

Making the World Less Safe for Democracy

If we wish to know why democracy is slipping around the world, maybe we need to look at how we project it abroad, especially as the Fourth of July draws near.

Ever since the Cold War, the Pentagon has been the chief architect of US foreign policy, with the State Department dragging along behind. A look at our overseas military and diplomatic installations supplies the proof. Currently we run 750 overseas military bases at a cost of \$80 billion annually, three times the number of such bases from all other nations combined. That 750 base total is also nearly three times the 277 embassies, consulates, and missions run by the State Department. And in the case of Iraq, our embassy in Baghdad is so heavily fortified that it functions as much as an armed camp as it does a diplomatic station.

There are several compelling reasons why we should reduce the number of military bases abroad and demilitarize our foreign policy. To begin with, their sheer number sends the message that we would rather impose our will on other nations than understand or negotiate mutually satisfactory agreements with them. Along with its military bases, the US is the largest arms seller in the world. And so we arm the planet. That means lucrative business for arms merchants, but little profit elsewhere if we wish to understand how other countries see us. Consider the matter of gathering both general information and intelligence. If we wish to know friends and adversaries alike, we would do far better with quiet diplomacy and cultural exchange. Ears do far better at listening than guns.

Then there are the costs to taxpayers at home, where the percentage of our fellow citizens who are ill-fed, ill-housed, unhoused, unwell, and ill-paid is a national embarrassment. According to the National Priorities Project, a fraction of the \$80 billion we spend on overseas military bases each year would set those wrongs right. This is not so much a matter of guns and butter as it is a matter of guns and bread.

The environment also suffers, in several ways. By itself, the US military is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, thereby increasing the existential dangers of climate change and worsening the risk of human extinction. Much of its emission results from fossil fuel expended to ship supplies to military bases worldwide. The burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have sickened many of the troops stationed there, are further instances of the environmental damage which our overseas bases have done. This summer's RIMPAC naval drill off the coasts of Hawaii and California is yet another example of the wreckage which will follow. Countries from around the Pacific rim, along with Israel, the UK, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, India, and Sri Lanka, are participating, with the US setting the agenda.

Much of that environmental damage comes at the expense of people in the countries where our bases are located. For years, the people of Okinawa have protested both the environmental damage and the sexual exploitation of the island's women at the hands of US troops and sailors there. Even worse is the case of the base at Diego Garcia, where British and American authorities threw the island's native people completely out of their homeland, casting them into poverty and slum life in Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Some of our bases abroad subvert our own treaty obligations, in spirit if not in letter. Articles 1 and 2 of the Non-Proliferation Treaty forbid the transfer of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear nations, and forbid non-nuclear powers from receiving them. Nonetheless, we store nuclear weapons at our bases in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany, and Turkey. Because we store them at US bases there, our government claims they are not on foreign soil, a convenient technicality which mocks all our talk of respect for a rules-based order and respect for the rule of law.

Our bases abroad often serve as launching pads for interventions in other countries, and to that degree are offensive. There are many cases in point, going back to the mid-1900s. Here are some: Iran, 1953; Guatemala, 1954; the Dominican Republic, 1964-65, Nicaragua in the 1980s; El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s; Grenada, 1983; Panama, 1989, Iraq from 1991 onward, especially from 2003. As often as not, those interventions have cost lives and untold suffering. Our military operations from 2001 onward, what we have called endless war, have cost 4.5 million lives and have displaced 38 million people. Such is the strange fruit of what our government describes as defense of the planet. In the case of Saudi Arabia, our bases in the Middle East have served to support its war in Yemen, the rough and ready brutality of which matches Russia's crimes in the Ukraine.

Regrettably, our overseas bases are often scenes of sexual assault and substance abuse among those living there. Along with that, frequent turnover and reassignment of personnel makes it hard for military families to establish a stable life for themselves. What example does that set for the children affected?

In at least two major cases, the very location of our bases increases international tension and potential for major conflict. As China sees it, our bases close to its borders are a standing announcement that we claim jurisdiction over its foreign policy and a reminder of the humiliation it suffered at the hands of the west in the 1800s and early 1900s. That reduces the chances of arriving at an understanding of where Chinese and American influence should prevail, and how that influence should express itself. Nor does it leave the nations near China secure.

Then there's Russia. Steady NATO expansion eastward gave Vladimir Putin every excuse he needed to launch his vicious invasion of Ukraine. When George Kennan and Henry Kissinger saw what was going on, they knew what was coming. They warned us, but our leaders didn't listen. Now Ukraine bleeds, and all Europe is on edge.

Despite our own country's often-expressed and well-meant hopes for peace, the sheer number and proportion of our military bases abroad suggests that we prefer diplomacy by the sword. Along with our current program of nuclear rearmament, it reduces the chance that we shall ever rid ourselves of nuclear weapons.

As the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and municipal and national mayors' conference resolutions here in the United States show, most of the world's people are sick and tired of the arms race and demand a demilitarized planet. So far, the nuclear weapons states and

their allies have refused to listen. Dangers increase, and the ability of people to govern themselves and chart their own destiny falls apart. This is hardly the way to strengthen democracy.

References: one of the best scholars on this issue is David Vine, professor of anthropology at American University. His books on the subject include *The United States of War* (2020), *Base Nation* (2015), and *Island of Shame* (2009). Royalties from that last book go to support the Chagossians whom the British and Americans threw off their native island of Diego Garcia. For both the economic and human costs of excessive armament, three of the best organizations to consult are The Center for Defense Information, Brown University's Cost of War Project, and the National Priorities Project. They also provide useful geopolitical analysis.

submitted by John Raby, June 2022