

Democratic deficit

In almost all cases, foreign military bases operate outside usual democratic processes. Governments, whether democratic or not, enter into deals that are recognisable by the lack of accountability written into them. US base authorities are allowed to carry out their activities in secret. Questions about US military activities, whether directed at the bases themselves or at local and national governments, are met with a wall of silence or a cloud of obfuscation. The activities of US military bases simply fall outside the rights of citizens to ask about what goes on in their countries.

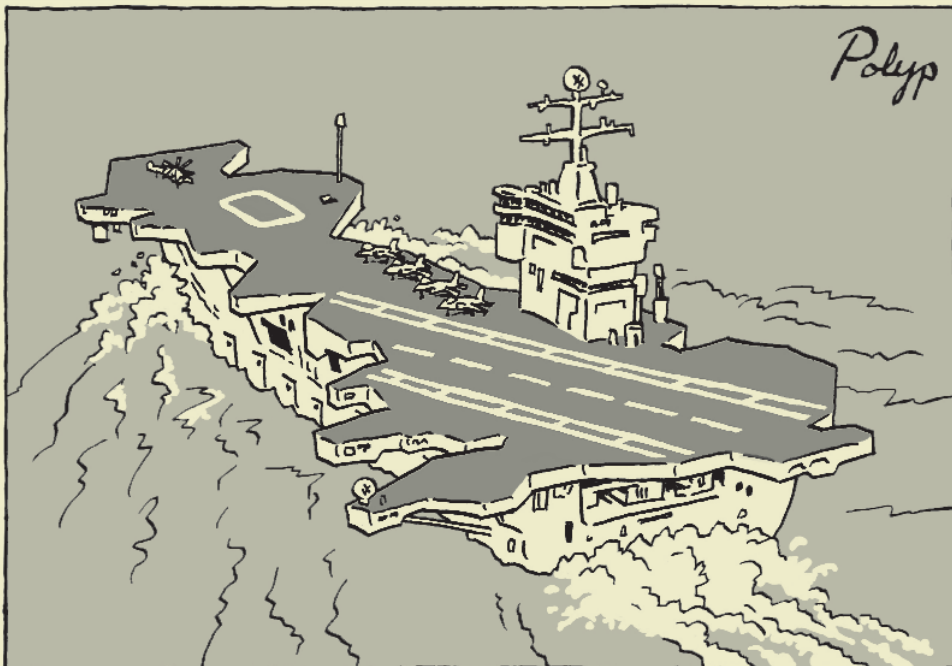
The rules governing US bases are usually covered by Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs), deals negotiated specifically between the US and host governments. The terms are in many cases kept secret, but often exempt US military personnel from visa and tax requirements and from local criminal jurisdiction, as well as granting US forces wider abilities to act outside the usual laws of the country.

Even greater secrecy surrounds the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe. Recent research has shown that the US still has 480 nuclear weapons in six European countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom. But there is no official record of this, with the US and host country governments refusing even to confirm or deny their presence.

In Britain, campaigners against the Menwith Hill spy base have long demanded answers about US activities on the site. Despite being officially labelled as a British Air Force base, it is almost entirely staffed by US personnel, whose role is to monitor telephone and internet communications from Europe,

North Africa, the Middle East and the former Soviet Bloc.

Although the base is situated in Britain, the country's government only receives information from it via its security services – at US discretion and on a so-called “need to know” basis. The US base authorities have tried to use British military liaison officers to have the peace camp outside the base evicted, whilst distancing themselves from any such infringements of the right to protest. Attempts by campaigners across Britain to ask questions of members of parliament or government ministers have been stonewalled. A similar base at Pine Gap in Australia, monitoring communications in the Southern Hemisphere, has also been the target of campaigns by Australians wanting to know exactly what their government is allowing the US military to do – and meeting another wall of silence in the process.



The Philippines

The Philippines hosted two major US bases (and several smaller installations) until 1991 when, in response to decades of popular opposition, the Philippine government did not renew the US military's right to operate bases there. However, a Philippine-US Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a type of SOFA, was signed in 1999 which allows US military forces to conduct joint military exercises in the Philippines, despite the strength of public opinion. Since then, US Special Operations Forces have been involved in counter-insurgency operations, and US troops operating in the country are exempt from the country's regular legal procedures.

Roland Simbulan, a leading peace activist and opponent of US military bases since the 1980s, describes the long history of the struggles against the US militarisation of the country:

"We succeeded in incorporating a provision against nuclear weapons in the new Philippine Constitution drafted after the Marcos dictatorship, and we successfully lobbied in the Philippine Senate for the removal of US military bases and US troops in 1991. These events were part of our struggle for the assertion of Philippine national sovereignty and dignity, which have long been trampled by the forces of US colonialism and the present day neo-colonial regime. It is part of our social awakening as a people, a continuation of our national liberation struggle.

"Since 1999, though, US military exercises have been held year-round, including the deployment of US military advisers and US Special Operations Forces which are involved in counter-insurgency operations with Philippine troops. There is no accountability for their actions or activities, which are covert and lack transparency. The Philippine government, through the VFA, granted US troops involved in the joint military exercises special treatment, such as exemption from customs, immigration procedures and immunity from the regular court procedures should they commit crimes on Philippine territory. They are given special treatment not accorded to Filipino citizens.

"We monitor the US activities very closely. The people are our eyes and ears. We can even hear the US forces breathe. We expose their crimes against the people and how they violate Philippine laws and the dignity of our people, especially women and children, who they use for their so-called 'rest and recreation.' Nothing that they do escapes us.

"Our objective is to remove the US military exercises, training and logistical support from the Philippines. It is part of the overall infrastructure for US military forces worldwide. Without this infrastructure, the US warmongers cannot wage or sustain any wars of intervention or aggression against other countries."