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Obama Meeting Advisers Amid Debate on Afghan Policy By PETER BAKER and JEFF ZELENY

WASHINGTON — Eight years to the day after the start of the war in Afghanistan, the White House and Congress were agonizing on Wednesday about what to do next in that isolated, mountainous country that has been called “the graveyard of empires.”

A day after telling Congressional leaders that he would not substantially reduce American forces in Afghanistan or shift the mission to just hunting terrorists there, President Obama was scheduled to confer with his national security team Wednesday afternoon on Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The afternoon session at the White House was one of several official gatherings in the capital at which American troop levels in Afghanistan were sure to be discussed. So far, President Obama appears to be undecided about how to respond to the proposal by his commanding general for a major troop buildup.

Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates met with Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. on Wednesday morning at the vice president’s residence at the Naval Observatory in Washington. Then Mr. Gates went to the White House, where he conferred with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Gen. James L. Jones, the president’s national security adviser.

On Capitol Hill, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is scheduled to hear from a panel of experts on Wednesday afternoon on the threat from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and beyond.

There have also been scattered antiwar protests in Washington timed for the anniversary, although none as large or emotional as those of the Vietnam era.

For the moment, President Obama seemed to be searching for some sort of middle ground, saying he wanted to “dispense with the straw man argument that this is about either doubling down or leaving Afghanistan,” as White House officials described his remarks on Tuesday during a meeting with leaders from both parties.

The meeting on Tuesday and the series of Afghanistan-related events on Wednesday underscored the perilous crosscurrents awaiting Mr. Obama. While some Democrats said on Tuesday that they would support whatever he decided to do, others challenged him about sending more troops. And Republicans pressed him to order the escalation without delay, leading to a pointed exchange between the president and Senator John McCain[?] of Arizona, his Republican opponent from last year’s election.

Mr. McCain[?] told the president that “time is not on our side.” He added, “This should not be a leisurely process,” according to several people in the room.

A few minutes later, Mr. Obama replied, “John, I can assure you this won’t be leisurely,” according to several attendees. “No one feels more urgency to get this right than I do.”

Still, compared with the harsh debate over health care, the tone was civil and restrained during the 75-minute meeting in the State Dining Room as Mr. Obama, Vice President Biden and about 30 members of Congress gathered around a large table with only glasses of water and notebooks in front of them.

Mr. Obama had summoned the lawmakers to assure them that he would keep their concerns in mind as he considered the request of his commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal[?], for as many as 40,000 more troops. Several administration officials and lawmakers who attended the session on Tuesday said Mr. Obama was intent on using it to dismiss any impression that he would consider pulling out of Afghanistan. "There is no option that would entail a dramatic reduction in troops," said one administration official, who, like others quoted in this article, requested anonymity to discuss the closed-door meeting.

Mr. Obama and Mr. Biden made it clear that the option Mr. Biden had proposed was not a pure counterterrorism alternative, relying only on drones and Special Forces to track down leaders of Al Qaeda. Instead, Mr. Biden's approach would increase the use of such surgical strikes while leaving the overall size of the American force in Afghanistan roughly at the 68,000 troops currently authorized.

And in the final moments of the meeting, Mr. Obama sought to put to rest suspicions of friction with General McChrystal[?]. "I'm the one who hired him," Mr. Obama said, according to participants. "I put him there to give me a frank assessment."

A joint appearance afterward on the White House driveway by the two top Democratic Congressional leaders demonstrated Mr. Obama's political challenge. "The one thing that I thought was interesting was that everyone, Democrats and Republicans, said whatever decision you make, we'll support it basically," said Senator Harry Reid, the majority leader.

But Representative Nancy Pelosi, the House speaker, smiled and raised her eyebrows in apparent disagreement. "Whether we agreed with it or voted for it remains to be seen when we see what the president puts forth," she said. "But I think there was a real display of universal respect for the manner in which he was approaching it."

At least three Democrats — Ms. Pelosi; Senator Carl Levin, the Armed Services Committee chairman; and Representative David R. Obey, the Appropriations Committee chairman — voiced reservations during the meeting about increasing troops, according to those in attendance.

"There were a number of people who spoke out with a lot of caution about getting in deeper and what the endpoint is," Mr. Levin said in an interview. Mr. Levin, who promoted accelerated training of Afghan forces, then met alone with Mr. Obama to expand on his views.

Others shared their skepticism in interviews. "Clearly, there is hesitancy about the prospect of sending 40,000 more troops," said Representative Nita M. Lowey, Democrat of New York.

Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said after the meeting that "it would be irresponsible" to send more troops until it became clear "what is possible in Afghanistan."

Some Democrats were more supportive of General McChrystal[?]'s request, including Senator Dianne Feinstein, head of the intelligence committee, and Representative Ike Skelton, head of the Armed Services Committee.

"I said the real war in Afghanistan did not start until March, when the president made the speech on strategy," Mr. Skelton said in an interview, referring to the strategy Mr. Obama put in place shortly after taking office. "There was no strategy before that," he said, and so the president ought to give General McChrystal[?] what he needs to execute it.

Republicans pressed even harder. After the meeting, Mr. McCain[?] warned against any middle ground. “Half measures is what I worry about,” he said. Citing the Bush administration’s experience in Iraq, he added that half measures “lead to failure over time and an erosion of American public support.”

Mr. Obama separately pointed to American successes against Al Qaeda in a series of recent missile strikes and Special Forces raids. During a visit to the National Counterterrorism Center just outside Washington on Tuesday, he said Al Qaeda had “lost operational capacity” but he vowed to continue pressing the battle to cripple the network around the world.

White House officials said the president’s visit was not related to the Afghanistan review. But the public focus on efforts to eliminate Al Qaeda’s top hierarchy through surgical strikes could provide political cover for Mr. Obama should he reject the most expansive request for 40,000 more troops. (The American campaign in Afghanistan began on Oct. 7, 2001, with raids by United States and British planes against suspected sanctuaries of the Taliban and of Osama bin Laden’s followers.)

Gen. David H. Petraeus, who oversees operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, told a military conference on Tuesday that the president’s strategy review was progressing toward a decision. “It is moving quite rapidly,” he told the Association of the United States Army. “There is a recognition of the need to move through this.”

The general said the effort in Afghanistan required “a sustained, substantial commitment,” but he declined to say if that meant more troops.

-- [BruceKorb](#) - 07 Oct 2009

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