



Most U.S. Military Troops Aren't Where You Think

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Since August, when President Trump announced his strategy of sending more troops to Afghanistan, feelings that the U.S. is increasing military presence in the Middle East and entangling itself in others' wars have intensified. The United States far surpasses any other country in the world when it comes to the number of military troops based overseas. But a majority of these troops are based not in conflict-ridden countries like Afghanistan, as you might expect, but in developed, peaceful democracies.

And three times as many in Germany. Moreover, Afghanistan ranks only fifth on the list of most active-duty U.S. military personnel — behind South Korea and Italy. That's according to June 2017 data from the Defense Manpower Data Center, the statistical arm of the U.S. Department of Defense.

But why the huge U.S. presence in these countries? "The logic of having the forward-deployed military bases in these peaceful countries stems from back in the Cold War when we felt that we needed to help contain the Soviet Union and prevent their expansion," says John Glaser, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a public policy think tank.

Today, these forces mainly perform peacekeeping duties and have a more strategic importance, explains Jeffrey Hornung, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, another policy think tank. "Germany and Italy are important airfields for refueling fighter planes, as well as reconnaissance and surveillance," he says, adding that they're also closer to potential flashpoints like the Middle East. The bases in Japan, a legacy presence from the World War II era, along with bases in South Korea, help maintain peace in the Pacific.

The United States has about 800 military bases overseas, the most in the world — by contrast, other developed nations like Britain, France and Russia combined have fewer than 50 bases abroad.

Glaser claims that a large overseas military presence does more harm than good. It can, at one extreme, get the United States involved in unnecessary foreign wars, he says, pointing to what's

happened in the Middle East: “Instead of deterring the enemy, military bases can antagonize them.” Bases can also lead to tensions between U.S. personnel and locals, and do little to ensure the safety of the American people, says David Vine, professor of anthropology at American University and author of *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*. “[A large overseas U.S. military presence] makes the world a more dangerous place,” he adds.

Still, American military presence overseas is at its smallest in six decades, according to a recent [Pew report](#). But will this downsizing trend continue? Looking at President Trump’s foreign policy stance till now — surging troops in Afghanistan, welcoming NATO expansion, launching Tomahawk missiles in Syria without congressional approval — that doesn’t seem likely, Glaser contends. For now, he adds, the United States continues to play global cop.