

**Obama meets war cabinet on Afghanistan**  
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President Barack Obama has been huddling with his war cabinet for what officials indicated could be the final time before he decides whether to dispatch tens of thousands more US troops to Afghanistan.

Top officials at the meeting, the ninth gathering of Obama's national security team to review Afghan strategy since August, included Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

An administration official said Monday could "possibly" be the last time Obama will consult his team before making an announcement, though he cautioned "that's not something we can say definitively."

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs told reporters there would be no announcement before the weekend, but said Obama could reach a decision on the biggest strategic move of his young administration sooner.

"It may be tonight, it may be over the course of the next several days," Gibbs said.

Attending Monday's war meeting via videoconference were two men very much at odds over the decision: General Stanley McChrystal, commander of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, and Karl Eikenberry, US ambassador in Kabul.

McChrystal has asked for around 40,000 more US troops, cautioning that the intensifying Taliban insurgency could win out if he does not get the reinforcements within a year. Currently, there are 68,000 US troops in Afghanistan.

**Rampant corruption**

In leaked cables earlier this month, Eikenberry, a retired army general who commanded US forces in Afghanistan from 2005 to 2007, warned against sending more troops until Afghan President Hamid Karzai gets a grip on the rampant corruption in his administration.

While Karzai has earned the opprobrium of the international community since a fraud-tainted election in August highlighted the massive levels of official graft in Afghanistan, his inauguration speech Thursday generally won praise.

He pledged to clean up corruption, eradicate drug production and trafficking, work towards ending a Taliban-led insurgency, and see that Afghan security forces can take over from international forces in five years.

Clinton, attending the inauguration, sought to turn the page and hailed the speech as a "new starting point" for the war-torn country.

But some of America's allies in the war, now in its ninth year, are no longer willing to wait for the tide to turn: Canada and the Netherlands have announced plans to pull their troops out in 2010 and 2011 respectively.

Gates in a speech in Canada Friday said US forces could provide a "sustainable" replacement in the south for the departing Dutch and Canadian troops.

But he called on other allies to step forward, saying the Afghan effort will "require more commitment, more sacrifice, and more patience from the community of free nations."

Obama also faces opposition to the dispatch of more troops from members of his own Democratic Party who question the wisdom of deploying additional soldiers.

Polls show the American public is becoming increasingly disillusioned with the war, and some fear a deepening military commitment could sidetrack his presidency, as Vietnam did Lyndon Johnson's in the 1960s.

But the military strongly favors a so-called surge, and Obama risks being denounced by Republican critics as weak on national security if he refuses McChrystal's request.

More than 800 US soldiers have lost their lives in Afghanistan and the number of casualties is rising. October was the deadliest month for US forces there since 2001 and another four US fatalities were reported Monday.

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