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The Wall Street Journal

Taliban Now Winning

By Yochi J. Dreazen and Peter Spiegel

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U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Warns of Rising Casualties

The Taliban have gained the upper hand in Afghanistan, the top American commander there said, forcing the U.S. to change its strategy in the eight-year-old conflict by increasing the number of troops in heavily populated areas like the volatile southern city of Kandahar, the insurgency's spiritual home.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal warned that means U.S. casualties, already running at record levels, will remain high for months to come.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, the commander offered a preview of the strategic assessment he is to deliver to Washington later this month, saying the troop shifts are designed to better protect Afghan civilians from rising levels of Taliban violence and intimidation. The coming redeployments are the clearest manifestation to date of Gen. McChrystal's strategy for Afghanistan, which puts a premium on safeguarding the Afghan population rather than hunting down militants.

Gen. McChrystal said the Taliban are moving beyond their traditional strongholds in southern Afghanistan to threaten formerly stable areas in the north and west.

The militants are mounting sophisticated attacks that combine roadside bombs with ambushes by small teams of heavily armed militants, causing significant numbers of U.S. fatalities, he said. July was the bloodiest month of the war for American and British forces, and 12 more American troops have already been killed in August.

"It's a very aggressive enemy right now," Gen. McChrystal said in the interview Saturday at his office in a fortified NATO compound in Kabul. "We've got to stop their momentum, stop

their initiative. It's hard work."

In an effort to regain the upper hand, Gen. McChrystal said he will redeploy some troops currently in sparsely populated areas to areas with larger concentrations of Afghan civilians, while some of the 4,000 American troops still to arrive will be deployed to Kandahar.

The Obama administration is in the midst of an Afghan buildup that will push U.S. troop levels here to a record 68,000 by year end. There are roughly an additional 30,000 troops from North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries and other allies.

Gen. McChrystal's predecessor, Gen. David McKiernan, had a request outstanding for 10,000 more troops. Gen. McChrystal said he hadn't decided whether to request additional U.S. forces. "We're still working it," he said.

Outside experts are giving Gen. Stanley McChrystal an assessment of what the war in Afghanistan looks like on the ground, as WSJ's Peter Spiegel reports.

Several officials who have taken part in Gen. McChrystal's 60-day review of the war effort said they expect him to ultimately request as many as 10,000 more troops -- a request many observers say will be a tough sell at the White House, where several senior administration officials have said publicly that they want to hold off on sending more troops until the impact of the initial influx of 21,000 reinforcements can be gauged.

The U.S. war effort in Afghanistan is costing American taxpayers about \$4 billion a month.

Gen. McChrystal also said he would direct a "very significant" expansion of the Afghan army and national police -- which would double in size under the plans being finalized by senior U.S. military officers here -- and import a tactic first used in Iraq by moving U.S. troops onto small outposts in individual Afghan neighborhoods and villages.

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Associated Press U.S. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, center, meets Afghan citizens in Canada's "model village" of Deh-e Bagh, Afghanistan, in June.

One person briefed on the assessment said it will call for boosting the Afghan army to 240,000 from 135,000 and the Afghan police to 160,000 from 82,000.

One official noted the emerging plans to double the size of the Afghan army and police will require thousands of additional U.S. trainers. The U.S. will also need more troops if security conditions in north and west Afghanistan continue to deteriorate, the official said. "At the end of the day, it's all about the math," he said. "The demand and the supply don't line up, even with the new troops that are coming in."

In earlier phases of the assessment process, Gen. McChrystal's staff conducted a "troop-to-task" analysis that weighed increasing U.S. troop levels by two brigades -- each such unit has 3,500 to 5,000 troops -- or by as many as eight brigades, according to officials familiar with the matter. A middle option of four to six brigades was also considered, these people said.

The prospect of more troops rankles some of Gen. McChrystal's advisers, who worry the American military footprint in Afghanistan is already too large.

"How many people do you bring in before the Afghans say, 'You're acting like the Russians'?" said one senior military official, referring to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. "That's the big debate going on in the headquarters right now."

Afghan President Hamid Karzai has said publicly during his campaign for the approaching Aug. 20 elections that he wants to negotiate new agreements giving the Afghan government more control over the conduct of the foreign troops currently in the country.

Gen. McChrystal, however, says too many troops aren't a concern. "I think it's what you do, not how many you are. It's how the force conducts itself."

Regardless of how he resolves the internal debate on troop numbers, Gen. McChrystal's coming report won't include any specific requests for more U.S. troops. Those numbers would instead be detailed in a follow-on document that is set to be delivered to Washington a few weeks after the assessment.

The timing of Gen. McChrystal's primary assessment remains in flux. It was initially due in mid-August, but the commander was summoned to a secret meeting in Belgium last week with Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and told to take more time. Military officials say the assessment will now be released sometime after the Aug. 20 vote.

The shift came amid signs of growing U.S. unease about the direction of the war effort. Initial assessments delivered to Gen. McChrystal last month warned that the Taliban were strengthening their control over Kandahar, the largest city in southern Afghanistan.

American forces have been waging a major offensive in the neighboring southern province of Helmand, the center of Afghanistan's drug trade. Some U.S. military officials believe the Taliban have taken advantage of the American preoccupation with Helmand to infiltrate Kandahar and set up shadow local governments and courts throughout the city.

"Helmand is a sideshow," said the senior military official briefed on the analysis. "Kandahar is the capital of the south [and] that's why they want it."

Gen. McChrystal said in the interview that he planned to shift more U.S. troops to Kandahar to bolster the Canadian forces that currently have primary security responsibility for the region. Hundreds of American troops equipped with mobile armored vehicles known as Strykers are already in the province.

"It's important and so we're going to do whatever we got to do to ensure that Kandahar is secure," he said. "With the arrival of the new U.S. forces we'll have the ability to put some more combat power in the area."

Despite the mounting concern about the Taliban's infiltration of Kandahar, there are clear limits to how soon additional U.S. forces can be sent to the city.

Moving forces from neighboring Helmand is nearly impossible, because those troops have already set up forward bases and recruited help from local tribal leaders, who have been promised American backing. As a result, the additional American troop deployments to

Kandahar have only begun in recent days, with the arrival of new reinforcements that will continue into the fall.

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Gen. McChrystal defended the decision to focus first on Helmand. The current operation, one of the largest since the start of the war in 2001, was meant to disrupt the Taliban's lucrative drug operations there, he said.

The armed group reaps tens of millions of dollars annually from the sale of opium from Helmand, and the commander said he wants to have troops on the ground before local farmers start to plant their next batch of poppies in November. The U.S. is working to persuade Helmand's farmers to replace their poppy fields with wheat and fruit.

The roughly 4,000 Marines in Helmand have been charged with putting Gen. McChrystal's thinking about counterinsurgency into practice. They are trying to build local relationships by launching small development and reconstruction projects.

Gen. McChrystal said his new strategy had to show clear results within roughly 12 months to prevent public support for the war from evaporating in both the U.S. and Afghanistan.

"This is a period where people are really looking to see which way this is going to go," he said. "It's the critical and decisive moment."