

Around the Globe, US Military Bases Generate Resentment, Not Security

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As we debate an exit from Afghanistan, it's critical that we focus not only on the costs of deploying the current force of more than 100,000 troops, but also on the costs of maintaining permanent bases long after those troops leave.

This is an issue that demands a hard look not only in Afghanistan and Iraq, but around the globe—where the US has a veritable empire of bases.

According to the Pentagon, there are approximately 865 US military bases abroad—over 1,000 if new bases in Iraq and Afghanistan are included. The cost? \$102 billion annually—and that doesn't include the costs of the Iraq and Afghanistan bases.

In a must-read article in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Sciences*, anthropologist Hugh Gusterson points out that these bases “constitute 95 percent of all the military bases any country in the world maintains on any other country's territory.” He notes a “bloated and anachronistic” Cold War-tilt toward Europe, including 227 bases in Germany.

“It makes as much sense for the Pentagon to hold onto 227 military bases in Germany as it would for the post office to maintain a fleet of horses and buggies,” writes Gusterson.

In a recent Italian documentary *Standing Army*, the late author and *Nation* contributor Chalmers Johnson says, “The unit of empire in the classic European empires was the colony. The unit for the American empire is not the colony, it's the military base... Things that can't go on forever, don't. That's where we are today.”

The bases—isolated from the host communities and, as Gusterson writes, “generating resentment against [their] prostitution, environmental damage, petty crime, and everyday ethnocentrism”—face growing opposition from local citizens.

Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) fellow Phyllis Bennis says that the Pentagon and military have been brilliant at spreading military production across virtually every Congressional district so that even the most anti-war members of Congress are reluctant to challenge big Defense projects.

“But there's really no significant constituency for overseas bases because they don't bring much money in a concentrated way,” says Bennis. “So in theory it should be easier to mobilize to close them.” What is new and heartening, according to Bennis, is that “there are now people in countries everywhere that are challenging the US bases and that's a huge development.”

For example, in the wealthy, conservative town of Vicenza, Italy, environmental and progressive activists have been joined by the right-wing government, city council, and local businesspeople in the “Stop Dal Molin” base expansion campaign. A NATO base is already located there, but the US is trying to expand to a new base and build a new landing strip less than 500 meters from some of the original Palladio mansions of the Renaissance, according to Bennis.

IPS has worked diligently not only with allies abroad but also in the US to promote a more rational military posture with regard to bases. Other active groups include the American Friends Service Committee and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the latter focusing on bases in Latin America.

In 2010, IPS mobilized congressional opposition to the building of a new base in Okinawa by working with groups in the US and in Japan. This campaign included the creation of a grassroots coalition of peace, environmental and Asian American groups called the Network for Okinawa, a full-page ad in the Washington Post, articles in various progressive media, and a series of congressional visits. (The East Asia-US-Puerto Rico Women’s Network Against Militarism also played a key role, linking anti-base movements in Okinawa, Guam, Puerto Rico and Hawaii.)

The Congressional outreach culminated in a recent bipartisan effort by Senators Jim Webb, Carl Levin, and John McCain to reject the proposed base in Henoko and rethink US military force posture in Asia overall. Other Congressional activity includes Congresswoman Barbara Lee’s recently passed amendment barring defense appropriations for FY2012 from being used to establish permanent bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) People’s Budget which calls for base closures, force reductions, and “decreasing routine deployment of US troops overseas.”

Representative Mike Honda—a House Budget Committee member and lead author of the CPC budget—says, “Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, says the biggest threat to our national security is our debt. Now if the Pentagon would just be willing to do something about it, we might actually see a different defense strategy abroad and a different defense budget here at home.”

While major peace organizations and other groups focused on human needs are demanding that the military budget be cut in order to fund vital domestic programs, the empire of bases is often overlooked.

“Most people involved in this work have no idea that the US maintains a network of roughly 1,000 foreign military bases,” says Joseph Garson, Director of Programs for the American Friends Service Committee in New England and editor of *The Sun Never Sets: Confronting the Network of U.S. Foreign Military Bases*. “Similarly, they have no awareness that the bipartisan budget reduction commission called for cutting the number of US foreign military bases by a third.”

One budget item activists have set their sights on is AFRICOM—the US Africa Command launched in 2008 and responsible for overseeing all military and security programs and operations in Africa, and an increasing amount of development work. The AFRICOM headquarters alone costs almost \$300 million for operation and maintenance, with an additional \$263 million for support and \$200 million for the Camp Lemonier base with 1,800 US troops in Djibouti. Based on the FY 2010 budget requests, AFRICOM would receive approximately \$1.4 billion.

IPS took the lead in organizing the Africa Human Security Group, a coalition of faith-based and youth groups, African Diaspora groups, academics and Africa-based allies opposed to the development of the new US Africa Command. In general, African civil society is strongly opposed to AFRICOM and US military involvement on the continent. In large part due to widespread African criticisms, the US was unable to headquarter the command on the continent. It is located instead outside of Stuttgart, Germany.

“This is a victory for Africans,” says Emira Woods, co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus at IPS, “and one that should be sustained through the next round of base negotiations.”

The opposition to US military bases stretched like tentacles across the globe has also led to some interesting transpartisan work. IPS research fellow Miriam Pemberton and the Cato Institute’s Chris Preble were part of a task force that argued substantial cuts to the military budget must be part of any deficit reduction package.

The task force report offered \$1 trillion in military cuts over 10 years, a proposal adopted by Bowles-Simpson Deficit Commission members Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky and labor leader Andy Stern. Included is the idea that greater savings could be achieved by adopting the military strategy of “Offshore Balancing” which would involve pulling most of our bases out of Asia and Europe, at a savings of approximately \$80 billion per year. IPS’s forthcoming Unified Security Budget of the United States, FY 2012—which will be published in July—will include a new section on the military roles and missions we can do without, thereby realizing substantial savings. It will lean heavily on overseas bases and “military support missions” like AFRICOM.

The plain truth is that the staggering resources we spend to support an empire of bases isn’t making us more secure. Instead, they fuel resentment and consume resources desperately needed to invest here at home, as well as targeted development aid that could be used more wisely and efficiently by non-military experts.

“President Obama has ordered a new review to look for ways to cut the military budget,” says Pemberton. “Crucially, it is supposed to be—in his words—based on ‘a fundamental review of America’s missions, capabilities, and our role in a changing world.’ First on the list of roles we need to jettison—reaping benefits in billions of dollars saved and in international good will earned—is world policeman with precinct bases on every continent.”

Bennis agrees.

“The President talks about re-setting, and ‘new relations’ with people and governments around the world. Here’s an opportunity to make good on it.”