



# How Would the United States Cope If It Lost the Next War?

Steven Metz | Friday, Oct. 12, 2018

Last week, I argued

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/26263/how-the-united-states-could-lose-a-war>) that while the U.S. military, the Pentagon and most national security experts expect that the United States will always win the wars it is forced to fight, America could in fact lose one if an astute enemy capitalizes on the nation's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. I sketched out three ways that might happen: if an enemy found a way to drag out a war past the limits of American patience; if a nuclear-armed enemy invaded another nation and then dug in; or if an adversary used what security experts call "gray zone"

(<http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1303>) aggression to present the United States with a fait accompli. But there are three other ways America could lose its next war, all of which expose how the country has become weaker politically despite its military dominance.

The first scenario might be if an adversary found a way to exploit geopolitics to its advantage. In today's security environment, the United States is likely to fight a war far from home via long-range force projection—think the mostly air war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or the 2003 invasion of Iraq. America is more adroit at this kind of mobilization than any nation in history and constantly getting better. The U.S. military can strike targets anywhere on earth. But being able to strike enemy targets may not always be enough to win a war. To project decisive power to the far reaches of the globe and roll back military aggression, the United States needs local partners to provide bases, staging areas or at least transit and overflight rights. The 1991 Gulf War, for instance, would have been impossible without support from Saudi Arabia. The 2003 invasion of Iraq depended on bases in Kuwait. And the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan required the movement of personnel and supplies through Pakistan.

Imagine a future conflict in which an adversary has compelled or convinced nations in a particular region—either through force or other incentives—to deny the United States those bases, staging areas or transit rights. Under such conditions, the American military might not be vanquished on the battlefield, but it could not bring its full power to bear, thus leaving the United States strategically defeated. If the current



*U.S. Army soldiers salute as vehicles carry what are believed to be remains from American servicemen killed during the Korean War, Osan Air Base, Pyeongtaek, South Korea, July 27, 2018 (AP photo by Ahn Young-joon).*

degradation of America's security partnerships and alliances under the Trump administration is not reversed, some underlying assumptions about longstanding allies in the Middle East or Asia, for example, would be severely tested.

A second scenario might be one where an adversary forestalls a unified and effective U.S. response to its aggression by exploiting America's domestic political rifts. Russia is clearly running a strategic information campaign to expand pro-Russia sentiment among American ethno-nationalists and segments of the religious right, to intensify America's hyperpartisanship, and to stoke isolationism within the United States. Given the current state of American politics, this could reach a point where the United States no longer had the political unity and will to counter armed aggression abroad, whether by Russia or another nation. This is exactly what the Soviet Union tried to do. It failed, of course, but the United States was a very different nation then. It is now significantly more vulnerable to external manipulation.

The current commander-in-chief has already provided opportunities that an adversary like Russia could exploit. President Donald Trump recently questioned whether the U.S. should defend NATO's newest member, Montenegro, despite the alliance's commitment to collective defense. During the height of the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump wouldn't even commit to defending NATO members in the Baltics from a hypothetical Russian attack, saying his response as president would instead depend on whether they had "fulfilled their obligations to us."

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A third plausible scenario in which America could lose its next war would be if some adversary—whether another nation or even a non-state actor—develops and deploys some sort of militarily decisive technology that the United States lacks. While no opponent will have across-the-board technological superiority over the United States, one might develop a strategically decisive niche technology that America doesn't possess, whether for ethical or legal reasons. This could be some variant of artificial intelligence, a particularly devastating type of cyber capability, weapons based on biotechnology or genetic engineering—or potentially something else entirely, perhaps borrowed from the private sector or developed in conjunction with organized crime. Such an adversary might actually win on the battlefield or deter the United States from engaging it altogether.

All six of these potential scenarios share one characteristic: They do not have a purely military solution. No matter how much more lethal and effective the U.S. military becomes, the roots of a potential military

defeat are political, particularly the inherent weakness of a bitterly divided, hyperpartisan United States that is unwilling to tend to its alliance network, unable to resist using national security as a partisan cudgel, and incapable of sustaining a working domestic consensus. In the past, when the United States faced external enemies, the nation came together. In today's political climate, it might not.

If the United States or one of its key allies were attacked, the party out of power might use that to discredit the party in power, rather than joining with it to confront the threat. Consider how Republicans in Congress seized on the 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi to try and discredit the Obama administration, and especially then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, rather than seriously tackle the growing security threats in Libya. Defeat in this scenario would come from within, not on the battlefield.

If there is a glimmer of hope, it is that none of these potential war-losing scenarios would pose an existential threat to the United States. But all would be psychologically traumatic. It is not clear how Americans would react. Is the nation still resilient and unified enough to regain its bearing after losing a war, adjust and move forward—or is it so badly divided and brittle that defeat would cause a complete collapse of national will?

Past defeats, such as Vietnam, led to major adjustments in American national security strategy and eventual rejuvenation. Future ones, however, may signal global disengagement, internal fracture and even a dire threat to democracy.

*Steven Metz is the author of "Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy." His weekly WPR column (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/authors/790/steven-metz>) appears every Friday. You can follow him on Twitter @steven\_metz ([https://twitter.com/steven\\_metz](https://twitter.com/steven_metz)).*

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