

## Consensus on Afghan strategy eludes Obama

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*Supporters of a ramped-up US war effort in Afghanistan on Wednesday expressed confidence that Barack Obama would send more troops, a day after the US president met congressional leaders as he attempts to thrash out strategy.*

Some of the most prominent backers of a bigger US force emerged from Tuesday's meeting claiming Mr Obama would eventually dispatch 30,000-40,000 more troops, the option being pushed by General Stanley McChrystal, US and Nato commander in the field.

"The president's going to have to listen to Gen McChrystal. He's his man. He's his pick," said Ike Skelton, the Democratic chairman of the House armed services committee, one of the more than 30 lawmakers at the meeting. "I can think of no incident where holding back forces and reducing forces . . . led to victory."

But other attendees noted that Mr Obama, who on Wednesday convoked his top officials to discuss policy on Pakistan, is still playing his cards close to his chest and that many Democratic sceptics on Capitol Hill have yet to be convinced.

In a further indication of the difficulties of the debate, a poll released by Quinnipiac University on Wednesday – the eighth anniversary of the start of the US war in Afghanistan – said that 52 per cent of Americans saw the war as the right thing to do, compared with 37 per cent who disagreed.

But only 38 per cent thought more troops should be sent, compared with 28 per cent who thought the number should be decreased and 21 per cent who believed US forces should keep their current level of 68,000.

This week the White House has stressed that the US neither has "the option to leave" Afghanistan nor is contemplating a rapid drawdown in forces – but neither scenario has seriously been discussed within the administration. Instead, the debate has pitted Joe Biden, the vice-president who favours emphasis on "counterterrorist" strikes against al-Qaeda targets, against Gen McChrystal's supporters, who back a broader "counterinsurgency" approach to win the hearts and minds of ordinary Afghans, largely by defending them from the Taliban.

After attending the White House meeting, John McCain, the president's rival in last year's election, warned Mr Obama against taking "half measures". But on Wednesday the senator's spokeswoman said Mr McCain believed that "at the end of the day the president will make the right decision and commit the additional resources that are required".

Lindsey Graham, the Republican senator from South Carolina, also expressed support for Mr Obama's deliberative approach to the issue, while Harry Reid, Senate majority leader, suggested that Congress would support whatever decision the president finally took.

But some prominent Democrats have yet to be won over. These include Nancy Pelosi, House speaker, who refrained from the kind of assurances Mr Reid offered, John Kerry, chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, who says he has not yet made up his mind, and Carl Levin, who chairs the Senate armed services committee, who has called on the US to train more Afghan forces rather than send more troops.

**Financial Times, London, Oct. 7<sup>th</sup> 2009, World, online.**