

U.S. Redraws Afghan Command

Coalition Prepares to Establish New Military Headquarters in South Before Major Surge Offensive

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. and its allies are working to create a new American-led military command in southern Afghanistan, setting the stage for a large-scale offensive into the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar.

Senior military officials say the new command will manage all military operations in Helmand province, including the continuing campaign in Marjah. The plan would allow the existing British-led command in southern Afghanistan to focus on the Kandahar campaign.

Many of the 30,000 U.S. reinforcements being deployed to Afghanistan will take part in the assault on Kandahar, the most populous city in southern Afghanistan and the Taliban's spiritual birthplace.

U.S. and British commanders plan to deploy the additional troops to build a security cordon around the city to make it harder for Taliban fighters to intimidate local residents or assassinate Afghan government officials and security personnel there.

As with Marjah, senior U.S. personnel are publicly telegraphing the Kandahar campaign, which will likely start this summer. A senior White House official said last week that the Marjah campaign—the coalition's largest offensive since 2001—was a "tactical prelude" to a substantially bigger assault on Kandahar.

"Bringing security, comprehensive population security, to Kandahar city is really the centerpiece of operations this year," the official said.

All military operations in both Helmand and neighboring Kandahar province are currently managed by Regional Command South, which has its headquarters at the sprawling Kandahar Air Field and is currently led by a British general. Under the new plan that organization will be renamed Regional Command Southeast and directed to focus exclusively on the upcoming Kandahar campaign.

At the same time, the U.S. will build a new command, Regional Command Southwest, at Camp Bastion, a rapidly expanding American base near Lashkar Gah, Helmand's capital. The command will be headed by a two-star Marine general, who hasn't yet been tapped for the post.

"This is the answer to how we'll array our troops and reorient the commands to meet the mission on the ground," said a senior military official familiar with the plan. "It's basically a done deal."

The new command would work closely with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who senior U.S. officials are trying to turn into more of a wartime leader. Mr. Karzai was briefed repeatedly on the plans for the Marjah offensive and asked to give it his formal approval, in part so the Afghan government would feel ownership of the campaign there. Mr. Karzai is likely to have a similar role in the run-up to the Kandahar campaign.

The idea for the changes in the command structure originated with Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the top Western military officer in Afghanistan.

Rear Adm. Greg Smith, a spokesman for Gen. McChrystal, said the commander's strategic review of the war effort last summer concluded that the main military offensives going forward would all be in southern Afghanistan and "that the number of forces would exceed the command and control capacity of a single regional commander."

Adm. Smith said he expected a final decision on the command changes within the next month.

Regional Command South is led by British Maj. Gen. Nick Carter, the architect of the Marjah offensive. With a new command established, Gen. Carter would shift his focus to Kandahar, leaving the incoming U.S. general to oversee operations in Helmand.

Gen. Carter is set to relinquish his command to a U.S. army general late next year as part of a standard rotation of authority, putting American officers at the helm of military headquarters in eastern and southern Afghanistan, the war's main battlegrounds.

The Taliban's fugitive leader, Mullah Omar, was born in Kandahar and governed Afghanistan from the city during the years the Taliban ruled the country.

The Taliban have mounted several unsuccessful attempts to conquer Kandahar militarily.

In 2006, Canadian forces blunted a major Taliban offensive into the city, with heavy casualties on both sides. Two years later, the Afghan army rushed 1,000 soldiers into Kandahar to rebuff a similar Taliban advance.

But the Taliban have made deep inroads into the city. They run shadow courts, tax local businesses and have stepped up a campaign to intimidate or kill Afghan government and security officials, as well as citizens who don't abide by their decrees.

The Afghan central government has little sway in Kandahar, a city of over 800,000 people, and many residents say they have been effectively abandoned by Kabul.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization officials say the Taliban have been able to take advantage of the paucity of foreign troops in and around Kandahar. Kandahar Air Field is one of the largest NATO facilities in Afghanistan, but most of the Western troops who live there stay within the confines of the base.

Until recently, there were 2,000 Canadian and American troops patrolling Kandahar province, a small fraction of the troops deployed to Helmand and other regional hotspots.

Those numbers will increase substantially in coming months. The U.S. will send at least one new brigade from the Army's 101st Airborne Division to Kandahar later this spring, which will push Western troop levels up by at least 4,000.

A senior military official said another incoming brigade may also be sent to Kandahar this year, and other troops will be redeployed from within Afghanistan for the offensive. "There won't be a shortage of manpower, and that's a huge change from every earlier attempt to secure the city," the officer said. "Kandahar had always been the definition of an 'economy of force' mission, and the Taliban exploited that to the hilt."

Gen. McChrystal and other top U.S. officials hope the upcoming offensive will bring the city back under Afghan government control.

"If our overall goal for 2010 is to reverse the momentum and gain time and space for the Afghan capacity, we have to get to Kandahar this year," a senior administration official said.

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