

## Bring War Dollars Home by Closing Down Bases

Posted By [Christine Ahn](#) On April 1, 2011 @ 11:00 pm In [Uncategorized](#) | [7 Comments](#)

On the eighth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, U.S. fighter planes took off to start yet another military action — this time, in Libya. A recent Gallup poll found that only 47 percent of Americans approved of military action in Libya, the [lowest level of support](#) for military intervention in 40 years. At the same time, U.S. President Barack Obama has sent Congress a budget that includes [\\$1.2 trillion dollars](#) for military and security expenditures. Clearly, Americans are weary of war, especially during an economic crisis that has threatened jobs, health plans, and pensions most families need to survive.

The hopeful news is that a grassroots movement of ordinary people across U.S. towns and cities has launched the [New Priorities](#) campaign, uniting under the demand to “bring the troops and war dollars home” by cutting defense spending instead of benefits, jobs, and basic government services. Worldwide actions are also being planned for the [Global Day of Action on Military Spending](#) on April 12th to shine a light on egregious amounts of military spending by the world’s governments. Central to these efforts must include demands to shut the [1,000-plus U.S. military bases](#) in over 46 countries.

Bases are the most visible structures of the U.S. drive to maintain global military hegemony. Yet for most Americans, bases remain out of sight and outside the national discourse on war. Many don’t know about the enormous footprint of U.S. military installations around the world and how they undermine the lives and aspirations of the people who live directly in their shadow. Ending U.S. wars is essential, but closing down foreign bases is even more critical to dismantling U.S. militarism and global hegemony.

On the island of Cheju off the coast of South Korea, villagers are struggling to prevent the construction of a South Korean naval base intended for U.S. military use. In 2009, one of us traveled there and can still remember the tattered yellow flags lining the fence posts of homes, symbolizing the movement’s determination to stop the project. Walking along the endangered rocky coastline at the edge of this quiet village of farmers and fisherfolk, it was clear that Cheju Island and other sites of U.S. military bases in Korea have borne enormous costs to the people and to the future of peace in the region.

### A Huge Financial Cost

Most figures used to estimate the cost of U.S. wars omit the global network of U.S. bases that provides vital resources and infrastructure to existing military conflicts. The Pentagon’s [2010 Base Structure Report](#), for example, lists 662 overseas bases but fails to include the 411 bases in Afghanistan, the 88 remaining bases in Iraq, or sites in Qatar and other countries where U.S. military personnel are stationed. Maintaining and constructing all U.S. bases cost American taxpayers \$41.6 billion in 2010, according to Undersecretary of Defense Dorothy Robyn.

Of these 662 overseas bases, more than 70 military installations and bases and 28,500 U.S. troops are stationed in South Korea. [Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow](#) of the Cato Institute estimate that the cost of U.S. bases in Korea “probably runs on the order of \$15 to \$20 billion annually.” Although the United States and South Korea have agreed to reduce and consolidate the number of U.S. military bases in Korea, other bases and training ranges — including Osan Air Base in Pyeongtaek — are expanding displacing thousands of villagers and destroying Korea’s productive and limited farmland.

The agreements governing the responsibility for U.S. base relocation in Korea illustrate the unequal dynamic prevalent in countries that host U.S. bases. Under the Special Measures and Base Relocation Agreements, the United States and South Korea agreed to share the cost burden of moving U.S. bases, with South Korea obligated to pay more than half that cost. In 2008, South Korea paid \$741.4 million, angering South Koreans unhappy over having to foot the majority of the moving bill and pay to clean up 60 years of environmental contamination. At some of the 23 bases “returned” to South Korea, the levels of contamination are 100 times above the limit set by Korean law. Cleanup at these sites will require years of decontamination at enormous cost to South Korean citizens, not to mention the public health and ecological consequences for generations to come.

Moreover, U.S. bases and troop presence are an extension of U.S. intervention in South Korea. Historically, the U.S. military provided legitimacy, economic aid, and protection to dictatorial regimes that maintained their power with brute force. Today, the U.S. and South Korean governments control and suppress dissent through the infrastructure of bases, particularly Pyeongtaek and Osan, which are now major U.S. military intelligence outposts for the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA). While conducting research for his book [Spies for Hire](#) on the privatization of U.S. intelligence, Tim Shorrock found unsavory evidence of eavesdropping on Korean civilian activities by U.S. military bases located there. Although the primary target of surveillance activity is North Korea, U.S. intelligence also monitors China and Vietnam from Korean bases. What worries Shorrock is that since 9/11, what is considered a threat has widened to include almost any activity that questions or challenges U.S. interests. His discovery of the U.S. military in Korea colluding with Korean police to monitor anti-base activities is "an amazingly frank assessment that the anti-bases movement is being as closely monitored, and probably more so, than Al Qaeda – and basically puts the movement in the same camp as global terrorists." But it's not just anti-base movements. Recently protests against the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement were also noted in the [log of the U.S. forces](#) in Korea.

## Resistance to U.S. Military Bases in Korea

Given the fierce opposition to U.S. military bases throughout the Asia-Pacific rim, the United States has become savvy at reducing its military footprint in regions where its presence is politically contested. Rather than establish its own base, the U.S. military has sought the cover of the South Korean military in the construction of a new naval base in Cheju, an island located off the southern coast of South Korea.

The people of Cheju Island are known for their fierce resistance to Korea's division and occupation by U.S. troops over the south during the post-World War II period. For their resistance, the people of Cheju paid dearly. Following the April 3 rebellion of 1948, South Korean government forces killed up to 30,000 people – more than one in ten residents – for opposing separate elections between the north and south and the U.S. occupation of the southern half of Korea. In a long-awaited gesture of apology, in 2005, former President Roh Moo-Hyun named Cheju the "Peace Island."

Cheju Island is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site and a national protected area by the Korean Cultural Heritage Administration. The Joongduk coastline, adjacent to Gangjeong village, is home to rare sea life, including soft coral, and is the seasonal habitat for dolphins migrating across the Pacific Ocean from Alaska during the summer.

In 2002, Seoul announced plans to build a naval base on Cheju. After two villages resisted, Gangjeong Village became the government's third target. In 2007, 94 percent of the Gangjeong Village People's Council voted "no" to the base plans. The government then proceeded to pressure residents. Some 1,500 farmers and fishermen live in Gangjeong village, including the legendary [Haenye pearl divers](#)—women in their 50s and older who forage in the sea for their livelihoods. Some of the villagers, including a few elderly Haenye divers, sold their farmland to the military under pressure from the South Korean government. According to [Sung-Hee Choi](#), a South Korean peace activist and blogger, many of the villagers who signed the contract now regret their decision. However, they've been told that if they renege, they would have to pay back the money plus interest. Still, dozens of families are resisting the naval base construction.

In May 2009, the South Korean government approved construction of the joint U.S.-South Korean naval base. The military has begun to dredge the Joongduk coastline to accommodate the massive naval warships. If construction proceeds, it will not only destroy the rare coral reefs and surrounding ecosystems, it will kill the area's fishing industry and displace citrus growers in Gangjeong village whose lands will be confiscated as part of the base expansion.

Gangjeong villagers have filed several lawsuits without much success. On December 15, 2010, a Cheju court ruled that the naval base did not infringe on the rights of the villagers, despite the projected destruction of the tangerine groves and the soft coral habitat where the villagers fish. The Gangjeong villagers have used every possible democratic means to block the base construction, but the South Korean government has been completely unresponsive. On Christmas Day, some 500 supporters joined dozens of villagers to block the cement trucks brought in by the Navy to pour concrete over the coral reefs along the shoreline.

The Cheju facility is ostensibly a South Korean naval base, but for all intents and purposes it will be used by the U.S. military. This was confirmed when Americans made calls to the South Korean embassy urging them to close the base, to which the South Korean embassy responded, "Call your own government, which is pressuring us to build this base." The villagers are currently occupying the

site, stopping the construction cranes from dredging up the shoreline and facing off against riot police.

## Not for Korean Security

When most Americans learn how U.S. military bases are infringing on the sovereignty and rights of the Korean people, most agree that it's high time for troops to be withdrawn. But many ask, what about the threat of nuclear-armed North Korea — who will protect the Korean people?

Although the U.S. military has long stated that it maintains a presence in South Korea to protect the civilian population, South Koreans have experienced the impunity with which U.S. troops behave on their territory. Organizations have documented thousands of crimes committed by soldiers against South Koreans. Between 1988 and 1996, U.S. troops committed an average of two crimes per day, ranging from the mundane to the heinous. The frequency of crimes committed by U.S. military personnel demonstrates the impunity with which U.S. forces act in South Korea — and likely, in many other host countries in which Status of Forces Agreements clearly give the U.S. military the upper hand. Furthermore, contrary to most fear-mongering projections of a nuclear-North Korea, "Most economic and military indicators show that South Korea has an edge over North Korea in almost all measures of power," writes [Jae-Jung Suh](#).

But perhaps more relevant today than the U.S.-South Korean military alliance is the grander regional alliance the United States has been forming in response to the perception of a growing Chinese military and economic threat. A key indicator of this is how the Mutual Defense alliance of the U.S. and South Korea has been transformed. Under the 2009 "Strategic Flexibility" agreement signed by Presidents Obama and Lee, the defense of South Korea is returned to Seoul, allowing the United States to deploy its forces outside Korea. Under the new arrangement, not only will South Korea be used as a rapid deployment hub for US military objectives elsewhere, [South Korean troops will also](#) be deployed for U.S.-led military deployments beyond Korean borders.

The realignment and consolidation of U.S. bases is also revealing. Many of the larger U.S. bases are along Korea's West Coast and have moved away from the Demilitarized Zone toward more southern locations. This network of bases is part of a new missile defense shield directed as much toward China as toward North Korea. In the region as a whole, U.S. base expansions are taking place in Japan, Okinawa, Guam, Australia, and other key locations in the Asia-Pacific theatre, which effectively form a belt of bases that encircle China and Russia. The United States, South Korea and Japan have strengthened their [tri-lateral alliance](#), which has resulted in more intense and frequent joint war games among all three nations, including the recent Key Resolve Foal Eagle ROK-U.S. joint military exercises involving 13,000 US troops and a nuclear aircraft carrier,

In a 2007 [interview](#), former U.S. Forces in Korea Commander General B.B. Bell explained why South Korea was so vital to the United States by saying, "Twenty-five percent of the world's trade flows through northeast Asia. Whether it's Korea, Japan, or China, if you're trading in the world, one out of every four things you trade, commodity-wise and dollar-wise, is going through that area." Korea itself is the seventh-largest U.S. trading partner. Bell further explained the need for U.S. military engagement in Northeast Asia "because of the natural resources, lines of communication, and products that we will have to deliver around the world."

But there's more than cargo protection driving U.S. base strategy — U.S. bases are there to encircle China. Of all U.S. military bases, South Korea is the closest spot to Beijing, a strategic location to gather intelligence, and a key point for a possible standoff with China. The [Project for the New American Century](#) clearly states this: "Raising U.S. military strength in East Asia is the key to coping with the rise of China to great-power status."

This broader regional strategy also explains U.S. pressure on South Korea to build a naval base in Cheju. [Bruce Gagnon](#) of the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space explains why villages in Cheju are being destroyed to accommodate the expansion of the U.S. military base: "China imports 80 percent of its oil on ships and a Navy base on Cheju would help give the U.S. ability to 'control' this vital shipping lane in the Yellow Sea. While the declining U.S. economy can't compete with China anymore, the Pentagon is embarking on a strategy that says if we can control access to declining supplies of oil then we will still hold the keys to the global economic engine." This year, China surpassed the United States in energy consumption. As [Michael Klare](#) puts it, "China's decisions on energy preferences will largely determine whether China and the United States can avoid becoming embroiled in a global struggle over imported oil and whether the world will escape catastrophic climate change."

With bases encircling China, the U.S. military has the capacity to stave off a growing Chinese

presence and control its growing demand for energy. South Koreans know this reality well. In a recent visit to Pyeongtaek, when Bruce Gagnon asked the Pyeongtaek Peace Center, an organization based in South Korea, to whom the United States was directing its aggression, Center representatives replied, "Russia and China. Russia has large supplies of natural gas. It's about energy wars."

### **Close Down U.S. Bases and Cut Military Spending**

As grassroots efforts are made in the U.S. to shift funding from the military budget to our communities, we must remember the active struggles of groups overseas that are directly resisting the footprint of U.S. military bases. Whether in Okinawa, Guam, or Korea, residents are on a daily basis fighting to stop the construction or expansion of U.S. military bases. Not only are the massive joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises diverting critically needed public dollars in both countries, they are moving the two Koreas further away from the promise of reconciliation and reunification. U.S. bases in Korea are no longer needed. The real issue is how these bases are serving to keep tensions high on the Korean peninsula and in the region as a whole.

Rather than accept the unending stalemate that continually threatens to erupt into war, in the United States, [a broad movement](#) is calling for the end of the Korean War, in solidarity with groups in South Korea that have long campaigned for the same demand. The signing of a peace treaty is the first step to demilitarizing not just the Korean peninsula, but also the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, and paving the way for a self-determined reunification of the two Koreas.

Bringing the war dollars home refers not just to active, hot-wars but also to the network of bases that makes war and U.S. empire-building possible and thwarts democratic advancement and the development of more just, equitable societies.

Perhaps few can express the importance of this struggle better than those who have defended their rights to land and life against US military interests. From 2004 to 2007, for nearly 1000 days, villagers in Pyeongtaek, South Korea held candlelight vigils to stop the expansion of the US military base, Camp Humphreys. When asked by the South Korean Defense Ministry for the price for his land, Pyeongtaek village leader Kim Ji Tae replied, "The price will be unimaginably high. The price must include every grain of rice grown and harvested here. It must include all of our efforts to grow them, as well as our whole life here, including our sighs, tears, and laughter. The price must include the stars, which have witnessed our grief and joy, and the wind, which has dried our tears. If all of these could be added, I would tell you the price."

We must call for the defunding of U.S. bases and war games, and join this global people's struggle for peace and sovereignty.

*Reprinted with permission courtesy of [Foreign Policy In Focus](#)*

### **Read more by Christine Ahn**

- [Sixty Years of Failed North Korea Sanctions](#) – August 20th, 2010
- [Democracy Thwarts US Base Plans](#) – February 11th, 2010

---

Article printed from Antiwar.com Original: <http://original.antiwar.com>

URL to article: <http://original.antiwar.com/christine-ahn/2011/04/01/bring-war-dollars-home-by-closing-down-bases/>

Copyright © 2009 Antiwar.com Original. All rights reserved.