

Presenter: Director for Operations, Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. Carter Ham and Director for Strategic Plans and Policy Joint Chiefs of Staff Lt. Gen. John Sattler April 30, 2008

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DoD News Briefing with Lt. Gen. Ham and Lt. Gen. Sattler from the Pentagon

GEN. SATTLER: Good afternoon, everyone. This is the -- we were jokingly saying in the back room, this is the Pentagon's, I guess, look-alike for the "Antique Roadshow" when General Ham and I come out here. But we welcome the opportunity to go and answer your questions.

Just as an opening statement, I'd like to highlight the point that the chairman just stood up -- the first meeting of the chairman's wounded warrior integration team was this past Monday, and that's a team that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mullen, has put together. It's currently headed up by the J-5, myself, to take a look at all programs across all agencies that impact on the wounded warriors and their families.

We will look at all the practices, everything that's being done. We will look for best practices. And we will report back to the chairman biweekly and to the service chiefs as the chairman directs as to what this integration team finds. A lot of things being done across the spectrum by a lot of great people, we just want to make sure that where there may be duplication of effort we can use those resources more wisely. And if there may be unintentional gaps and seams we can overcome those.

And we're ready for your questions.

GEN. HAM: Yes, sir.

Q General -- either general or both generals, question -- couple of quick questions on Iran, the arrival of the Lincoln Carrier Group in the gulf. Was that a normal -- a standard rotation of carrier forces or was there some additional element that would reflect an increase in U.S. firepower in the region? Second question is on reports that the Pentagon has ordered commanders to develop new options for attacking Iran. Can you comment on that?

GEN. HAM: I'll take the first part, with regard to the carrier transition. Obviously, we're constantly rotating our forces, including the maritime forces. So it is not particularly unusual to have two carriers in the CENTCOM area of responsibility at any one time. It is not terribly unusual, but hasn't occurred for a while, where we've had two in the northern Arabian Gulf simultaneously.

It allows us to do a couple of things, by doing that. First, it provides some additional capability to our commanders in the region for additional air power, which is always a good thing. It allows us also to demonstrate to our friends and allies in the region a commitment to security in the region. And importantly, from a military -- from a

tactical standpoint, operating two carriers in the same maritime and same airspace simultaneously allows us to practice some tactics, techniques and procedures which are very, very useful to us in a relatively constrained area.

So again, I wouldn't read more into this than there is. It is two carriers deployed for a very, very short period of time for those purposes.

Q One day?

GEN. HAM: About a one to two-day where they'll be together.

GEN. SATTLER: On the planning question, as you all know, we're a culture of planners. We have individuals whose title is planners. It is a verb, it is a constant. Plans that we have -- our plan to take a look for opportunities around the world we can take advantage of and possibly, if there's problems that might be brewing, that we are prepared and go and act against those problems to keep them from becoming a crisis.

So there has been no orders -- specific order to plan in any particular area of the war -- of the world, but I want to make it clear to everyone that we do plan. We challenge those plans. We challenge the assumption of those plans ongoing, and I would just leave it at that. We don't discuss, as you well know, specific plans that are ongoing or operations that are ongoing.

Q But the report suggested a specific stepped-up planning regarding Iran. Has there been recently any stepped-up planning activity above the normal, everyday planning regarding Iran?

GEN. SATTLER: No. Which report are you referring to? When you said the report --

Q News report --

GEN. SATTLER: I'm sorry?

Q The news report yesterday.

GEN. SATTLER: Ah. No. I'm sorry. I'm not -- I think I am familiar with the news report. I was thinking it was a government report or whatever. But you know, General Ham and I were the ones who are constantly involved with the chairman. We would know, and there has been no direct -- no order or stepped up effort to plan anywhere, and I'll just leave it at that.

Q And just to be clear, I mean, you're the guy in charge of planning, right? (Laughter.) You'd know this, right?

GEN. SATTLER: Yes, I would hope I would.

Q All right. I just wanted to make sure we --

GEN. SATTLER: You know, the -- yes.

Q I have a question about Iraq. The number of casualties -- U.S. casualties, U.S. deaths in Iraq this month has gone up again. I know that the number of U.S. casualties might not be the best measure of success in Iraq, but it is a pretty good barometer of how the American public feels the war is going in Iraq. And when we see a month like April, where, again, we've had a spike in U.S. deaths -- I think it's the highest in seven months -- people are wondering what's going on. Can each of you provide some perspective about what you think that statistic means? What does it tell us about how things are going in Iraq right now?

GEN. HAM: I'll try first, Jamie. First I would say it's important to remember what General Petraeus has said from day one about the surge and about operations in Iraq. There will be indications of progress, but there will also be times when the going is tough. It is not necessarily a straight-line increase in improvement. There are going to be some challenges and there certainly have been challenges and will continue to be challenges to our operations inside Iraq.

And so while it is sad to see an increase in casualties, again, I don't think it is necessarily indicative of a major change in the operating environment, at least from the U.S. perspective.

What we have seen recently, with the Iraqi government's decision to operate in the southeast, particularly in Basra, and indications clearly of a willingness on the part of the Iraqi government to confront the militias that -- the extra-constitutional militias that exist in the country, that's going to cause an increase in fighting. And generally, where the Iraqis fight, even when they are in the lead, there are Americans there with them, as transition teams embedded with the Iraqi security forces, but also providing capabilities that the Iraqis do not yet have.

So when the level of fighting increases, then, sadly, the level of casualties does tend to rise.

Q But with all due respect, you know, people are going to see these casualty figures and going to say, "Oh, my gosh, things are going the wrong way again in Iraq." What do you say to that?

GEN. HAM: Well, we've had -- we've seen casualties decline over the past several months. And I think that's -- while that's generally been a good thing, we've never established that, appropriately so, as you indicated, as THE measure of how things are progressing in Iraq.

My sense is that most people recognize that. There's sorrow, to be sure. There's gratitude to those families that have expressed sacrifice. But I'm not sure a one-month increase will be interpreted by most people as a changed condition.

Q General Sattler --

GEN. SATTLER: No, I would agree with what General Ham said. There are -- and there are obviously other metrics that we measure: economic, you know, progress; what the Provincial Reconstruction Teams are doing; how we move to provincial Iraqi control. As you know, there's nine of the 18 provinces under provincial Iraqi control right now. And as we press forward to have the criteria met in the other provinces -- you know, that security is sufficient, security forces are sufficient, the governor has the capacity and capability to command his security forces to match the security challenge in his province. And then the last piece of that is, we go into an overwatch. The coalition forces step back, with a memorandum of agreement with the governor that, if necessary, we can come back in.

Nine of the 18 provinces are under Iraqi control under those conditions, and we're pressing forward.

So I would also like to add that no one, believe me, no one definitely at this podium or within this building doesn't take each and every casualty very, very seriously. And as General Ham said, there is sorrow, and we are concerned. But I would not say that that's an indication that there's any shift on the ground inside of Iraq.

Yes, sir.

Q Sir, do you have any concern that the fight against the Shi'a militants in Sadr City still in the beginning? And do you think this kind of fight can lead to a confrontation with Iran?

GEN. HAM: Again the government of Iraq has decided -- it appears that they have decided that they will not stand for militias that are outside of the government structure.

I think that we are certainly hopeful that that does not necessarily lead to military confrontation. It's very possible that it will. It may be even likely that it will. But there are other ways to reconcile this issue between the militia and the Iraqi government.

However if the militia do continue to operate outside of the government and refuse to comply with the directives of the Iraqi government, it seems to me that the Iraqi government doesn't have much of a choice.

They can't stand for armed groups to operate outside of the government. And they've got to take action to counter that. And if that ultimately has to be resolved through

armed conflict, then our job as Americans, as members of the coalition, is to assist the Iraqi security forces to assist the Iraqi government in countering that threat.

Q Just to follow up, do you know, sir, how much the Iraqi forces and the American forces are controlling Sadr City? Can you give us like figures, numbers?

GEN. HAM: No, not specifically.

It is very clear that there are militia operating inside that part of the city. I think what the government of Iraq will likely seek to do is to make sure that they can control the ingress and egress into those neighborhoods, control key routes, make sure that they have measures in place to control the populace.

What you're really concerned about in this issue, where there are -- if the militia do choose armed conflict, as opposed to a negotiated settlement or a settlement through other means other than armed conflict, what you really worry about is, how do you conduct those operations in a densely populated area without causing a tremendous number of displaced persons or civilian casualties?

I'm confident that the Iraqi government is considering all those factors as they're looking forward to the operations that may be necessary.

GEN. SATTLER: Yes. Right here, please.

Q Yeah.

Regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan, I'm wondering if you're seeing any fallout from the reported truce between the government of Pakistan and the groups in the tribal areas. Are we seeing increased level of attacks, on the Afghanistan side of the border, in the wake of this?

GEN. HAM: The level of -- the number of incidents in Afghanistan are slightly higher than they were from the same period a year ago. There are some indicators that maybe there is some more fighting to be had as the weather improves and as the season progresses.

This is one of the reasons that General McNeill, the commander of the International Security Assistance Force, requested and has received additional forces, particularly operating in Regional Command South, is to try to counter that expected increase in particularly Taliban activity in the border regions between Afghanistan and Pakistan. But so far it just slightly increased over last year.

Q How concerned are you about it?

GEN. SATTLER: Well, as the sovereign country of Pakistan takes a look at the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the challenges that presents, and also the North-

West Frontier, they're coming forward with a holistic approach to the challenges there -- diplomatic, economic, as well as security approach.

So I think what we have to do is, we have to work very closely with a strong ally who has really participated very heavily in the global war on terror, has taken on challenges inside their own border. They are taking that next step, new government.

I say we give them a chance; we watch; we help out if we're asked for any assistance. But, and we'll just keep an eye on it.

So --

GEN. HAM: If I could make one other comment, we each had the opportunity today to meet with Major General Dave Rodriguez, who recently relinquished command of Regional Command East, and talked with him about -- and some of his key leaders about their recent experience in Afghanistan. And two things I would bring to note that he mentioned.

First is the significant improvements over the past year in the capabilities of the Afghan security forces, notably the Afghan National Army, and most specifically the commando battalions of the Afghan National Army. They really are doing quite well.

The second -- the second improvement I would note is the establishment of the first border coordination center along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan -- there are more planned -- that are intended -- these are manned by Afghans and by Pakistanis to work these very difficult border issues, to make sure that they're doing all that they can between those two nations to prevent that flow of foreign fighters or others as we have seen in past years.

Q Can I just follow, please?

Today State Department issued a report on global -- the terrorism report around the globe. And in that report, what State Department is saying that as the FATA region is concerned, it's a haven for terrorism, and also the new government has signed an agreement with the leaders there, like President Musharraf did in the past and it failed. Now, you think this new agreement will work as far as the U.S.' interest, and the U.S. forces are there because attacks on the Karzai government or attacks on themselves. So what do you think the future is, in light of that, for the U.S. forces and the NATO?

GEN. SATTLER: Inside of the FATA itself, or -- well, once again, Pakistan is a sovereign country. When Pakistan does their analysis and comes up with a complete holistic approach to taking on those challenges, not only to us and the coalition forces as it comes into Afghanistan but also in the country of Pakistan, we will work very closely with them. And I think we'll just go ahead and leave it at that.

Please, up here in the front.

Q (Off mike) -- if I may --

GEN. SATTLER: Well, we have to move on, please. Thank you. I'm sorry.

Sir.

Q General Ham, you said with regard to the Gulf that having the two carriers there for a couple of days sends a message to our allies. Are you also sending a message to Iran and other potential adversaries? And if so, what is it?

And also, Dana Perino at the White House mentioned today that this was part of exercises.

Was she just referring to what you said about having two air wings in the air? Or is there something more going on?

GEN. HAM: The message of commitment to the region is one that we think is important, but it's not intended to be any more than that. It's a message to all nations that the United States possesses the capability and the will to operate globally. And so this is an opportunity to do that.

With regard to exercises, we have a -- Central Command has a series of exercises that we conduct -- some of them are bilateral, some of them are multilateral -- with our friends and allies in the CENTCOM AOR. So we are routinely exercising with regard to the specifics of the two carriers that -- I think that's under the -- would be more of an exercise of our capability to do the operations in the northern Arabian Gulf.

Q So they're not part of a larger exercise --

GEN. HAM: There are -- there are currently and are often exercises that are ongoing. The two carriers are not specifically part of another exercise.

Q Well, I mean, I think the bottom line is, is this some kind of a show of strength aimed specifically at Tehran, which is how it's being perceived in some quarters.

GEN. HAM: I think that's -- I think that's not a correct perception. I'd go back again to what we're trying to achieve: demonstrate our ability to operate, reassure our commitment to that region. And there is tremendous tactical benefit to us to operate the two side-by-side in restricted space.

Q Follow-up on that -- you said that the -- part of the message is that the U.S. possesses the capability and will to operate globally. I mean, who doesn't understand that message?

GEN. HAM: I don't know. But that doesn't mean we don't do it. We operate in lots of places around the world to demonstrate just that commitment. When we operate throughout the Pacific, throughout the Atlantic, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres to -- because we believe it is important to maintain the understanding that the United States can and will operate wherever we need to operate.

Q But are there any countries that don't understand that the U.S. can't do that? I mean, you just laid out all of these places where the U.S. does operate and has the capability.

GEN. SATTLER: I don't think we want to make the assumption that everybody understands that. Therefore, as General Ham indicated, around the world, we're constantly -- we'll bring forces together. Two reasons: number one, to show you can take the pieces and bring them together in a cohesive operation; and second of all, it just -- if anybody is wondering if we have that capacity and capability and the will to do that, well, then, that kind of takes that off of their checklist. So --

Q General Ham, on IED/EFP trends, last week -- over the last couple weeks we've heard of Iran's increased level of supplying lethal weapons over there, their involvement in Iran (sic). One of the benchmarks is EFP activity. As clearly as you can, what has been the trend line in the -- since January? We know that last fall there was a drop. Has that drop continued, or has it been -- has there been some precipitous spike?

GEN. HAM: Tony, I should be able to answer, but I can't. I don't have that right now in my brain housing group. But I will check. I'll get the guys to take a note, and we'll -- I'll come back to you.

Q May I ask you a question on that? You said twice today having two carriers in the Gulf gives a tremendous tactical capability. As an Army person, who -- you probably don't fly Navy airplanes -- could you give the audience here a sense of some of the tactical capabilities that does give them -- sortie generation -- what does it give to have two there that you wouldn't have with just one?

GEN. HAM: It provides the air component commander for Central Command a tremendous amount of increased flexibility. A carrier strike group brings with it capabilities that many of you understand that are -- unlike any other nation possesses.

So what it brings -- the greatest thing it brings to the air component commander is increased flexibility for this period of time. We can generate more sorties, some of them strike, some of them reconnaissance, some of them to perform other operations. But it is that ability to -- which benefits the air component commander.

For the carriers themselves and their air wings, what it provides is an opportunity to operate in close proximity. Most of the time, carriers operate independently. The

complexity of operating in the same sea and air space is compounded, and the opportunity to exercise that is very, very useful to us.

Q One more, quickly. The carrier group coming in, carrier coming in -- is it accompanied by a full carrier battle group, or is it just the carrier swapping out and using the accompanying battle group that's already there?

GEN. HAM: I'm going to look and see if we know. I think it's the whole CSG, but I'm not sure, Tony. Let's -- okay, so I owe you two.

Q Can I go back to Iraq for a second?

GEN. SATTLER: Jim, could we grab one in the second row? And then we'll come back up front. Please.

Q This is also Iraq-related. I'm not sure if this falls into plans or operations, so I'll throw it at both of you. About -- a little over a week ago, Secretary Rice was in Baghdad, and she had some rather aggressive things to say about Muqtada Sadr, that he's -- you know, what kind of leader is he that he's spending all his time in Iran and so on. It seemed to be different in substance and tone than what General Petraeus had been saying a week or two earlier, in which he was sort of saying Sadr is a legitimate political player that we have to deal with.

Is there a change in thinking in the U.S. government or is there some difference of views between how the military views Sadr and the diplomats view Sadr? Or can you sort of give us what you think those comments were aimed at?

GEN. HAM: This is clearly an interagency question. (Laughter.)

Q I know.

GEN. SATTLER: Yeah, and I apologize. Although I'm vaguely familiar with, you know, Secretary Rice's comments, I have not -- I have not digested them totally. What -- as General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker have said, you know, Muqtada Sadr is obviously -- he is a player on the ground inside of Iraq. The elements of his group that he controls -- he has -- he has control of those fairly well. It's the special groups, the radicals of his organization that, whether he -- we believe he doesn't control those, that operate independently, and those are the ones that we have to deal with and we have to make sure that they are either captured or they're taken out of the equation. So I --

Q So your view is that -- (off mike) -- hasn't changed what General Petraeus has said? There's been nothing in the interim, post- Basra, that has forced you to change your --

GEN. SATTLER: That would be a correct statement. And if -- when I have an opportunity to take a look at Secretary Rice's comments -- I certainly don't want to -- don't want to, having not studied them, make a comment on those, please.

Okay.

Q Last week, Admiral Mullen talked about fresh evidence of Iran's interference in Iraq. Let me ask you both a question that Lou Dobbs asked me on the air the other night, which is: What are you going to do about it?

GEN. HAM: Okay, well -- I'll talk. We think --

Q I'll tell you my answer later.

GEN. HAM: The government of Iran has said that they will work -- they've made a commitment to stem the flow of fighters and materiel from Iran into Iraq.

General Petraeus and others have stated that they are not seeing evidence that that is, in fact, the case.

I think it now is a matter for the government of Iraq. We know that they are considering this. And how it is that the government of Iraq intends to address this issue, with their neighbor and with their regional partners, as to how they might more effectively convince Iran to take a positive role in Iraq.

Q But as Defense Secretary Gates put it very pointedly recently, Iran is killing Americans in Iraq. And you're saying that the response is to rely on the Iraqi government to pressure Iran.

GEN. HAM: Well, I think that clearly the Iraqis have a leading role. But it is necessarily an international effort to which the United States clearly is a significant factor in this.

But I think, as our chairman has said, the best way to modify Iran's behavior is not through military means. It's through other means, not through us.

GEN. SATTLER: And there is an interagency effort looking at the diplomatic, the economic, all the other instruments of national power, both within our own country and internationally, to get Iran's attention. I mean, we would like them to be constructive in the region. And they have not been constructive up to this point.

They have made statements. Their leadership has made a statement, to Prime Minister Maliki, which now he will have to, based on the evidence that he has, and it's in Prime Minister Maliki's hands right now, the evidence as to whether or not he has been lied to, boldface lied to, by the Iranian government.

Q (Off mike) -- any happier with your answer than he was with mine.  
(Laughter.)

GEN. SATTLER: Well, it goes back into planning. And you know, we don't talk about, you know, anything that we're planning on, any operations that are either ongoing or may be ongoing. So it's -- that's where it stands right now.

Q Can you say if Prime Minister Maliki is in dialogue with the Iranians about this new evidence in particular?

GEN. SATTLER: Don't know how far -- where the dialogue has gone. Just know that the evidence inside of Baghdad has been shared with the Iraqi leadership. And that's where it stands right now.

Q Sir, just to follow Jeremy's question, the report on country terrorism also said that Iran is killing Americans through the flow of arms and ammunition in Iraq and also in Afghanistan.

And second question is also that are you worried about China's expansion in backyard of the United States, in Latin America?

GEN. HAM: I'll take the Iranian issue.

There are some indicators of Iranian influence and support to the Taliban and others in -- particularly in western Afghanistan. Probably not to the same degree as we believe it is occurring in Iraq, but it clearly is of similar concern.

GEN. SATTLER: As far as, you know, China's engagement efforts around the world, or any other country's engagement efforts around the world, a sovereign country can engage where it wants to engage, as long as it's not nefarious activity that would be to our detriment. So I really don't have any comment on what any country may be doing in any part of the world, in this particular case you asked, China inside of South America.

Q General Ham, just to follow on the question -- on the answer you just gave about Afghanistan and Iranian support to the Taliban, are you referring to the arms shipments from last year, or is there something new?

GEN. HAM: There is -- there is indication that Iranian support for the Taliban has continued. Again, we don't believe it to be at the same level which they have provided fighters and weapons into Iraq, but there is some clear evidence that it has occurred.

Q And we're talking about recent evidence? There was a story from last year about the arms shipment that was stopped. But we're talking about something recent?

GEN. HAM: Oh, I think there is continuing indication of Iranian support, particularly to fighters in western Afghanistan.

Q What kind of support are we talking about, then?

GEN. HAM: Weapons and materiel.

Q Are there EFPs that are coming into western Afghanistan?

GEN. HAM: Not that I am aware of.

GEN. SATTLER: Nor am I.

GEN. HAM: I don't think we have seen EFPs yet.

GEN. SATTLER: Question?

GEN. HAM: We probably have time for one more, I think.

Q Could you update us on the launch of operations in Helmand province by the Marines, what the goal of that operation is?

GEN. HAM: The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit has commenced its initial collective operations in the southern portion of Helmand province, operating where there has generally not been much International Security Assistance Force presence over the past few years. They are operating with some Afghan units, which is a very good thing, and with some other NATO forces in that particular -- in this particular operation with some U.K. forces, which is a good thing.

What they're trying to do is, again, extend the reach of the central government, extend the security into regions where previously the Taliban has been largely uncontested. So this operation is in its first few days. It's going to -- it will unfold, I think, more fully over the coming days. And then, because they are very imaginative and very adaptive, the Marines will then modify their operations based on the intelligence that they gain from these initial operations.

So we're not sure yet where this will lead, but we are confident that the Marines will gain some intelligence in these initial operations that they'll be able to exploit in subsequent operations.

GEN. SATTLER: And one other point on that. There was also -- there was another Marine battalion put in with them, Marine Expeditionary Unit 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines. Their mission is different. They are working with General Cone and the trainers to go ahead and provide security for police trainers to get police in districts where the security would not permit them to go across that same southern belt. So not on the operational side, but working under the train and equip side, there's another Marine battalion in there also making sure that we can bring police, the rule of law, out into the hinterland.

Q So just to follow up, are there enough forces now to meet the requests of commanders in Regional Command South?

GEN. HAM: No. The secretary of Defense, commander on the ground, the chairman, Chairman -- Admiral Mullen has made it clear to us that a very high priority is to get more NATO forces, U.S. included, to Afghanistan, as the conditions allow us to do so.

So we are exploring possibilities of when we might be able to do that.

We'll have to -- I think we're out of -- we're out of time there. But before we leave the podium, I'd like to introduce someone who many of you know, Brigadier General John Campbell --

GEN. SATTLER: Come on up.

GEN. HAM: -- recently assigned as the deputy director for regional operations in the J-3. J.C. is just back from 18 months -- is that about right?

BRIGADIER GEN. JOHN CAMPBELL: Yes.

GEN. HAM: About 18 months in Baghdad. So long experience there with a couple of different divisions. And we're very, very glad to have him join the Joint Staff. And selfishly, I'm very glad to have him join the J-3. And General Campbell will be the normal ops briefer for these sessions for you.

So thank you very much.

GEN. SATTLER: Thank you very much, sir. I appreciate it.

Does that mean we're abnormal?

Q (Laughs.)

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