



the Taliban in rural areas. By 2009, the focus had shifted: remote areas would no longer feature; the focus was, as a [Pentagon document went](#), “protecting and developing the major population centres” in eastern Afghanistan.

Retired two-star **Army General Paul Eaton**, whose previous brief was to train Iraqi forces following the calamitous 2003 invasion of that country, has more than let the cat out of the bag: the US has run out of military solutions amidst the “significant loss of life, and blood and treasure.” It is “time to say that we need a political outcome.”

The basis of such a political outcome will involve encouraging the Afghan military to leave unpopulated areas with a focus on more heavily populated ones, seen by Eaton as “a rational approach to secure the cities, and provide the Afghanistan government the political opportunity to work with the Taliban.” Again, this is reminiscent of the prodding by the Obama administration in 2015 to convince Afghan commanders that various remote checkpoints were simply not worth defending, let alone reclaiming and holding.

The denials that this is the case have been forthcoming. **Hamdullah Mohib**, Afghanistan’s ambassador to the United States, is well versed enough in spin to suggest that the approach has nothing to do with conceding ground to the enterprising Taliban and surrendering rural areas to their control; the focus, rather, is to secure urban areas with a future aim on re-engaging rural communities.

This treachery ignores the point that a retreat from remote Afghanistan is a de facto defeat for the Afghan and US forces. The police forces left in place will become fodder for Taliban attacks; in some instances, negotiations are taking place between the local police and the Taliban. Survival is the aim.

True to erratic form, the Trump administration is attempting to adjust old and stubborn positions. The President had preferred a swift withdrawal and termination of the conflict but **Defence Secretary Jim Mattis** got to his ear, preferring a more conventional topping up of forces – an additional 4,000 troops in a last hurrah for a victory that never came.

Instead, new talks with the Taliban are being proposed. A few preliminary ones have already taken place in Qatar. In their aftermath, State Department spokeswoman **Stephanie R. Newman** [preferred](#) a modest assessment.

“Any negotiations over the political future of Afghanistan will be between the Taliban and the Afghan government.”

The giant is being humbled.

The Taliban remain an indigenous force, nigh impossible to dislodge. Its unsavoury brand of Islam will not fly in cosmopolitan circles, but that hardly matters. In the game of crude politics, they have survived and become a reality impossible to ignore, let alone defeat. Swords may, in time, be sheathed, and guns holstered – if only temporarily.

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