. troops, while his medium-risk option puts the number at 40,000 to 45,000, the officials said.

"This is a fully resourced COIN (counterinsurgency) strategy with the low-risk option," one official said. The current Army counterinsurgency manual, however, estimates that an all-out COIN campaign in a country with Afghanistan's population would require about 600,000 troops.

Some 20,000 additional forces would be deployed under McChrystal's high-risk option, but that would mean the greatest risk of failure, the same official said. There now are 67,000 U.S. troops and 52,000 coalition forces in Afghanistan.

White House officials have leaked word that McChrystal's maximum option calls for 60,000 to 80,000 or more troops, but that many aren't available in the near future.

According to Army readiness figures, four lighter brigades needed for Afghanistan's rough terrain – three from the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Ky., and one from the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum, N.Y. – will be ready by December. A fifth brigade, also from the 101st Airborne, could deploy by March. Those would total roughly 25,000 troops who would be accompanied by several thousand support troops.

Marine Corps Commandant James T. Conway has said the Marines could deploy no more than 18,000 troops in Afghanistan, where 10,600 Marines already are serving. Marine officials said an additional 7,400 Marines could be available in three months.

The Army and Marines could deploy that many more troops to Afghanistan without extending tours of duty or reducing time at home between tours, which could further strain the forces. Indeed, the Army, led by Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the vice chief of staff of the Army,

has said that extending tours to 15 months, as the military did during the 2007 surge in Iraq, could break the forces.

Army soldiers serve now one year of combat and get a minimum of one year off. Marines serve seven-month deployments and get at least 14 months off.

In addition, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates could order airmen, seamen and members of National Guard and Reserves, but military officials said that wouldn't substantially boost the total number of troops available.

Military readiness figures are fluid, and today's numbers are a snapshot of what the military could deploy. If the military accelerated the drawdown in Iraq, which would present serious logistical hurdles, the number of troops available for Afghanistan could rise, for example.

A change in strategy also could alter the size and type of forces needed. The Obama administration could ask for more trainers and fewer combat troops to build up the Afghan National Army, which currently has 95,000 troops.

Afghanistan also could demand more U.S. troops, however. Many coalition countries, including Britain, Germany and Italy, are facing mounting domestic pressure to leave Afghanistan. But earlier this week, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown authorized an additional 500 troops to reinforce the roughly 9,000 British forces serving there.

The Obama administration is reviewing its Afghanistan strategy as violence against U.S., coalition and Afghan forces is at the highest levels of the war, which entered its ninth year earlier this month.

"McChrystal has already said that the status quo cannot be sustained," the U.S. military official pointed out, referring to a separate assessment written by the U.S. commander that described the situation in Afghanistan as "dire." It was delivered to Obama last month.

In that assessment, McChrystal argued for more resources.

"Our campaign in Afghanistan has been historically under-resourced and remains so today. Almost every aspect of our collective effort and associated resourcing has lagged behind a growing insurgency," he wrote. "Resources will not win this war, but under-resourcing could lose it."

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