

The far-flug fallout from the capture of Kunduz

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The Taliban's capture of the northern Afghan city of [Kunduz](#) is a catastrophic blow to the beleaguered government of President Ashraf Ghani, who has been in office for a year. But it has much wider implications for the region.

It is a significant setback for the US and Nato, who have spent much blood and money on trying to secure Afghanistan since 2001 but withdrew most of their forces this year despite clear warnings that the situation in the north was deteriorating. There are still 9,800 US and Nato personnel in the country, and President Barack Obama has promised to pull them out by early next year.

It will strengthen [Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour](#), the new Taliban leader, and help reunite the insurgents, who have been divided by factionalism since he was chosen last month. His rivals can now do little but agree to his leadership. Proposed peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are put in jeopardy.

But the greatest threat is to central Asia and western China. Kunduz borders both regions and could become a hub for central Asian militants who helped the Taliban conquer the city. Senior officials in central Asia say the insurgents and their allies pose the biggest risk to stability there.

When a few hundred Taliban advanced on Kunduz at dawn on 28 September, they met little opposition from the estimated [7,000 government forces](#) stationed there. By midday they had [captured half the city](#), freed hundreds from jail, looted banks, government buildings and UN and Red Cross offices, and set up the first Taliban administration in a large Afghan city since their defeat by US forces in 2001.

Yet the move was hardly a surprise. The Taliban have held [70 per cent of Kunduz province](#) all year and in June launched an abortive attack on the city of an estimated 300,000 people. Their forces have since been sitting in villages just five miles from the city of Kunduz, but the Afghan army, police and local government militias made no attempt at a counter offensive. Western intelligence has been sporadic and there is no fully quipped Afghan air force. The fallout from Kunduz is likely to be felt across the region. Western and central Asian intelligence and diplomatic officials agree that many Taliban militants are not Afghans. They are Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs from the five central Asian republics, who have been fighting for the Taliban in their own designated groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union and Jamaat Ansarullah. There are also Chechens and Dagestanis from the Caucasus and [Uighurs](#) – Chinese Muslims fighting under the banner of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement but trying to free their homeland in the province of Xinjiang from Beijing's control. There are even elements of al-Qaeda, the [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant](#) (Isis), and Pakistani fighters.

For a decade these militants have been based in the tribal areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Operations by the Pakistani army have since June 2014 pushed these jihadis into Afghanistan. The Afghan army made no attempt to stop them. Within months they had regrouped to capture strategic territory in north and east Afghanistan. Their broad aim is to conquer central Asia and establish a caliphate there.

Kunduz will give the Taliban and their allies an ideal base from which to send fighters, explosives and money to destabilise China and central Asia. Russia, which has [7,000 troops](#) stationed in southern Tajikistan, would become embroiled, along with China. The dangers of increased terrorism and a wider regional conflict will increase. The capture of Kunduz fits strategically into recent Taliban conquests of the north-eastern Afghan provinces of Badakhshan, Kunar and Nuristan. These neighbour Pakistan and China, and allow access to Tajikistan and central Asia. Already militants, drugs, money and weapons flow freely across borders.

The US and Nato show little interest in retaining a presence in this volatile region. Russia and China have huge armies but are ill equipped to deal with terrorism and prolonged guerrilla war here. Yet all four big powers could co-operate militarily and diplomatically to help strengthen Afghanistan and secure central Asia. Unless much greater attention is paid to the region we can expect more Taliban conquests.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and central Asia, most recently 'Pakistan on the Brink'