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Pressure grows on Obama to rethink Afghan war policy

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As he mulls how many U.S. troops to pull out of Afghanistan starting next month, President Barack Obama is coming under increasing pressure from Democratic lawmakers and a growing number of Republicans to re-examine his war strategy following Osama bin Laden's death.

Obama's nominee to be the new U.S. ambassador to Kabul, veteran diplomat Ryan Crocker, felt the heat on Wednesday. Senate Foreign Relations Committee members of both parties used Crocker's confirmation hearing to vent frustration with record violence in Afghanistan nearly a decade after the U.S. invasion, and to question the size of the U.S. military contingent and what nearly \$19 billion in U.S. aid since 2001 has accomplished.

Before the hearing, the panel's majority Democrats released a two-year study highly critical of U.S. aid programs. It found that the \$320 million now spent each month lacks oversight, has limited impact, is fueling corruption and diverting skilled Afghans into U.S.-funded projects, depriving their government of their talents.

"While the United States has genuine national security interests in Afghanistan, our current commitment in troops and in dollars is neither proportional to our interest nor sustainable," said

the committee chairman, Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass, who until recently was a key backer of the administration's policy.

"What we're doing . . . is not sustainable," agreed Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn.

Yet Obama is trapped between the unrelenting bloodshed in Afghanistan — and an allied insurgency destabilizing nuclear-armed Pakistan — and domestic demands that he bring U.S. troops home, reduce unemployment and close the budget deficit, issues critical to his 2012 re-election prospects. With polls showing most Americans opposing the war, some Obama aides are advocating a major troop drawdown.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates and U.S. military commanders fear that a precipitous U.S. drawdown will spur greater violence and encourage leaders of the Taliban and allied groups to spurn peace talks being sought by the U.S., the NATO allies and Karzai.

Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told McClatchy in an interview that the military will craft several drawdown options based on recommendations from Army Gen. David Petraeus, the top commander of U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan.

"Gen. Petraeus has made no specific submission to this point, and we all wait for him to do that. And that will really trigger the process of review," Mullen said during a trip to the Middle East and Europe. "My expectation is that there will be several options and the risks associated with the options."

Crocker, a former U.S. envoy to Iraq whom Obama pulled out of retirement, acknowledged enduring problems of bad governance, corruption that "undermines the credibility of the Afghan state," narcotics trafficking and a dearth of basic services.

But he insisted that there has been progress, and he warned that walking away from Afghanistan, as the U.S. did after the 1979-89 Soviet occupation, could bring "disastrous consequences," a reference to the Sept. 11 attacks that al Qaida organized from its sanctuary there.

"Making progress on these issues has been hard and it will go on being hard, but hard does not mean impossible," Crocker said.

The hearing came as Obama weighs how many of the 100,000 U.S. troops to withdraw from Afghanistan beginning next month. He set the deadline in a Dec. 1, 2009, speech laying out a strategy to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" al Qaida and prevent a Taliban takeover that would allow the terrorist network to return to Afghanistan.

The strategy deployed an additional 30,000 U.S. soldiers, mostly in the Taliban's southern strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand provinces, and stepped up training to create 300,000-strong Afghan security forces.

It also increased U.S. aid to improve governance and spur employment and services to boost backing for President Hamid Karzai's government.

Nearly 18 months later, bin Laden is dead, killed in a May 2 U.S. raid on his hideout in Pakistan.

The beginning of the U.S. drawdown coincides with the transfer of security responsibilities for seven provinces and districts to Afghan forces, a process scheduled to culminate in 2014 with a total withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO troops.

A Washington Post-ABC News poll released Tuesday found that 73 percent of Americans favor a "substantial" withdrawal of U.S. forces beginning next month.

Many Republicans, including Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the top GOP member of the Armed Services Committee, back Gates and his commanders. He said no more than 3,000 soldiers should leave this year.

"I hope the administration listens to Secretary Gates," McCain told McClatchy. "He sees a careful drawdown and said it would be 'premature' to change course."

Asked about a call for a withdrawal of 15,000 soldiers by Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich, the committee's chairman, McCain replied: "If you want to lose, you do that."

Republicans on the foreign affairs committee, however, openly questioned the administration's approach.

"Undoubtedly we will make some progress when spending more than \$100 billion per year in that country," said Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, the panel's top Republican. "The more important question is whether we have an efficient strategy for protecting our vital interests that does not involve massive, open-ended expenditures and does not require us to have more faith than is justified in Afghan institutions."

Voicing concerns that many U.S. officials express privately, Kerry pointed out that U.S. policy has failed to deal with the sanctuaries enjoyed by the Taliban, al Qaida and allied militants in Pakistan's tribal area bordering Afghanistan.

"We're spending \$120 billion (a year) in a country where there is no safe haven (Afghanistan) and about \$2.8 billion in a country (Pakistan) where there is a safe haven," he said.

The two-year study of U.S. aid found that assistance was geared mostly toward projects with short-term results, such as paying Afghans in areas previously controlled by insurgents to repair irrigation canals or repair roads in order to win popular support and encourage locals to share intelligence with U.S. forces.

But the funds aren't producing long-term employment or development and have created a "war economy" that could collapse in a "severe economic depression" after foreign forces leave, it warned.

Moreover, there's limited evidence that U.S. aid has produced stability, while "insecurity, abject poverty, weak indigenous capacity, and widespread corruption create challenges for spending money," the study said.

The Obama administration rejected the study's findings, saying that Afghanistan has made "significant progress."

"The assistance that we provide is aimed at improving the chances that Afghanistan can sustain itself as we begin to draw down our forces and transition the lead to Afghan security," White House spokesman Jay Carney said.