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Top 2 Civilians Face Rockiness in Afghan Shift By MARK LANDLER The New York Times Thu, July 1, 2010

WASHINGTON — As General David H. Petraeus takes command in Afghanistan, the two top American civilian officials in the war face an uncertain and tricky future, working with a newly empowered military leader, under the gaze of an impatient president who has put them on notice that his fractious war council needs to pull together.

Richard C. Holbrooke, the Obama administration's special representative to the region, and Karl W. Eikenberry, the ambassador to Afghanistan, both hung on to their jobs in the uproar that followed Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal's career-ending quotes in Rolling Stone magazine.

But privately, at least one senior White House official suggested using General McChrystal's exit as an excuse for a housecleaning, according to senior officials. That was rejected as too disruptive during a military campaign that relies heavily on civilian support, these people said.

In recent days, other administration officials have begun floating the idea that Ambassador Eikenberry might be replaced by

Ryan C. Crocker, the highly regarded former ambassador in Iraq who forged a close partnership with General Petraeus during the successful Iraq troop increase.

Such a prospect is viewed as remote, given Mr. Crocker's prestigious new post at

Texas A&M University. But the fact that his name is being invoked underlines the challenges that confront Ambassador Eikenberry, as he adapts to a new partner — one who has strong ideas about how soldiers and diplomats should work together in war.

It also illustrates the remarkably powerful role that General Petraeus will assume in the nine-year-old war, setting him up as almost a viceroy in Afghanistan and a key broker in negotiations between President

Hamid Karzai and Pakistan over an eventual political settlement.

Prior to General Petraeus's arrival, some critics said the White House had created a problem by recruiting several forceful, ambitious personalities and giving them jobs with overlapping responsibilities. Administration officials acknowledge that, as one said, "There are obviously a number of substantial personalities on the team." But the White House believes that the current lineup can mesh, and that a difficult war demands this much talent.

Still, the McChrystal blow-up has reverberated through the State Department. Secretary of State

Hillary Rodham Clinton instructed Ambassador Eikenberry and Mr. Holbrooke to take a hard look at the civilian team, two officials said. She is not wedded to the current lineup if it continues to bog down in internecine battles, they said.

"You can't have a major shift in a civ-mil structure without having the civilian side take a step back and look at everything," said a senior State Department official, using the jargon for a civilian-military campaign.

General Petraeus, whose appointment was approved 99-0 by the Senate on Wednesday, took pains at his confirmation hearing on Tuesday to back a unified civilian and military effort. He noted then that he had telephoned Mr. Holbrooke and would rendezvous with Ambassador Eikenberry in Brussels, so the two could land in Kabul together.

"Holbrooke has been my wingman, to a great degree," General Petraeus said in an interview. "We have had, and do have, a very good relationship." That role, he said, will now fall to Ambassador Eikenberry.

Ambassador Eikenberry was highly critical of the Pentagon's proposal last year to send 60,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, which led to a difficult relationship with General McChrystal. But in fact General Petraeus was the true architect of the plan.

The ambassador, a retired lieutenant general and former commander in Afghanistan, graduated from

West Point in 1973, a year ahead of General Petraeus, but they did not know each other at the academy. The two share a scholarly bent: General Petraeus holds a Ph.D. from Princeton, while Ambassador Eikenberry has Master's degrees from

Harvard and Stanford.

While they were never assigned together, their careers intersected twice. In Iraq, General Eikenberry led an assessment of Iraqi security forces while General Petraeus was commanding the 101st Airborne Division in Mosul. When General Eikenberry was commander in Afghanistan, General Petraeus led an assessment of Afghan National Security Forces.

General Petraeus declined to discuss personnel issues, while Ambassador Eikenberry and Mr. Holbrooke turned down requests for an interview. Mr. Crocker, now the dean of the George Bush School of Government at Texas A&M, did not return a call for comment.

For Mr. Holbrooke, the new landscape is challenging in other ways. Officials said his job security was less in doubt than it was six months ago, when his ouster was the subject of endless Washington chatter. Yet he has arguably become a less central player:

Jacob J. Lew, a deputy secretary of state, manages much of the civilian influx in Afghanistan that Mr. Holbrooke helped shape, while the embassy in Kabul is carrying it out. Mr. Holbrooke's current portfolio has played to his weaknesses, his own allies admit. He is best as a high-level negotiator, and not as comfortable with the nitty-gritty work of helping Afghanistan build an economy.

These days, Mr. Holbrooke has become a globe-trotting diplomat, trying to retain flagging European allies while seeking to draw influential Muslim countries like Egypt into helping Afghanistan. At a recent conference of 35 countries in Madrid, Mr. Holbrooke drummed up more support from allies for the Afghan government's campaign to reintegrate

Taliban fighters into mainstream society.

Mr. Karzai's longer-term effort to reconcile with Taliban leaders, and his negotiations with Pakistan, could propel Mr. Holbrooke back into a central role. Were these talks to become more serious, several officials said, Mr. Holbrooke's negotiating skills could be put to use, as a broker and guardian of American interests. For now, though, as evidence of General Petraeus's influence, he will do most of the shuttling between Kabul and Islamabad.

On his last visit to the region, Mr. Holbrooke met with Mr. Karzai and with senior Pakistani officials, including the army chief of staff,

Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. Mr. Holbrooke's past run-ins with Mr. Karzai, several officials said, have not hindered his ability to deal with the Afghan leader, and Pakistani officials said they trusted him.

Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's ambassador to Washington, said that Mr. Holbrooke took time to understand Pakistan's concerns. "Ambassador Holbrooke is liked by some, admired by others and seen as effective, even by those who may not like him," Mr. Haqqani said.

Still, General Petraeus is indisputably the key player, and he has wasted no time asserting his control. On a secure videoconference call last Saturday, a person familiar with the call said, General Petraeus threw his support behind a costly, and controversial, plan to install temporary generators to supply more electricity to Kandahar, the Taliban stronghold that is the next major American military target.

Mr. Holbrooke and Ambassador Eikenberry swiftly assented.