

Afghanistan strategy must change, US commander McChrystal says

Top American commander announces completion of long-awaited review that may prefigure request for more troops

By [Mark Tran](#)

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The west must change its strategy in order to prevail in Afghanistan, the top US commander in the country said today as he handed over to US and Nato commanders a sweeping review of operations that may lead to a demand for more troops.

“The situation in Afghanistan is serious, but success is achievable and demands a revised implementation strategy, commitment and resolve, and increased unity of effort,” General Stanley McChrystal said. His findings will be submitted to President Barack Obama, who faces a public increasingly restive over a war that has lasted eight years.

McChrystal does not ask for more US troops to be sent to Afghanistan, but his grave reflections on the failure of strategy may well herald a request in a separate briefing to Obama expected later this autumn.

The deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan was graphically illustrated during the recent elections, over which numerous complaints have been filed. Results are still being compiled, but a tally released today based on 48% of polling stations gave the incumbent president Hamid Karzai 45.8% of the vote to 33.2% for his nearest challenger Abdullah Abdullah. Karzai needs 50% to avoid a second round run-off.

McChrystal has been working on the review since Obama put him in charge of the war in June after firing his predecessor, David McKiernan. The document has been sent to the US military’s central command (CentCom), responsible for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to Nato headquarters in Brussels.

The review is expected to confirm that protecting the Afghan people against the Taliban must be the top priority. The document has not been published yet, and the severity of McChrystal’s assessment was difficult to gauge. But at an event last week, according to the BBC, he likened the US military to a bull charging at the matador-like Taliban and slightly weakened with each “cut” it receives.

US officials have spoken openly about the failing war effort in Afghanistan and McChrystal’s report will be a distillation of their strong misgivings. He says the aim should be for Afghan forces to take the lead, but that the Afghan army will not be ready for three years and the police will need longer.

Although the report does not mention increasing troop numbers, the implication is that more

soldiers will be needed to turn around an unsuccessful strategy. Officers in Afghanistan consider much of the effort of the last eight years wasted, with too few troops deployed and many of them placed in the wrong regions and given the wrong orders.

Any recommendation of a troop increase would come against a background of growing scepticism about the war, with the latest Washington Post-ABC news poll showing that only 49% of Americans now think the fight in Afghanistan is worthwhile.

“Over the next 12 to 15 months among the things you absolutely, positively have to do is persuade a sceptical American public that this can work, that you have a plan and a strategy that is feasible,” Stephen Biddle, a military expert who advises the US-led command in Afghanistan, told the McClatchy-Tribune news service.

Another leading counter-insurgency expert said Afghanistan’s government must fight corruption and deliver services to Afghans quickly, because Taliban militants were filling gaps and winning support. The Taliban were already running courts, hospitals and even an ombudsman in parallel to the government, making a real difference to local people, said David Kilcullen, a senior adviser to McChrystal.

“A government that is losing to a counter-insurgency isn’t being outfought, it is being out-governed. And that’s what’s happening in Afghanistan,” Kilcullen told Australia’s National Press Club.

Obama has already sent nearly 20,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, raising the total of US troops to about 68,000 by the end of the year. In all, Nato has committed about 100,000 troops to the war effort. McChrystal is widely expected to ask for even more forces, as he tries to implement the kind of counter-insurgency strategy that prevented Iraq from descending into all-out civil war two years ago.

While Obama has to wrestle with Afghanistan, there is also renewed concern about Iraq, where suicide bombers have stepped up attacks that have killed hundreds of Iraqis as political tension mounts ahead of January’s elections.

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