

U.S. plan threatens Canadian command

Proposal would see American general taking Canada's place in NATO's regional rotation in 2010

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WASHINGTON — Canada may lose its next and perhaps last chance to command NATO forces battling the Taliban in southern Afghanistan under a new plan that will insert an American general into the rotation, according to defence officials in Ottawa and Washington.

Several senior U.S. military officials have called for an end to the revolving-door rotations of allied commanders serving relatively short nine-month rotations before handing over to a general from another country, usually with a different approach to waging a counterinsurgency.

The compromise under consideration is designed to placate allies who fear the Americans wanted to install a U.S. general permanently as the head of Regional Command South, which includes the embattled provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. The rotation will be lengthened to a full year.

An American general will also be added into the rotation that until now had involved only Canadian, British and Dutch, the three major troop contributing countries fighting in southern Afghanistan.



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From left, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, outgoing ISAF commander U.S. General Dan McNeill, German General Egon Ramms and incoming ISAF commander U.S. General David McKiernan, take part in change-of-command ceremony Tuesday at NATO headquarters in Kabul. (*Musadeq Sadeq/AP*)

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Under the new proposal, a Dutch general will take command of RC South in November this year, followed by a British general in November of 2009 and a U.S. general in November of 2010.

"Canada will no longer be involved in the command rotation of RC South," Nancy Cook, a civilian spokeswoman for the Defence Department in Ottawa, said. "Canada will be out of Afghanistan in 2011."

Currently, Canadian Major-General Marc Lessard is about halfway through his nine-month stint as NATO's commander in southern Afghanistan. There is no plan to lengthen his tour.

Under the existing nine-month rotations, another Canadian general would have taken over command of southern Afghanistan in the spring of 2010.

It remains unclear whether the new plan has been accepted by the British and the Dutch and whether it needs NATO approval.

U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates has discussed the change in command rotations with his counterparts.

"There is no official change to announce," said Dan Dugas, a spokesman for Defence Minister Peter MacKay. "This has yet to be taken to NATO, as far as I know, and has only been discussed at ministerial level," he added in an e-mail response to questions.

Some senior U.S. officers, including General Dan McNeill, who has had overall command of the entire NATO operation in Afghanistan

for the past 15 months, have made it clear they believe that rotating regional commands among nations causes problems.

"Different nations bring in different cultures," and those differences, especially when it involves integrating Afghan forces in combined operations, have caused difficulties, Gen. McNeill said recently at the end of his tour. He said he hoped governments would consider "one country leading a multinational headquarters in the south."

Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said the generals are "certainly entitled to their opinions in this. But we work with allies in RC South and throughout the country. And we take their considerations into account."

The arrival of significant numbers of American ground troops in southern Afghanistan - already many special forces operate there under a separate U.S. command - underpins Washington's push to get a U.S. general into the command rotation in the south.

Some of the Americans are expected to fill Ottawa's demand for at least 1,000 more soldiers to reinforce the Canadian contingent in Kandahar.

A U.S. general already commands the eastern regional command in Afghanistan, reporting to a more senior U.S. general with overall command of NATO forces in the entire country.

Other regional commands, especially in the quieter areas of northern and western Afghanistan are held by German and Spanish generals.

Another Canadian general, one rank lower, a brigadier-general, is usually assigned national command of the Canadian contingent in Kandahar but that is separate from the NATO post.

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