

Global Vigilance in a Global Village: U.S. Expands Its Military Bases

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The consequences of September 11th remain visible on several fronts. Politically, the United States decided to use the tragedy and reorganize the world. Its military bases now cover every continent. The largest of these is situated in one of the tiniest states: Qatar in the Persian Gulf. There are 189 member states of the United Nations. The globe's only superpower maintains a military presence in 140 countries, including significant deployments in 25 countries. It has security arrangements with at least 36 countries.

Empires throughout history have relied on foreign military bases to enforce their rule. U.S. forces are active in the biggest range of countries since the Second World War. The aim is to provide platforms from which to launch attacks on any group perceived by President George W. Bush to be a danger to America. According to defense analysts, the intention is to have a host of such forward bases—staffed by a few thousand troops and technicians all year round—that can provide support for huge reinforcements as required. These bases are being built in or near any country that President Bush decides constitutes “a clear and present danger.”

As of the latest count, there are more than 200,000 troops (half of these in Asia-Pacific) on foreign soil and more than 50,000 personnel afloat in foreign waters. In recent years, an average of 35,000 of these personnel have been involved in contingency operations, mostly around Iraq and in the Balkans. Aside from

these, the United States maintains more than 800 foreign military installations including 60 major ones. Many current U.S. bases were acquired after previous wars—from the Second World War through the war in Afghanistan. Bases obtained in one war are seen as forward deployment positions for some future war, often involving an entirely new enemy. The Bush administration says publicly that it will leave the Central Asian bases after the “war on terrorism” is over, but privately officials admit they are there to stay. As well as bases, the U.S. is sending in military advisers to a host of countries.

The massive introduction of U.S. troops into the Middle East during the Gulf War led to the proclamation of a New World Order rooted in U.S. military power. New military bases in the Middle East were established, most notably in Saudi Arabia, where thousands of U.S. troops have been stationed for more than a decade. The 1990s closed with U.S. military intervention in the Balkans and extensive U.S. support for counterinsurgency operations in South America as part of “Plan Colombia.”

Military doctrine insists that the strategic significance of a foreign military base goes beyond the war in which it was acquired, and that planning for other potential missions using these new assets must begin almost immediately. For this reason the build-up of bases in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and three of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia is inevitably seen by Russia and China as constituting addi-

tional threats to their security. Russia has already indicated its displeasure at the prospect of permanent U.S. military bases in Central Asia.

The perception of U.S. military bases as intrusions on national sovereignty is widespread in “host” countries for the simple reason that the presence of such bases inevitably translates into interference in domestic politics. U.S. overseas military bases thus frequently give rise to major social protests in the subject countries. Until the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 1992, the U.S. bases in the Philippines were widely regarded in that nation as a legacy of U.S. colonialism. Bush’s “war against terrorism” has given the United States the pretext to accelerate its military expansionism throughout the world.

According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, in their recent “What the World Thinks in 2002” poll, resentment toward the United States has grown tremendously in the past two years. In 19 of the 27 countries polled, attitudes toward the United States have fallen. In Muslim majority countries, America’s image has plummeted, as many Muslims believe that the war on terror is a war on Muslims. All across Latin and South America, views toward the United States eroded in the past two years. The largest change was in Argentina, where many Argentinians blame U.S.-dominated financial institutions for their current economic hardships. What is most surprising is that even developed nations have become alienated by Washington’s policies.

U.S. citizens may be convinced by President Bush’s strategy of interventions to defend the “homeland” from attack, or even to build new bases or oil pipelines to preserve U.S. economic power. But as the dangers of this strategy become more apparent, Americans may begin to realize that they are being led down a risky path that will turn even more of the world against them, and lead inevitably to future September 11th-style attacks.

Are there alternatives to a global network of U.S. military bases? There are military answers and there are broader political answers. There is a broader political alternative to a globe-girdling network of bases: dropping the notion that the United States is the world’s policeman. The UN Security Council was supposed to have at its disposal contingents from the member nations’ armed forces under the strategic direction of a Military Staff Committee. The committee, made up of the chiefs of staff of the five permanent members of the Security Council, was to advise on the military requirements for maintaining international peace. The cold war prevented that blueprint from becoming reality. Now the UN Charter could show the way to a less expensive, less one-sided approach to maintaining the peace.

Indeed, the establishment of new bases may in the long run be more critical to U.S. war planners than the wars themselves. The U.S. military interventions cannot all be tied to the insatiable U.S. thirst for oil even though many of the recent wars do have their roots in oil politics. They can nearly all be tied to the U.S.

desire to build or rebuild military bases. The new U.S. military bases, and increasing control over oil supplies, can in turn be tied to the historical shift taking place since the 1980s: with the rise of the “euro bloc” and “yen bloc,” U.S. economic power is perhaps on the wane. But in military affairs, the U.S. is still the unquestioned superpower. It has been projecting that military dominance into new strategic regions as a future counterweight to its economic competitors, to create a military-backed “dollar bloc” as a wedge geographically situated between its major competitors. The Bush administration’s first *National Security Strategy*, released recently, takes an unprecedented step away from cold war views to confront a world beset by the likes of Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda terrorists. Critics are already describing the new strategy as arrogant and dangerous—a far cry from the tone of humility in foreign affairs promised in President Bush’s inaugural address. To supporters, it represents an overdue codification of America’s mission of global leadership. On one thing analysts on both sides agree: In many ways it merely makes explicit what has been U.S. practice for years.

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