

The New York Times

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PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
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Pressure Builds Over Obama's Afghanistan Plan

By [ERIC SCHMITT](#) and [HELENE COOPER](#)

WASHINGTON — As [President Obama](#) nears a decision on a troop increase for the war in Afghanistan, he is facing increasingly vocal criticism from senior Congressional Democrats over the war's cost, the size of the United States troop commitment and the reliability of America's allies.

Mr. Obama met with his war council for two hours on Monday night — his ninth such session and, aides said, perhaps the final meeting before Mr. Obama announces his decision, which is expected next week. Administration officials are already working on the big, and potentially contentious, rollout of Mr. Obama's Afghanistan strategy.

Aides on the Senate and House committees dealing with military and foreign affairs were tentatively preparing for hearings next week. The aides and administration officials said witnesses might include Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) and Adm. [Mike Mullen](#), chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#).

Gen. [Stanley A. McChrystal](#), the top military commander in Afghanistan, and [Karl W. Eikenberry](#), the United States ambassador to Afghanistan, are also expected to testify soon after Mr. Obama's announcement.

White House officials are bracing for opposition in Mr. Obama's own party. "On the merits, I think it is a mistake to deepen our involvement," Representative [David R. Obey](#), a Wisconsin Democrat who heads the House Appropriations Committee, told ABC News on Monday. "But if we are going to do that, then at least we ought to pay for it. Because if we don't, if we don't pay for it, the cost of the Afghan war will wipe out every initiative we have to rebuild our own economy."

Mr. Obey and other senior House Democrats [introduced legislation](#) last week to impose a surtax beginning in 2011 to cover the costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. While the legislation has little chance of enactment, it underscores the frustration among Democratic lawmakers and the pressure Mr. Obama is under to outline a clear exit strategy when he announces his plan for Afghanistan.

Administration officials said that even if an exit strategy was not an explicit part of Mr. Obama's announcement, it would be implicit. "One of the things which we want to convey is that we're not in the business of staying there forever," an administration official said. A second senior administration official said that Mr. Obama had "pretty much" made up his mind, but that details remained to be worked out.

Several people briefed on administration deliberations said that the president's advisers had been testing the reaction to an increase of 20,000 to 30,000 troops.

American commanders in Afghanistan said they were anxious to learn whether Mr. Obama would approve [40,000 additional troops, as requested by General McChrystal](#), or something less.

"We will welcome any increase," one senior American officer in Afghanistan said Monday by e-mail. The officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the White House review had not concluded, said a troop increase was "desperately needed to dominate in critical areas."

"Without it, we will execute the same strategy, focused on the same areas — Kandahar City, central Helmand, and freedom of movement for Afghans on Ring Route — but risk is greater," he said.

Mr. Obama has not yet personally conveyed his decision to his major allies in the war, including Prime Minister [Gordon Brown](#) of Britain, Prime Minister [Angela Merkel](#) of Germany and President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France, officials said. "I think at the point that the phone calls are made, we'll know it's a done deal," a European official said Monday.

But administration officials have been trying to consult their foreign counterparts. [Richard C. Holbrooke](#), Mr. Obama's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, recently went to Russia to discuss Afghanistan. He has also met with representatives from the [NATO](#) countries involved in Afghanistan. He told reporters on Monday, "With the elections now behind us, we're going to be intensifying our effort on coordination."

A NATO spokesman, James Appathurai, said NATO officials would meet Dec. 7 to discuss the troop strategy, Reuters reported.

In addition to ensuring his NATO allies are on board, Mr. Obama must sell his plan on Capitol Hill. On Friday the House speaker, [Nancy Pelosi](#), [challenged any American strategy that relied on](#) the ineffectual and corrupt government of President [Hamid Karzai](#) of Afghanistan.

"How can we ask the American people to pay a big price in lives and limbs, and also in dollars, if we don't have a connection to a reliable partner?" she said on [National Public Radio](#).

Senator [Carl Levin](#), a Michigan Democrat, who heads the Armed Services Committee, said that to win over Congress and the American public, Mr. Obama needed to lay out how Afghans would eventually assume more of their own security, how the Afghan government would aggressively tackle corruption and improve services, and how [Taliban](#) fighters willing to stop fighting the government could be reintegrated into Afghan society. "This is a package," he told C-Span on Sunday.

In any vote on Capitol Hill, Mr. Obama will probably be put in the uncomfortable position of relying on Republicans.

"I had hoped — and I still hope — that the president's going to make the right decision here, which is to keep the pressure on," Senator [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky, the Senate Republican leader, told CNN on Sunday. "The military people are getting a little frustrated with the delay in making the decision. It's really time for the president to make the call."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: Nov. 24, 2009

This article misstated the title of Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany.

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