

GLOBAL DIALOGUE

Gain a deeper understanding of the forces shaping today's world



- *Analysis and debate on questions of international concern*
- *Articles and book reviews by leading scholars and thinkers*
- *Themed issues, providing in-depth coverage of specific topics*
- *Ideas, information and argument on world affairs, politics, economics, culture and society*

For a truly global perspective on today's issues and events,
subscribe to *Global Dialogue*

Annual rates: individuals US\$30, institutions US\$96

Send subscriptions to: *Global Dialogue*, P.O. Box 23992, CY-1687 Nicosia, Cyprus

Published by the Centre for World Dialogue [www.worlddialogue.org]

39 Riga Fereou Street, CY-1087 Nicosia, Cyprus

Telephone: 357-22511782. Fax: 357-22311752. E-mail: info@worlddialogue.org

Imperial Footprint: America's Foreign Military Bases

ZOLTÁN GROSSMAN

The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against US Military Posts

EDITED BY CATHERINE LUTZ

London, Pluto Press, 2009. 356 pages

Hardback UK £60.00, US \$95.00. Paperback UK £17.99, US \$29.95

“Metaphorically,” observes Catherine Lutz, “the military is spoken of as an ‘arm’ of the state, as having ‘posture,’ ‘reach,’ ‘stance,’ and perhaps most tellingly, a ‘footprint’ ” (p. 21). In the twenty-first century, this military “footprint” can be seen in the form of the vast, global network of military bases belonging to the United States. Lutz’s new anthology, *The Bases of Empire*, asserts that “Bases are the literal and symbolic anchors, and the most visible centerpieces, of the U.S. military presence overseas. To understand where those bases are and how they are being used is essential for understanding the United States’ relationship with the rest of the world, the role of coercion in it, and its political economic complexion” (p. 6).

Lutz, a professor of international studies and anthropology at Brown University, introduces her anthology with a review of the growing military-bases network. As of 2007, the Pentagon officially massed “190,000 troops and 115,000 civilian employees” within 909 military facilities in forty-six countries and territories. Just one of these military installations—the Balad Air Base in Iraq—covers sixteen square miles with an additional twelve-square-mile “security perimeter”. The base can, in fact, be seen from outer space (and can be viewed on Google Earth by downloading the military-bases datafile at www.tni.org). Lutz observes that “While the bases are literally barracks and weapons depots and staging areas for war-making . . . they are also political claims, spoils of war, arms sales showrooms, toxic industrial sites, laboratories for cultural (mis)communication, and collections of customers for local bars, shops, and prostitution” (p. 4).

Like a good geographer, Lutz ties the global phenomenon of US bases to their local realities:

The environmental, political, and economic impact of these bases is enormous and, despite Pentagon claims that the bases simply provide security to the regions they are in, most of the world’s people feel anything but reassured by this global reach. Some communities pay the highest price: their farmland taken for bases, their children neurologically damaged by military jet fuel in their

water supplies, their neighbors imprisoned, tortured, and disappeared by the autocratic regimes that survive on U.S. military and political support given as a form of tacit rent for the bases. (P. 4)

Lutz identifies four major historical periods when the United States has built new military bases, and during which “The presumption was established that bases captured or created during wartime would be permanently retained” (p. 14). The first period was after the United States began expanding into North America, when it annexed Native American and Mexican national territories, and “every Western fort . . . was a foreign military base” (p. 10). The second period was after the 1898 Spanish–American War, and the acquisition of new colonies in the Pacific and Caribbean, which served as “coaling stations” for a globalised US Navy. The third period was after 1945, during the Cold War and the immense extension of US economic power around the world. The fourth period was set in motion after 2001 in the so-called “global war on terror”, which is notable mainly for its similarity to earlier imperial projects, with the same rationales of protecting security and freedom.

It used to be that military bases were built to wage wars, but increasingly it seems that wars are being waged to build bases. After every US military intervention since 1990, the Pentagon has left behind clusters of new bases in areas where it never before had a foothold. The string of new bases stretches from Kosovo and adjacent Balkan states, to Iraq and other Persian Gulf states, into Afghanistan and other Central Asian states. Collectively on a map, the bases appear to form a new US sphere of influence in the strategic “middle ground” between the European Union and East Asia, and may well be intended to counteract the emergence of these global economic competitors.

In his contribution on “US Foreign Military Bases and Military Colonialism”, Joseph Gerson of the American Friends Service Committee analyses the reasons for the Pentagon’s “web of foreign fortresses that surpass those created by Genghis Khan, Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, or Queen Victoria” (p. 51). Gerson notes that bases do not simply project military force abroad, but have many other functions. These include encircling enemies (such as the Soviet Union or Iran), servicing warships and jets, securing fossil fuels from friend and foe alike, controlling and influencing governments and political dynamics, and serving as training and exercise centres, command-and-control facilities, and more recently as torture centres. In a sense, the bases serve as a “tripwire” to prevent any real changes to the status quo—the United States has to intervene in other world regions in order to protect the bases it has already stationed there.

Gerson recalls activists from Guam displaying two maps that illustrated the effects of US bases on their daily lives. One map showed the island’s “best fishing grounds, its best agricultural land, and its best drinking water. The other showed the locations of the U.S. military bases, installations, and military exercises. The two maps were identical” (p. 53). He also relates the tragedy of Diego Garcia, ostensibly a tiny British island-colony in the Indian Ocean. All of the island’s residents were evicted in the 1960s so that it could be occupied by an enormous US base that has served as a lynchpin in every US Middle East invasion and occupation since that time.

Some may be tempted to blame the administration of George W. Bush for the rapid growth in the number of US military bases around the world. But Gerson observes that “While the reckless unilateralism of the Bush–Cheney administration was widely regarded as a radical departure

from more complex and nuanced methods of maintaining the empire, it reflected more continuity than change” (p. 57). During recent Republican and Democratic administrations, the Pentagon has used every crisis as a convenient opportunity to establish a permanent military presence in strategic parts of the world—particularly in the belt stretching from Poland to Pakistan.

The Bases of Empire is invaluable for its documentation of recent changes in US basing strategy. While most critical studies of US military bases seem stuck in Cold War or “post-Cold War” paradigms, this book focuses on the new conditions of the twenty-first century. Uppermost among the new strategies is former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s “lily-pad” scenario, which has seen the proliferation of smaller and more widely scattered bases around the world—including in new regions such as East and West Africa. Because the new bases have fewer personnel (and virtually no military families), they are less visible and socially disruptive to the host nation than earlier sprawling megabases.

A key aspect of the lily-pad strategy is the increasing US use of foreign military installations through basing access agreements, and the repositioning of weapons and supplies. The foremost example, as Ronald Simbulan observes, is the “Visiting Forces Agreement” (VFA), a controversial measure in the Philippines that offers the United States temporary access to its former bases there, allowing it to mount aggressive and nearly constant training exercises. Another major feature of the lily-pad strategy is the turning over of US military functions to private security contractors, to place a civilian fig leaf over armed occupation. As Lutz notes, Balad Air Base houses not only thirty thousand troops, but also ten thousand private contractors (who call the base “Mortarville” because it has been pounded so often by the shells of Iraqi insurgents). The Obama administration is increasing the use of civilian contractors in Afghanistan as well.

As part of the lily-pad strategy, followed closely by the current US defence secretary, Robert Gates, bases have been located in new host countries in order to substitute for bases that have become unpopular in other host countries. For example, new bases in eastern and central Europe—such as Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo—are substitutes for the unpopular and rapidly downsizing US presence in Germany. Operations in Guam and Hawaii have expanded because of the powerful anti-bases movements in the Philippines and Okinawa. The US bases in Iraq were intended partly to be substitutes for the US bases in Saudi Arabia—whose presence in the Muslim holy land fed the resentment that helped lead to the attacks of 11 September 2001. And since Ecuador has announced that the United States will no longer be allowed to use the air base at Manta, Washington has been planning to set up new military bases in Colombia, the region’s most notorious human-rights abuser. By playing this “shell game” with its bases, the Pentagon may also be trying to play off anti-base movements in different countries against one another.

Another new development in the past two decades has been the Pentagon’s ability to deliver force directly from the US “homeland”. The Air Force has undertaken bombing runs around the world (to Panama, Iraq, etc.) from air bases in the United States, rather than exclusively from foreign bases. A related development is the pronounced military build-up of island garrisons that are under US sovereignty or control so that they become virtual aircraft carriers. John Pike, webmaster of the defence website GlobalSecurity.org, predicts that the US military will “be able to run the planet from Guam and Diego Garcia by 2015, even if the entire Eastern Hemisphere has drop-kicked us” (p. 211).

The global proliferation of US bases might cause one to believe that the US military is an unstoppable steamroller that inevitably prevails over the hapless victims in its path, but *The Bases of Empire* highlights several case studies of successful popular resistance. As Lutz observes, nationalist revolutions or public campaigns have ejected large US military bases from at least twenty countries or territories—including the Philippines, Panama, Ecuador, and Vieques (Puerto Rico)—and reduced or modified the Pentagon’s presence in dozens of other countries. In certain other countries—such as Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan—even dictatorial regimes have (at least temporarily) scaled back US bases in the face of public dissent.

In 2007, anti-bases activists from around the world met in Ecuador to form the International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases, committed to ending the presence of all militaries outside their own borders. They met again in 2009 in a “Security without Empire” conference in Washington, D.C., buoyed by the strengthened citizens’ opposition to US bases in Italy, South Korea, Japan, the Czech Republic, and other countries. The network’s website at www.no-bases.org documents the struggles in each country, and discusses unified strategies and actions to overcome the bases “shell game” played by the Pentagon, and to prevent the growing global movement from becoming segmented and divided.

Lutz does a great service to the global movement by including case studies by anti-bases activists and scholars themselves, who deftly explore the local nuances and complexities unique to their regional situations. The contributors cover Latin America and the Caribbean (John Lindsay-Poland), Europe (David Heller and Hans Lammerant), Iraq (Tom Engelhardt), the Philippines (Roland Simbulan), Diego Garcia (David Vine and Laura Jeffery), Vieques (Katherine McCaffrey), Okinawa (Kozue Akibayashi and Suzuyo Takazato), Turkey (Ayse Gül Altmay and Amy Holmes), and Hawaii (Kyle Kajihiro).

The authors discuss innovative strategies and tactics of the anti-bases movements, such as the “bombspotting” campaigns that have monitored nuclear weapons in Europe and tracked the caravans transporting such weapons in Britain. Other tactics include the activist occupations of naval bombing ranges on Vieques and Kaho’olawe (Hawaii) that not only stopped the shelling, but restored part of the islands for public use—pending the US Navy’s painfully slow munitions clean-ups. Local opposition has succeeded in preventing the expansion of bases in Okinawa (Japan), and blocked the use of US bases in Turkey as launching-pads for the US invasion of Iraq.

But the book does merely cheer on the anti-bases movements, or present them as a monolithic bloc. The contributors take a more original and innovative approach by describing the difficulties of building and maintaining social-movement alliances against the bases. For example, Diego Garcia activists have followed divergent strategies: to return the island to Mauritius, to return evicted residents to the island, or to return the region to a relatively demilitarised state. These strategies often conflict with one another and by no means entail a common goal—closure of the US base on the island—despite the use of the common yet ambiguous slogan, “Give Us Back Diego!” In contrast, political factions with different stances towards the colonial status of Puerto Rico agreed to frame their Vieques demands primarily around environmental health and safety for residents, as reflected in the slogan, “Not One More Bomb!”, and met with much greater success than did the Diego Garcia activists.

The opposition in Okinawa has similarly coalesced around safety for residents, and against the harassment and rape of local women by US military personnel. In the Philippines, various concerns about militarism, women's rights, and environmental safety reinforced the Filipino nationalist movement, helping it to throw off decades of American neo-colonial control. In Hawaii, about 17 per cent of the population is part of the US military community, and 19 per cent are Native Hawaiians—many of whom oppose not only the bases (largely for desecrating sacred and natural sites), but also the original illegal US annexation of their islands.

The main hurdle that the anti-bases movement must overcome, however, is the stunning lack of awareness among American citizens of their “empire of bases”. In her foreword, feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe offers useful insights into why the US public and media have a “lack of curiosity” about the bases. Most Americans assume that the bases have been invited in by host countries, that the latter enjoy stability and material benefits as a result, and that contact with the most “civilised” military in the world “can only prove beneficial to the fortunate host society” (p. xi). Catherine Lutz's book documents that most of these assumptions are untrue, and in fact are the opposite of the real experiences of local residents living near US military bases abroad. *The Bases of Empire* is a useful source for Americans asking why their foreign policy seems only to diminish national security for other countries, and for their own, and an invaluable handbook for Americans who really seek a new relationship with the rest of the world. □