

## Sangin shows the west must stay committed to Afghanistan

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The [battle for Sangin](#), and the Taliban's claim to have captured the Helmand town from the Afghan army, follows an intensifying military and political crisis in Afghanistan that has for months been clear to the US, Britain and their Nato allies.

The big powers have displayed a total reluctance to acknowledge publicly what is happening on the ground. There has been virtual silence from US [President Barack Obama](#) and UK Prime Minister David Cameron and their respective governments, even as [Britain](#) and the US have sent special forces to the beleaguered southern province of Helmand to stave off a Taliban attempt to conquer it. Defence ministry officials on both sides of the Atlantic have handled the crisis as though it were merely a spot of bother.

Afghanistan is becoming an unacknowledged disaster zone just a year after the withdrawal of the bulk of western forces, which at their peak in 2012 numbered 140,000. Now a few special forces are sent in periodically and expected to fix the country in a hurry.

The ground reality is what it is all about. The US took the lead with its withdrawal, working to a timetable made with domestic political objectives in mind – the most important being the need for a presidential legacy that would include all US troops home by the time Mr Obama leaves office about a year from now. That clearly is now not going to happen. The US and Nato will maintain about 10,000 troops for all of next year.

Washington secured what it wanted from its allies – even though it was clear to many European officers in Nato that the west was leaving a half-trained Afghan army, with an officer corps lacking experience of running its own logistics or providing adequate leadership to its troops. It was also in need of an air force and helicopter gunships to deal with the resurgent Taliban.

The writing was even more clearly on the wall in October, when the Taliban captured the northern city of Kunduz and held it for two weeks as Afghan forces fled. Only later were the troops remustered by US and German special forces. Helmand is far more important to the Taliban than Kunduz ever was. Fierce fighting is going on around Sangin, the last district headquarters still in the hands of government forces. Its fall would leave the Taliban with only the capital, [Lashkar Gar](#), to capture in order to control the whole province. Sangin is where British troops fought their most deadly battles, losing 100 soldiers since 2001. (A total of 456 British personnel have been killed while serving in Afghanistan.)

Helmand is the tribal base and birthplace of many of the Taliban's leaders. It provides the biggest source of Taliban income – poppies, which are taxed before being turned into opium. Moreover the province's poppy farmers provide one of the Taliban's few popular bases, as well as fresh recruits. Its terrain – and its location on the border with Pakistan, and adjacent to both eastern and western Afghanistan – is a geostrategic boon.

To the west lie the provinces of Farah and Herat, which are largely in the hands of the Taliban, as are the rural areas of the eastern province of Kandahar. In early December the Taliban launched an attack lasting 26 hours on [Kandahar airport](#), where US and British aircraft are based. Nearly 40 Afghan soldiers and civilians were killed. Officials in Kabul tell me that the Taliban pose a grave threat to more than half of the country's 34 provinces. Of those, half a dozen are in danger of falling completely into Taliban control, possibly when the spring offensive starts.

Afghan officials in Kabul tell me they suspect the Taliban wants to capture Helmand and then declare a governing council or even an alternative government – strengthening its position immeasurably before it may enter into talks with the Kabul regime. The last round of talks, in July, brokered by Pakistan – where most of the Taliban leadership live – were scuppered; but Islamabad is saying it will sponsor further talks. The Afghan government still deeply distrusts Pakistan, saying it is playing a double game.

But Helmand is not only the failure of the west. President Ashraf Ghani has proved unable to forge a political consensus at home, and he has failed to carry out badly needed reforms. The economy, which had grown so dependent on servicing western troops, has collapsed since they left. Afghans now constitute the second largest group of migrants trying to enter Europe.

And the Taliban is not the only threat. Pakistani, central Asian and Chinese Islamic groups are all using Afghan soil for their own agendas. Isis has extended its reach from Syria and Iraq – the group is battling the Taliban and the government in at least three provinces.

In the midst of the mess in the Middle East, the west needs to remain committed to Afghanistan. This means more training for its army, the use of western air forces until the Afghan one is ready and a financial commitment for the next five years that will pay for the war against extremism and rebuild the economy. And, if ultimately peace talks are to take place with the Taliban, the west needs to back them fully.