



Introduction

A few years ago, it was briefly fashionable to claim that empire had been “deterritorialised”, meaning that the physical outposts of imperial control had been replaced with more amorphous forms of political control. But if you map the remaining networks of foreign military bases worldwide, they tell a different story. More than 1,000 such bases and installations remain, most of which are run by the US military – which has a military presence in over 130 countries. These range from vast installations, like Guantanamo Bay, to smaller spy bases or joint training camps, stores for nuclear missiles, “rest and recuperation” facilities and refuelling stations. In addition, the US and some of its NATO allies complement this vast military presence with an even more elaborate network of port-of-call rights, landing rights for military and intelligence planes, refuel rights and fly-over rights.

Locating military bases outside one’s territory is as old as the concept of an organised army. But the history of the current global network of foreign military bases starts with the colonial period, during which the UK and other European powers set up competing military infrastructures to repress local discontent, ward off other powers and support all kinds of military or civilian operations in and close to colonial possessions. The remains of this colonialism are still visible in the maintenance of foreign bases by the UK and France, but the bulk of today’s foreign military bases belong to the US.

Building the base

Although the US tried to maintain the aura of non-colonial foreign politics throughout the 20th century, its first overseas bases were established in 1898, after it won the last Spanish-American war and confiscated Puerto Rico, Guantanamo Bay, the Philippines, Guam and Hawaii. Hawaii was regarded as crucial at the time by the McKinley administration “to help us get our share of China”. After the second world war, the US expanded its empire of bases rapidly, carving out the bipolar political world map by overloading Europe and east Asia with US troops and armaments, in an attempt to “roll back” the USSR’s aspirations and to be able to fight proxy wars in Asia, Latin America and Africa.

After 1989, the US started a massive “base restructuring” programme. The programme intended to reduce the number of

US troops based in Europe and east Asia, while at the same time expanding its global military reach by opening strategic, often small, bases in previously US-army free areas. In the past decade, this drive towards “full spectrum dominance” has concentrated on establishing a global network of spy bases along similar lines to the Echelon “listening posts”, such as Menwith Hill in the UK, and ground posts necessary for the projected global missile defence project and small “forward located” stations that enable the US to strike fast against anyone at any given moment. This project is ongoing, and on 20 February 2007 the US government announced provisional agreements for new “missile defence” radar bases in Poland and the Czech Republic.

The inability to sustain military ground invasions in Somalia in the 1990s, and more recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, has shed doubt among US military elites over the original aim to reduce the presence of its ground troops overseas. As a result, the withdrawal of troops from Germany, Italy, Japan and Korea seems to have stopped. In addition, the US seems to be planning about a dozen “enduring” bases supporting thousands of its troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, expanding its overseas military infrastructure as well as putting debates about US “withdrawal” into perspective.

Bases are not singular isolated military strongholds. Without its vast network of military bases globally, the US would not have been able to conduct 300-plus overseas military interventions in the 20th century. It would have been a lot more difficult to overthrow Latin American democratic governments friendly to socialist change, or to be so deeply involved in south east Asian wars and campaigns. It would have made the prolonged bombing campaigns against Iraq in the 1990s, not to mention the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the US-backed invasion of Lebanon by Israel, a lot harder. While bases in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Diego Garcia were crucial to these campaigns, the current build-up of military means in Iraq, Afghanistan, central Asia, Pakistan and the Gulf states will allow the US to suppress or even invade Iran in the future.

Foreign bases, local impacts

Foreign military bases are meant to project military power globally, but at the same time, the more visible and everyday effects are seen on a local or national level.



This booklet looks more closely at some of these effects. It draws on specific cases where the proximity of a base has led local populations to protest, often for decades. In its eight chapters, the booklet looks at the “reasons why bases are bad for you”. Each of these chapters looks at the background to the issue, then offers a case study illustrating both the problem and the remarkable effort that people on the ground have made in their relentless struggle against the injustices accompanying foreign military bases.

The booklet looks into the devastating effects of bases on local economies, environments and public health. It also analyses the loss of sovereign power of the “host nation” and the resulting lack of democratic accountability caused by foreign bases, as well as the moral issue of one’s country’s complicity in violations of international humanitarian and war law. It looks at the hike in crime rates that accompanies bases, the inability of most host countries to try US service men and, more specifically, at the high rates of rape, prostitution and exploitation of women associated with many bases. The booklet also relates the stories of those who lost their land, housing, or sacred ancestral grounds to a foreign base, as happened in Diego Garcia, Thule (Greenland) and Vieques (Puerto Rico).


Striking back against empire

Resistance to foreign military presence is almost as widespread as the bases themselves, whether they be colonial strongholds, cold war forward located defence facilities or current “full spectrum dominance” platforms.

For example, Vicenza in Italy is currently witnessing a powerful movement against plans to construct a new base at Dal Molin, the city’s old airport. This was one of the factors behind the recent fall of Prodi’s government. On 18 February 2007, an estimated 120,000 people from across Italy took to the streets of the city (which has a population of 110,000). “We are against that base. We defend our land and do not want to be at the forefront of the global war against terrorism,” said Francesco Pavin from “No to Dal Molin”, a coalition of citizens, antiwar activists, church groups and environmentalists. Cinzia Bottene, an organiser of one of several citizens’ committees against the base, said local residents are concerned that “A new base will put a strain on our infrastructure, our services, our resources. It will destroy our community.”

But this is more than simply a local struggle. As Toni Pigatto, of





the local boy scouts' association, told Inter Press Service, "We do not protest only because they will build yet another military base in Vicenza. We say not here, not anywhere else. We reject the idea that democracy can be spread with weapons."

This same spirit underlies a global network of campaigners, activist and researchers that has emerged over the past three years with the aim of meeting the phenomenon of foreign military bases head-on.

Using an email network, a joint website (no-bases.org) and meetings at Social Forums and other conferences to exchange information, discuss strategies and organise research and campaigns on a global level, this group of organisations and individuals has grown out to be a truly global movement, embedded in the larger movements for social justice and against war.

This booklet is being launched on the occasion of the network's first global conference, held in Ecuador from 5-9 March 2007, where it is calling for the abolition of foreign military bases. It aims to provide people with an easy-to-read overview of some of the arguments against foreign military bases.

The underlying aim of this network is a recognition that, while it remains important to strengthen each individual campaign against any foreign military base, it is time to challenge the whole structure of bases globally. This means questioning the moral, economic and political justifications that underlie the idea that some countries are allowed to export their militarism at such a universal level.

For those struggling to free themselves from the yoke of US and other foreign military involvement, the US Declaration of Independence provides a good starting point. The US aimed to free itself of British rule "For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us" and "For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States." Communities are organising now, worldwide, to declare their own independence from the US and its bases.

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