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Petraeus calls for more air strikes in Afghanistan

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In this Sept. 22, 2015, file photo, former CIA Director and retired Army Gen. David Petraeus testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington. In an op-ed in The Washington Post, Petraeus called for more air strikes in Afghanistan. (Photo: Evan Vucci, AP)

Retired Army Gen. David Petraeus says the U.S. should adopt a new policy that expands air strikes in Afghanistan, targeting a resurgent Taliban and an emerging threat posed by the Islamic State group.

“We should unleash our airpower in support of our Afghan partners in the same way that we support our Iraqi and Syrian partners against extremists,” Petraeus wrote in an op-ed published by *The Washington Post* on Thursday night.

“We do not need a big U.S. troop buildup in Afghanistan, but we should take the gloves off of those who are there,” Petraeus, also the former CIA director, wrote with co-author Michael O’Hanlon, a military expert with the Brookings Institution.

“We have the tools in place to step up our game considerably,” they wrote.

The piece highlights Pentagon data showing that about 400 U.S. and coalition aircraft missions dropped ordinance in Afghanistan last year. That's down from 1,100 in 2014.

Petraeus retired in 2011 after serving as the top commander in Afghanistan in 2010 and 2011 as well as the top commander in Iraq from 2007 to 2008.

The Obama administration’s current policy in Afghanistan authorizes U.S. air strikes to target the remnants of al-Qaeda. Only under limited circumstances will U.S. aircraft hit the more localized Taliban insurgent group or Islamic State militants.

Specifically, the U.S. can provide air strikes targeting any insurgents who threaten the U.S. force of about 10,000 troops in Afghanistan or in situations where the Afghan military is judged to be “in extremis” or facing a critical and immediate threat, defense officials say.

The Obama administration’s policy predates the recent growth in Afghanistan’s faction of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. U.S. officials characterize Islamic State there as “operationally emergent” and estimate there to be about 1,000 to 3,000 militants on the ground in Afghanistan, particularly in Nangarhar Province, which abuts the Pakistan border.

Army. Gen. John Campbell, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, told reporters in December that he focuses on any and all insurgents who threaten U.S. troops.

“I have what I need to go after any insurgent group, terrorist group that is going to cause force-protection issues for the coalition,” Campbell told reporters Dec. 18 at Forward Operating Base Fenty in Nangarhar Province.

“I look at it from a force protection nexus right now, to make sure I don’t let ISIL, Taliban, Daesh, Haqqani, you name it, come after Fenty where you are today,” Campbell said.

In October, at the urging of his military commanders, President Obama announced that he would keep troop levels steady through most of next year. By the end of 2016, rather than draw down to a Kabul-only U.S. military presence of about 1,000 troops as previously planned, Obama decided the U.S. will maintain 5,500 troops in Kabul and Bagram