



Why President Trump's Troop Surge is Not Certain to Produce Gains in Afghanistan – Despite American Strength

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In August of 2017 President Trump announced that he would expand America's military presence in Afghanistan. Will this "second surge" – which will likely involve an increased deployment of 5,000 U.S. troops – produce decisive results? Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" implies that the United States is a weary titan burdened by incompetent national leadership, disadvantageous trade deals, and out-of-control illegal immigration. Contrary to such sloganeering – and contrary to prognosticators of U.S. fiscal doom – America is hardly in a state of decline. It retains economic and military superiority over all potential challengers. Still, despite its relative strength, the United States is not certain to prove victorious in Central Asia.

In that region as in the Middle East and the South China Sea, the United States can be challenged when other nations use cost-imposing tactics to limit U.S. abilities to project force and exercise international leadership. "Cost-imposing" is what experts call military tactics that render military action in a given region prohibitively costly. In my research, I study U.S. vulnerabilities to such efforts in Central Asia, and also weigh additional factors limiting U.S. presence in that region.

Is U.S. Defense Spending Sustainable?

Since 2003, the United States has consistently ranked as the wealthiest country in the world as measured by Gross Domestic Product. However, research has revealed that Gross Domestic Product is an outmoded measure that fails to capture important developments in the so-called "knowledge economy." A better measure for that important part of the economy is called General Expenditure on Research and Development.

Data for this indicator collected by the World Bank suggests that, even after the United States absorbed costs of the initial invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and experienced the serious 2009-10 recession, the nation's investments in research and development did not decline relative to competitors. This is good news for the defense economy, because the United States continues to spend more on defense than any of its potential peer competitors.

The Challenge of Cost-Imposing Tactics

Cost-imposition is a tactic distinct from other peacetime tactics used by competitor nations (including tactics such as attacking foundations of an enemy's strategy to undermining its political system). A cost-imposing strategy is designed to convince the enemy that victory is not possible, by (in the words of strategy expert Bradford Lee) driving "the cost...of continuing or renewing the conflict...to a prohibitive level." This concept was originally developed by Andrew Marshall, a strategist for the U.S. Department of Defense, and deployed in 1972 when U.S. leaders proposed to peacefully compete with the Soviet Union while encouraging it to overextend abroad and thereby bankrupt its system.

At present, the United States despite its relative strengths remains vulnerable to cost-imposing tactics. Weaker states can take steps to limit America's ability to project force in their locale – for example, Russia's campaign to destabilize Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, or Iran's attempts to exert influence in Iraq. Why resort to arms buildups or alliance formation against the U.S. when a country can parry the United States at less expense through cost-imposing maneuvers?

Using these tactics, weak states can prevail against major powers more often than the conventional wisdom would suggest, making it advantageous for them to mount challenges. Tricia Sullivan, who researches the use of military force, finds that weaker countries have managed to keep five of the most powerful states in the international system from achieving their objectives 40% of the time since 1940.

What analysts call the “loss-of-strength gradient” boosts the effectiveness of cost-imposing steps. According to this concept, the further from its home territory a country tries to project force, the more expensive such efforts become. As technologies such as the Russian-made S-300 and S-400 missile systems spread in the international system, they make it easier for even weak powers to hinder distant projections of force by the United States. Such systems seem very likely to be used against U.S. forces in Afghanistan (and, indeed, Obama administration decision-makers designed plans to counter uses by enemies in regions where U.S. force is projected).

Domestic Constraints and Opportunity Costs

Beyond the tactics of opponent countries, limits on American “staying power” in Central Asia arise from domestic political constraints. Conventional wisdom suggests that the U.S. public takes its cues from elite opinion leaders, but since the second Iraq War this has not always been the case. The public may not be unwilling to accept casualties, but it is sensitive to defeats. Americans are willing to make sacrifices on behalf of a victorious mission, but not for a mission where casualties mount as the cause is lost or goals prove out of reach.

Such constraints could well apply to the renewed U.S. troop surge in Afghanistan. Although President Trump says that the United States will drop timetables for troop withdrawals and condition such moves on results attained, typical U.S. voters now seem to have their own ideas about reasonable conditions. If the Trump administration fails to satisfy voter understandings of success, it could face public reluctance to support continued U.S. troop deployments in Afghanistan, well before much new military progress could be made.

Opportunity costs also matter, because a continued U.S. commitment to Afghanistan involves not meeting other challenges – such as maintaining the balance of power in Asia or focusing on other troubled parts of the Middle East. It is not at all clear whether the United States will be -- or should be -- open to foregoing such alternative uses of its finite power.

For all of these reasons, therefore, U.S. gains or victory in Afghanistan are far from a foregone conclusion. Costs imposed by weaker states, along with domestic constraints and opportunity costs, can still trip America up in a part of Central Asia long dubbed the “graveyard of empires.”

Read more in Albert Wolf, “After JCPOA: American Grand Strategy Towards Iran,” *Comparative Strategy*, (Forthcoming).