

## America turns its attention to the 'other' war

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With the U.S. presence in Iraq about to wind down, Americans are already turning their attention to the "other" war - the one in Afghanistan, the one the United States cannot countenance losing because of the alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Look for some dramatic shifts in U.S. policy there over the next 15 months.

The first changes were announced last week by U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates. He plans to reorganize the command structures of both NATO and U.S. forces in Afghanistan and has pledged to raise \$20-billion from NATO and the U.S. to double the size of the Afghan National Army to 120,000 troops by 2013.

The current command structure has been called a "spaghetti sandwich" by one retired U.S. officer. It bifurcates the anti-Taliban coalition into two distinct forces. One is the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom, located almost entirely along the Afghan-Pakistani border. It is under the jurisdiction of the U.S.'s Central Command (Centcom) in Tampa.

The other is the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, with contingents large and small from some 26 countries. By the end of this month, all the U.S. forces in Afghanistan - currently split between the two commands - will come under the ISAF commander, U.S. General David McKiernan. He will be placed shortly under the new Centcom commander, General David Petraeus, the combat veteran-PhD who recently commanded U.S. troops in Iraq, where he shifted U.S. strategy. He is largely credited with the vastly improved security situation.

Mr. Gates has also announced the U.S. will bolster its forces in Afghanistan by at least two brigades (about 10,000 troops) in the next 15 months.

There are seven regional commands in Afghanistan. (The Canadians operate in Regional Command South.) Each contains national contingents trained, equipped and led to different standards. Many of these contingents operate under national caveats, or restrictions, which limit their use. There is thus a patchwork of capabilities. In addition, command of some of the regions is regularly rotated among the largest of the regional contributors. Each change in regional command can bring a new style and sometimes a new command philosophy, which are often drawbacks.

Mr. Gates's mini-surge will raise the total of U.S. troops to about 45,000, and Washington can be expected to seek, and probably get, greater control over the regional commands as well. From a military point of view, the change will be positive; greater unity of command and intent will give Gen. McKiernan and, ultimately, Gen. Petraeus, a far more united military force to wield.

From a political point of view, a stronger U.S. command presence might make the war a harder sell in Canada and other countries. War opponents will no doubt claim that Canadian and others will be Pentagon cannon fodder. But the reality is that the NATO effort in Afghanistan is already heavily dependent on the United States.

Changing the command structure and boosting U.S. troop strength will not be enough. Afghanistan is not Iraq and a "surge" in troop strength will not accomplish much without other initiatives. If the people's support is lost, Afghanistan will be lost.

A far larger development effort is in the works, focusing on roads and communications. Training of the Afghan National Police and the Afghan National Army will be stepped up and more and much better equipment will be supplied, including light armoured vehicles.

NATO's (and Washington's) ambiguous attitude to narcotics cultivation in Afghanistan is also about to end. There is simply no doubt any longer that the approximately \$800-million a year that flows into Taliban coffers from heroin and marijuana production must be stopped. The only way to do this is by aerial spraying.

The ultimate solution to the Afghanistan war must involve a Pakistani crackdown on al-Qaeda, a thorough cleansing of the government in Kabul, and meeting the Afghan people's expectations for rising living standards and less corruption. None of these conditions is likely to be in place very soon.

That is why the reform of NATO's military effort is still the best place to start - as long as it isn't the only place.