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## U.S. TO ELEVATE SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES' ROLE IN AFGHANISTAN

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Washington Post, February 06, 2012 The U.S. military is planning to elevate the role of Special Operations forces in Afghanistan as it shifts away from a combat focus to a mission that places greater emphasis on advising Afghan forces and raids to kill top insurgent leaders, senior U.S. officials said. Initial steps in that direction are likely to take place in the next few months, when the Pentagon is expected to create a new two-star command that would oversee the entire Special Operations effort in Afghanistan. The new command would be led by Maj. Gen. Tony Thomas, the deputy commander of the military's Joint Special Operations Command, which oversees the military's elite counterterrorism forces around the world. The new Special Operations command in Afghanistan could eventually take over responsibility for the day-to-day war effort as U.S. troop levels drop in the country and as the United States moves away from its traditional combat role to an effort focused primarily on training and advising Afghan forces. The plan, which is still being considered, would mark a major change in the war effort, built around big American conventional units working alongside Afghan army and police forces to clear areas of insurgents and reestablish Afghan governance. In many aspects, it resembles a plan advocated by Vice President Biden in 2009 to focus U.S. efforts on training Afghan forces and killing high-level insurgent leaders. Bidens proposal was largely rejected because U.S. military commanders said they needed additional conventional troops to push the Taliban out of major population centers and reverse its momentum. Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta referred in broad terms to some of the changes last week when he said that the United States hopes to end its combat mission in Afghanistan by the middle of next year, more than a year earlier than scheduled. Although Thomas is expected to go to Afghanistan as early as this summer to lead the new Special Operations command, senior U.S. officials cautioned that there has not been a final decision to send him. The next step in the plan, which involves consolidating all NATO military daily operations of the war under a command led by a Special Operations officer, is still the subject of broad debate in the Pentagon and White House, U.S. officials said. [ ] are talking about a stair-step approach, and we haven't even taken the first step in the process, a said a U.S. official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the administration's planning. The move to shift more of the war effort in Afghanistan to Special Operations units was first reported online Saturday by the New York Times. There is still broad debate within the military and the White House over how quickly the United States can shift away from its combat mission and turn over primary responsibility for security to Afghan forces that are still weak. Although Panetta said the United States hopes to end its combat mission in Afghanistan by mid-2013, in some parts of eastern Afghanistan, conventional U.S. units could still be involved in heavy combat through 2014 and even into 2015, according to senior military officials in Washington and Kabul. In those areas, mountainous terrain and insurgent havens across the border in Pakistan have made it difficult for U.S. and Afghan units to push Taliban fighters out of remote valleys and hold on to gains once the enemy fighters are dislodged. The Obama administration has said it will bring home about 22,000 troops by September, cutting the

overall size of the American force to 68,000. There will be heavy pressure on military commanders to continue the troop reductions into 2013. Currently, the Afghan forces partner with similarly sized U.S. units in areas where the fighting is heaviest. U.S. forces patrol regularly alongside Afghan units and take a leading role when insurgents launch attacks. As American troop levels drop, U.S. commanders will by necessity have to rely more heavily on Afghan units to operate with minimal support from big, conventional Army and Marine units. Senior military officials said they will begin pairing up small, U.S.-led advisory teams with the more capable Afghan forces this spring. The full complement of U.S. advisory teams should be in place by early 2013. The new focus could rely on American Special Forces soldiers to fill out some of the advisory teams in the most violent areas of Afghanistan. The Special Forces troops would continue to advise and mentor elite Afghan units and the Afghan local police, a program in which villages form units to defend themselves. The primary mission of the Army's Special Forces, also known as the Green Berets, is to mentor, train and fight alongside indigenous forces. The Special Forces teams also have the ability to marshal firepower from American warplanes for Afghan forces. Even with a heavy complement of Special Forces troops, the United States also would have to rely on significant numbers of conventional soldiers to fill out the advisory teams. The new plans being weighed by the Pentagon and the Obama administration would also keep large numbers of elite U.S. counterterrorism troops in Afghanistan to hunt the remaining terrorist threats and keep heavy pressure on insurgent leaders. Thomas, who is expected to lead the consolidated Special Operations effort in Afghanistan, has extensive experience overseeing counterterrorism operations around the world. He also served in Iraq as an assistant division commander in the Army's 1st Armored Division and is well known in the regular Army.

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