

Bases of Empire: Casting a Global Shadow

US military installations around the World

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Despite United States economic weakness, although not unrelated to it, our military casts a heavy shadow everywhere on earth, far beyond the major and minor wars it is now conducting. The geographical and functional scope of the US military is cosmic. Formal alliances are an important element, but even such bloated, increasingly un-Atlantic and shockingly un-pacific institutions as NATO are only the tip of the iceberg. Nations generally regarded as “neutral” are now junior partners in NATO: Ireland, Austria, Switzerland, Finland, Malta, and Sweden. “In June 2009, war games ‘Loyal Arrow’ were conducted by 10 countries in Northern Sweden, as a preliminary move to extend US and NATO military presence into Arctic regions—and confronting Russia in that area,” as reported by [Rick Rozoff](#).

Other affiliates are the NATO Mediterranean dialogue states: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia, and guests invited to NATO events: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea. Whether committed or just coffee dates, NATO nations are required to meet exacting standards. This means, in most cases, not only increased power for their military institutions, but also secret agreements that negate democracy. If our ally’s elected government is military-skeptical, prime ministers and their parliamentary supporters may be kept uninformed of the NATO arrangements, as in the case of the nuclear weapons that were stationed in Greenland in violation of the Danish Constitution. The “normalization” of NATO, its penetration into the European Union, and its effect on civilian life (East and West Europe and Central Asia) are rarely examined.

Another wing of the US military is training, supplied to NATO partners and the military and civilian personnel of over 150 nations. The [School of the Americas](#) (now Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) at Fort Benning, GA, is notorious. However, there are 200 institutions in the US that train foreign military, and many overseas. Any nation that buys US military equipment—there are about 150 such countries—gets trainers with the deal.

The joint exercises with our [Special Operations Forces](#) are also “trainings” that provide mentors for foreign troops, so that we can insure “interoperability.”

The scope of operations blurs the distinction between military and civilian functions. Among the problems that may call for a military response, according to the 2010 [Quadrennial Defense Review](#) are:

Rising demand for resources, rapid urbanization of littoral regions, the effects of climate change, the emergence of new strains of disease, and profound cultural and demographic tensions in several regions are just some of the

trends whose complex interplay may spark or exacerbate future conflicts.

US military serves humanitarian missions everywhere, in disasters as well as routine social service needs. One of its functions, according to the QDR, is “preventing human suffering due to mass atrocities or large-scale natural disasters abroad.” It also tries to win the hearts and minds of the people by operating dental and pet care clinics. The modern missionaries discover the lay of the land, make friends with ambitious, intelligent locals, and rarely leave. All these interactions—alliances, partnerships, training, and humanitarian services—create “networking,” collegial relationships with current and future elites, both civilian and military. Then there are the bases.

[The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle Against U.S. Military Posts](#), edited by Catherine Lutz (N.Y.: NYU Press, 2009) is a fitting sequel to another excellent book, [The Sun Never Sets: Confronting the Network of Foreign U.S. Military Bases](#), edited by Joseph Gerson and Bruce Birchard (Boston: AFSC/South End Press, 1991). Gerson and Cynthia Enloe are represented in both books.

Lutz is an anthropologist; many activists and anthropologists are contributors to this volume, which bodes well for information about what is really going on, in contrast to foreign policy experts who tell us mostly about elite opinion and their own ideological presuppositions. For information about the size, location, and real estate value of US military bases (domestic and foreign), one can look at the [DOD Base Structure Report](#). This understates the number, omitting the bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the forthcoming one in Yemen. Also not listed are foreign bases that grant access rights to the US military. The 2009 BSR claimed 4,742 bases in the US, 121 in our territories, and 716 foreign. Some have estimated the foreign bases as nearer to 1,000, and the cost for those alone at around \$250 billion annually.

The Lutz volume describes their effect on host countries and their people, and also reports the extensive activism protesting bases, some of which has been successful. For support and inspiration, there is an [International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases](#). The current status of anti-base protests can be found on its web site. The anti-base movements have considerable leadership and participation by women, indigenous people, and racial minorities. Ironically, the US military has promoted multicultural democracy in foreign lands.

Lutz tells us what people don't like about the bases. First of all, there is the sovereignty issue. Status of Forces Agreements often provide that the host countries' criminal and environmental laws will not be applied to US personnel and bases. Secret agreements, such as those allowing for the presence of nuclear weapons, bypass parliamentary institutions, laws, and constitutions. Aside from formal provisions, a foreign military occupation confers power over the politics and society of the host. Thus the 235 bases currently in Germany are not without function. They have helped to keep the population “in line” with the “American way.” In addition, as everywhere, there is an economic stimulus to the restaurant, entertainment, and real estate industries, filling in the gaps where war and the globalization of manufacturing and agriculture have hollowed out local economies.

Nevertheless, another reason for unhappiness is the purpose of the installations. They are used for making war, spying on other countries, torture, and other activities that violate the host countries' laws and the will of their people. To moral and legal concerns must be added

the potential for “blowback,” as bases may be targeted by nations resentful of being attacked.

Locals are angry at the taking of their land, which may be rendered unfit forever for agriculture or tourism. Vicenza, Italy is a UNESCO heritage city; a second massive military base is being constructed there despite a longstanding protest movement. In all cases, the environmental consequences of base construction and operation are grave for land, sea, and air. The constant noise of overflights, artillery fire, and bombing practice is also a cause for complaint.

A prostitution industry and violent crimes are common followers of base installations.

One of the best-known and vigorous protest movement, that of Okinawa, was catalyzed by the 1995 rape of a 12 year old girl and the US refusal to surrender the suspects to local authorities. However, all of the above reasons motivated the protests. In addition, many Okinawans consider themselves a colonized population of Japan, and resent the placement of 75% of the US Japanese bases on their territory.

The Bases of Empire contains detailed case studies of Latin America and the Caribbean, Iraq, and Diego Garcia; US nuclear weapons bases in Europe; and protest movements in the Philippines, Okinawa, and Turkey. Furthermore, it includes anti-base activism on US territory in Hawaii and Vieques, Puerto Rico, which has served as a worldwide inspiration. The afterword, by Julian Aguon, a Chamoru (indigenous person of Guam), protests that his people are becoming extinct. Filipino and Korean workers were brought to Guam to build the bases, which are now slated for massive enlargement. In addition, Chamorus serve and die in the US armed forces at a disproportionate rate.

The overall picture may be bleak, yet there are signs of hope. The anti-base movements have had some successes. The US military is creating a new basing system for strategic reasons; unpopularity is also a motivator.

As [Rumsfeld](#) announced in 2004:

Our first notion is that our troops should be located in places where they are wanted, welcomed, and needed. In some cases, the presence and activities of our forces grate on local populations and have become an irritant for host governments. The best example is our massive headquarters in some of the most valuable downtown real estate in South Korea’s capital city, Seoul – long a sore point for many South Koreans. Under our proposed changes, that headquarters will be dramatically reduced in size and moved to a location well south of the capital.

Now some of the “main operating bases” with permanent structures, family housing, etc., will be closed in favor of [“forward operating sites”](#) and “cooperative security locations,” often maintained by contractors to shield the principals from the gaze of the locals.

After many years of protest, spurred by prostitution and ensuing disease as well as the constitutional ban on nuclear weapons, the Philippines bases were closed. This success is somewhat countered by joint military exercises, ship visits, and Special Forces operations, but the activism has not ceased.

Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa refused to extend the contract for the base at Manta,

and it is closing. A major [movement](#) demands the end to all US bases in Latin America and the Caribbean, and deplores the US quest for new bases in Colombia. Although the Honduran request for the closure of the US base at Palmerola was not a success, it was a serious enough threat to trigger the overthrow squad. In Vieques, Puerto Rico, which was bombed for 180 days in a year, the protest began with environmental and health concerns, and was reinforced in 1999 when a security guard was killed by a stray bomb. Worldwide solidarity activists aided in the base closure, and the international [movement](#) continues today.

The environmental and political consequences of bases within the US are also worthy of investigation, yet one rarely sees comprehensive studies by journalists, social scientists, or activists. Political science and environmental studies textbooks mostly ignore them. At the very least, they represent another system of local government. The Military Toxics Project, which expressed serious concerns of military families and civilian base workers, has ceased for lack of funds. We are indebted to Catherine Lutz for authoring an earlier book on the impact of a domestic base: *Homefront: A Military City and the American 20th Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), a study of Fayetteville, NC, home of Fort Bragg. Her introduction asserts: "In an important sense, though, we all inhabit an army camp, mobilized to lend support to the permanent state of war readiness that has been with us since World War II."

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