

Air cover is what Afghanistan needs from the west

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President Barack [Obama announced](#) on Thursday that he would prolong the present US force in Afghanistan into 2017, beyond his earlier cut-off date for a total withdrawal of US troops before his term ends next year.

The Afghan Taliban are threatening to overrun half a dozen more provinces and their capital cities — a stark reminder of the country's continuing fragility that appears finally to have convinced Mr Obama to change his mind. Nato responded by saying the US move "paves the way for a sustained presence" by the alliance and it would take "key decisions" in the coming weeks.

The news about the troops is good, but it will not make much difference to the Afghan war effort. What the country's army desperately needs to prevent the massing of Taliban forces outside major cities is US air cover. If the Taliban are able to take and hold a big city before the winter starts, there will be panic across the country and the region. The Afghan army has proved that it can fight better than the Iraqis, although it has taken heavy casualties — more than 5,000 Afghan security forces have been killed this year. Yet it has taken two weeks for the army to retake the strategic northern city of Kunduz, which the Taliban captured on October 1. The Taliban continue to surround the city and occupy most of the province of Kunduz, which critically borders Central Asia.

Under the new plan, the drawdown of the 9,800-strong US force in Afghanistan to 5,500 trainers, advisers and Special Forces will begin in 2017. Since the start of this year, no US troops have been involved in combat operations. America had curtailed its already limited use of air power over Kunduz after its aircraft earlier this month accidentally bombed a hospital run by the international medical aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières. Twenty-two people died in the attack, including 12 of MSF's staff and three children, and the organisation has turned down a US [apology](#) and demanded an international investigation.

Mr Obama had been determined to withdraw all US forces from Afghanistan before his term ends but he has been pushed by the US military, congressmen, think-tanks and Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani to maintain a military presence. Some European countries, notably Germany, have said they are willing to continue their deployment of troops as part of Nato's operation in Afghanistan if US forces are there to give them back-up and air cover. There are now some 7,000 Nato forces in the country and it is expected that around 4,000-5,000 will remain in Afghanistan alongside the Americans.

Senior Afghan officials told me this week that the Afghan army desperately needs more sustained air cover to prevent the massing of Taliban forces outside cities. There is no proper Afghan air force or western air cover and the country has little offensive capability.

Western diplomats intimately concerned with Afghanistan admit that that the US was late beginning to train an Afghan air force, which will not be fully operational before 2018. Meanwhile, there is a small cadre of experienced pilots who were trained by the Soviets to fly Russian helicopter gunships in the 1980s and could do so again if they were available. So desperate has the Kabul government become that senior Afghan officials are trawling through the former Soviet states looking for older-generation Russian helicopters to buy for cash — annoying the Americans in the process. Spare parts and the helicopters have [become more difficult](#) to buy since western sanctions were imposed on Russia.

A few newly trained Afghan pilots are flying US-made MD-530 scout helicopters converted into gunships, but they are small and too light, with a very short range, and carry only two heavy machine guns.

The threats to the Afghan state are growing. Afghan officials told me that several provinces and their capital cities are at risk. They include Helmand and Uruzgan in the south, where the rural areas are largely Taliban-controlled; Faryab in the north-west bordering Turkmenistan; Farah in the south-west bordering Iran; and Badakhshan and Kunar provinces in the east bordering Pakistan.

The UN says the insurgency has [spread more widely](#) than at any time since 2001 and it has evacuated its staff from four provinces in recent weeks. Many roads are closed and there is a huge displacement of people, with few aid agencies or government offices able to take care of them. At least 120,000 people have fled Kunduz province alone, according to the UN. The humanitarian crisis is expected to worsen as the harsh Afghan winter approaches.

On October 13 [Afghan forces repelled](#) some 2,000 Taliban who converged from several directions to try to take the city of Ghazni south of Kabul, and there was heavy fighting before the Taliban were pushed back. Ghazni, an ancient multi-ethnic city, lies astride the key Kabul-Kandahar highway, which is now considered too dangerous to travel on. Much of the province of Ghazni is in the hands of the Taliban.

US and Nato air cover is urgently needed for the Afghan military. It is the key to raising morale in the country's armed forces. The Taliban must be pushed out of major populated areas before talks that were broken off in July can resume between them and the government. Unless the west shows commitment and resources to Afghanistan the Taliban will only be further emboldened to continue the war.