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*Predator done, an unmanned aircraft. (photo:Everett)*

The CIA is urging the White House to approve a significant expansion of the agency's fleet of armed drones, a move that would extend the spy service's decade-long transformation into a paramilitary force, U.S. officials said.

The proposal by CIA Director David H. Petraeus would bolster the agency's ability to sustain its campaigns of lethal strikes in Pakistan and Yemen and enable it, if directed, to shift aircraft to emerging al-Qaeda threats in North Africa or other trouble spots, officials said.

If approved, the CIA could add as many as 10 drones, the officials said, to an inventory that has ranged between 30 and 35 over the past few years.

The outcome has broad implications for counterterrorism policy and whether the CIA gradually returns to being an organization focused mainly on gathering intelligence, or remains a central player in the targeted killing of terrorism suspects abroad.

In the past, officials from the Pentagon and other departments have raised concerns about the CIA's expanding arsenal and involvement in lethal operations, but a senior Defense official said

that the Pentagon had not opposed the agency's current plan.

Officials from the White House, the CIA and the Pentagon declined to comment on the proposal. Officials who discussed it did so on the condition of anonymity, citing the sensitive nature of the subject.

One U.S. official said the request reflects a concern that political turmoil across the Middle East and North Africa has created new openings for al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

"With what happened in Libya, we're realizing that these places are going to heat up," the official said, referring to the Sept. 11 attack on a U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi. No decisions have been made about moving armed CIA drones into these regions, but officials have begun to map out contingencies. "I think we're actually looking forward a little bit," the official said.

White House officials are particularly concerned about the emergence of al-Qaeda's affiliate in North Africa, which has gained weapons and territory following the collapse of the governments in Libya and Mali. Seeking to bolster surveillance in the region, the United States has been forced to rely on small, unarmed turboprop aircraft disguised as private planes.

Meanwhile, the campaign of U.S. airstrikes in Yemen has heated up. Yemeni officials said a strike on Thursday - the 35th this year - killed at least seven al-Qaeda-linked militants near Jaar, a town in southern Yemen previously controlled by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as the terrorist group's affiliate is known.

The CIA's proposal would have to be evaluated by a group led by President Obama's counterterrorism adviser, John O. Brennan, officials said.

The group, which includes senior officials from the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department and other agencies, is directly involved in deciding which alleged al-Qaeda operatives are added to "kill" lists. But current and former officials said the group also plays a lesser-known role as referee in deciding the allocation of assets, including whether the CIA or the Defense

Department takes possession of newly delivered drones.

"You have to state your requirements and the system has to agree that your requirements trump somebody else," said a former high-ranking official who participated in the deliberations. "Sometimes there is a food fight."

The administration has touted the collaboration between the CIA and the military in counterterrorism operations, contributing to a blurring of their traditional roles. In Yemen, the CIA routinely "borrows" the aircraft of the military's Joint Special Operations Command to carry out strikes. The JSOC is increasingly engaged in activities that resemble espionage.

The CIA's request for more drones indicates that Petraeus has become convinced that there are limits to those sharing arrangements and that the agency needs full control over a larger number of aircraft.

The U.S. military's fleet dwarfs that of the CIA. A Pentagon report issued this year counted 246 Predators, Reapers and Global Hawks in the Air Force inventory alone, with hundreds of other remotely piloted aircraft distributed among the Army, the Navy and the Marines.

Petraeus, who had control of large portions of those fleets while serving as U.S. commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, has had to adjust to a different resource scale at the CIA, officials said. The agency's budget has begun to tighten, after double-digit increases over much of the past decade.

"He's not used to the small budget over there," a U.S. congressional official said. In briefings on Capitol Hill, Petraeus often marvels at the agency's role relative to its resources, saying, "We do so well with so little money we have." The official declined to comment on whether Petraeus had requested additional drones.

Early in his tenure at the CIA, Petraeus was forced into a triage situation with the agency's inventory of armed drones. To augment the hunt for Anwar al-Awlaki, a U.S.-born cleric linked to al-Qaeda terrorist plots, Petraeus moved several CIA drones from Pakistan to Yemen. After

Awlaki was killed in a drone strike, the aircraft were sent back to Pakistan, officials said.

The number of strikes in Pakistan has dropped from 122 two years ago to 40 this year, according to the New America Foundation. But officials said the agency has not cut back on its patrols there, despite the killing of Osama bin Laden and a dwindling number of targets.

The agency continues to search for bin Laden's successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and has carried out dozens of strikes against the Haqqani network, a militant group behind attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

The CIA also maintains a separate, smaller fleet of stealth surveillance aircraft. Stealth drones were used to monitor bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Their use in surveillance flights over Iran's nuclear facilities was exposed when one crashed in that country last year.

Any move to expand the reach of the CIA's fleet of armed drones probably would require the agency to establish additional secret bases. The agency relies on U.S. military pilots to fly the planes from bases in the southwestern United States but has been reluctant to share overseas landing strips with the Defense Department.

CIA Predators that are used in Pakistan are flown out of airstrips along the border in Afghanistan. The agency opened a secret base on the Arabian Peninsula when it began flights over Yemen, even though JSOC planes are flown from a separate facility in Djibouti.