

US to withdraw 70,000 troops from Afghanistan in next three years in favour of special forces

America would withdraw 70,000 troops from Afghanistan over the next three years and rely increasingly on special forces to lead operations in plans being discussed by the White House.



101st Airborne Division during a patrol in Siah Choy village in Kandahar province, southern of Afghanistan Photo: AFP



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Commandos would continue missions to kill or capture insurgents and to train [Afghan](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/>) forces while conventional troops begin leaving in July according to reports.

The plan is being debated as commanders are said to be proposing Barack Obama begin the withdrawal by pulling out up to 10,000 troops by the end of this year.

The commander of British forces in Afghanistan warned on Tuesday that the Taliban will exploit a power vacuum in Afghanistan after the 2014 security handover to local forces and that the West must not abandon the country.

“The Afghan people will not necessarily have the confidence to back their own government,” General James Bucknall told the Guardian. “And it is important that the regional players understand that the international community is going to be here for some time to come.

“December [2014] is not a campaign end date but a waypoint – a point at which the coalition security posture

changes from one that is in the lead to one that is mentoring and advising, but is still here.”

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America has 100,000 troops in Afghanistan and the killing of Osama bin Laden has rekindled debate on how many are needed now al Qaeda has been decapitated.

The US has become increasingly reliant on special forces troops in the 12 months, with Gen David Petraeus crediting raids against militant leaders with helping blunt Taliban momentum.

He has also used units to train Afghanistan's own special forces and help raise Afghan local police militia units.

Advocates of special forces teams have also been emboldened by the success of the US Navy SEALs operation against bin Laden.

Leon Panetta, the CIA director nominated to replace Robert Gates as defence secretary, is also said to favour use of special forces and unmanned drones rather than large numbers of troops waging a costly, counter insurgency campaign.

Under the outline plan, America would keep 20,000 to 30,000 troops on the ground by the end of 2014, when Nato has said it will hand over the combat lead to Kabul.

America's current 10,000-strong special operations forces deployment would remain steady as other troops left.

At present around 4,000 of them are used to kill and capture militants and 6,000 mentor Afghan commandos and raise village-based defence forces Military planners in Kabul have reportedly drawn up proposals for a withdrawal of

as many as 5,000 troops in July to meet Mr Obama's promised deadline to begin his pull out.

Up to 5,000 more would then leave by the end of the year according to the Wall Street Journal.

Nato troops from Britain, France, Italy and Germany could begin pulling out in addition.

The proposals have yet to be approved by the president or top officers, but would fit Mr Obama's comments last month that the start of the pull out would be more than "a token gesture".

The figures were also drawn up before the death of bin Laden, and could be revised.

A Nato military spokesman in Kabul said the report was "pure speculation".

Commanders want to keep as much combat power as possible this year as they brace for a renewed Taliban offensive.

The majority of troops sent home would be in support posts including engineering and logistics rather than fighting troops, officials predicted.

Opponents of maintaining a large counter insurgency force while the US economy continues to struggle have been buoyed by the death of bin Laden.

Malou Innocent, a foreign-policy analyst at the Washington-based Cato Institute, said: "With Osama bin Laden's death, the ostensible objective for the war in Afghanistan has been achieved.

"In terms of perceptions, bin Laden's death shows why when it comes to capturing and killing terrorists, targeted counterterrorism measures are often more effective than expansive counter-insurgency campaigns." However many Afghans fear Nato troops are the only think keeping the country from civil war, even as they grow weary of what they see as a bungled intervention.

A premature or hasty withdrawal would lead to "chaos" predicted Abdullah Abdullah, former presidential candidate.

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