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American Perspectives on U.S. Military Bases in Asia and the Pacific

by

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This exploration of American ideas about U.S. military bases around the Pacific Rim is a personal, impressionistic one, not at all comprehensive. Rather than give an assessment of developments vis-a-vis the bases themselves, I hope to uncover the cultural, political and psychological factors that influence domestic discussions and actions concerning U.S. military establishments in Asia and the Pacific Region.

First, let me offer some general observations about American perceptions of the global community. Most basic is the near total unconcern and ignorance of Americans about the world outside the U.S. except when events force awareness of the rest of the world on us. The bulk of the U.S. population, including political leaders and policy makers without firsthand experience of base communities abroad, is unfamiliar and unconcerned with the problems caused to host communities as well as to the United States by its military presence in foreign nations. That lack of awareness and concern does change when, as occasionally happens, some development or event involving U.S. military stationed overseas catches the attention of American news organizations, but this is very rare.

In addition, since the late 1940s, Americans have grown used to the existence of large U.S. military establishments in other countries, taking their existence for granted and assuming their country will

always have such establishments in some form or other. When I was a U.S. diplomat in Korea, I was often surprised by the seeming inability of Americans, even those living in Seoul, to connect anti-American feeling with the locations and privileges of American military personnel in major South Korean cities. Currently, for example, the opposition to construction of the U.S. naval base on Cheju Island is not widely known beyond the concerned offices of the U.S. government and some in the American peace community, and hardly understood even by those who are aware of the issue.

A second fundamental truth is that Americans by and large ignore history, especially history that happens outside the United States but our own history as well. When a probable candidate for the Republican Party nomination for President, Representative Michelle Bachmann, termed John Quincy Adams--nine years old at the time of the American Revolution--a Founding Father and implied he had made critical contributions to our founding documents, many people blandly accepted this very wrongheaded version of their own history. Similarly, although it was front page news in 1995, very few Americans now know anything about the progress, or more accurately, lack of progress in reducing the size of the U.S. military presence here on Okinawa, nor do most of us care about either reduction or relocation of the Marine garrison here. This ignorance or unconcern about the impact of American actions outside the United States is unfortunately characteristic of my country's interactions with the global community, and especially so whenever interests perceived as vital to American security might be threatened. Apart from the occasional story or editorial about "the man in the street" in some country in the news, the mainstream U.S. news media have not conveyed to American audiences the perspective of cultures outside the American mainstream, not to mention the complexity of many international issues. That perspective is readily available through the Internet home pages of newspapers published in foreign countries, but the truth is that most Americans throughout most of the nation's history have not concerned themselves with what happens beyond America's borders. Few are now aware that in Asia, the host countries are paying huge sums of money to maintain the American bases on their soil.

A third factor is that the United States switched in the 1970s from a citizen army of draftees to a professional military composed of volunteers. The decades since the transition from an army in which nearly any young man expected to serve for two years to a self-selected, volunteer military have

insulated the bulk of American citizens from the realities of military life. One consequence is that soldiers have been alternately demonized and idolized in American pop culture since about 1980. Before that, military service was the norm and viewed as a necessary but not particularly noteworthy responsibility of American male citizens. Up until the election of Bill Clinton as President, Americans expected candidates for our top elected office to have served in the military, preferably in time of war. That is no longer the case and has not been for two decades now.

Studies have shown that military officers, largely a self-selected professional group throughout American history, but until recently engaged deeply with the larger society and its politics, are increasingly isolated from mainstream attitudes and thoughts. This makes sense, since they are no longer exposed to a diversity of thought and opinion among the men and women whom they lead. Under the draft, men—and it was exclusively men at the time—entered the military from all walks of life, all socioeconomic classes, and all places on the political spectrum. Most non-officer soldiers now, especially the ones who make a career of the military, are working class, from rural areas and with limited educations. There are exceptions to this characterization, of course, but more significant is the lack of diversity in experience, political perspective and life experience.

Turning from the general public to U.S. policy makers and political elites, the same tendency to ignore or minimize history and events outside the U.S. seems to prevail among U.S. political leaders and, with some exceptions, policy makers. With an election cycle that now seems endless, elected officials and those who aspire to elected office concern themselves with the next election, whether they are running for office or not, since the fate of their party will affect their own fate when they do run. Their focus is also understandably domestic rather than foreign. Ignorance and disinterest characterize the average American's perceptions of events outside of her/his own community and this applies particularly to less experienced elected officials. Even so, a number of elected officials and policy-makers are more informed and concerned about the global community but these people often seem paralyzed or ineffective because of lack of public understanding and support and the political imperative to act on problems closer to home. Self-interest can pierce that cloud of unknowing in the best of circumstances: after the breakup of the Soviet Union, there was an effort to close bases inside the U.S. and to effect some reductions in bases in Europe and even, briefly, there was talk of draw

downs from Korea.

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American communities adjacent to domestic military establishments campaigned hard against closure of the bases they saw as providing vital economic energy to their communities. Stalemate was the result, both in the U.S. and abroad, and so, despite gradual reductions, there are still roughly 80,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in western Europe. In the Republic of Korea, the official number of U.S. troops is roughly 28,000 soldiers but as you know there are thousands more there at any given time. Still, there have been some reductions and base consolidations over time.

Since 1998, the number of U.S. military establishments abroad has actually increased, although there have been shifts in emphasis with forces drawn into new areas like Afghanistan, Iraq and the Arabian Gulf. These foreign bases as you know serve many functions, including staging areas for military exercises. Most military training in the U.S. takes place on federal government-owned land, land controlled by the U.S. military such as the National Training Center in the high desert of California. Because of the remoteness and isolation of such training centers, policy makers and political leaders rarely need to consider possible consequences for civilian communities when large scale military training exercises take place. Host communities tend to be small, more rural towns and cities and many are located in the South and Southwest. U.S. Army tanks do not damage or destroy crops and property in the U.S. as they have done quite often during exercises in the Asia-Pacific region. When the impact of exercises and testing on remote communities has made news in the U.S., it has been considered an aberration rather than a major problem, and soon gets dismissed as the fault of attitudes and perceptions that have since been corrected. This attitude of “past mistakes cannot re-occur” has with depressing regularity reinforced dismissal of the grievances of communities surrounding bases in Japan, Korea, the Philippines and elsewhere around the region and the world. Part of the explanation lies in the limited experience U.S. civilian and military officials have with base-community tensions in the United States; part must also be related to chauvinism or racism, discounting the lives and livelihood of non-U.S.-citizens.

In view of the current economic situation in the United States, one might expect a rising tide of public opinion in favor of withdrawing U.S. military personnel from at least some of the places they are currently stationed. Although there are more members of the U.S. Congress talking about the need to

reduce military spending, the specific cuts these legislators advocate tend to be expensive, long-term

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weapons development or research programs, not base closure or base relocation plans. Truthfully, few specifics of any sort have been fully discussed. As most of you are aware, U.S. military leaders and planners are strong advocates of expansion of bases in the Asia-Pacific region as a counterweight to renewed Chinese military power. As a result, and because we have already begun the 2012 presidential campaign season, there is little chance of any real movement on base eliminations or consolidations over the next several years. I recognize this is a gloomy forecast but it is realistic. Consider the way the U.S. postponed honoring a number of its obligations under the 1994 Geneva Agreement on the North Korean nuclear program, or the way it has postponed the changes in configuring the U.S. presence on Okinawa since 1995. In both cases, domestic considerations steered decision-makers toward procrastination.

No movement does not mean there will be no debate or controversy. Among policy makers, there are competing views of China and of its growing influence; one view seeks cooperation, the other assumes conflict. The latter view unfortunately might well prevail, if only because American media organizations and political organizers find that sensational, simplistic story lines attract larger audiences and revenues than does coverage of international affairs that reflects the true complexity of contemporary life. Another factor is the fairly consistent ineptitude of Democratic presidential administrations when handling national security issues. In this respect, President Obama has sometimes stood out from his predecessors but his most significant actions have been in nuclear arms reduction negotiations and prioritizing relations with the Muslim world.

With the above background, let's consider the U.S. bases from the perspectives of policy makers first, and then of the American peace movement. In terms of the U.S. security posture, despite quibbles over some issues such as how best to handle the situation on the Korean Peninsula, there is considerable agreement among Republicans and Democrats that the current base structure may not be ideal but it is adequate. Almost no one in a position to influence policy is pushing strongly for base closings or reductions, with the possible exceptions of a small number of well-known Senators and Congresspeople, who in many cases are risking their careers by so doing. The reason for this conservatism in part grows out of the peculiar insensitivity America has shown throughout much of the

last 150 years to developments outside its borders. It also is viewed by voters as a lower priority than

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job creation and, paradoxically, cutting federal government spending. Tracing the history of the U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula may illustrate my argument.

In 1945, the first American troops arrived as occupiers of the southern part of the peninsula. Many of the occupation forces had already departed when what we call the Korean War began, and U.S. forces reentered Korea throughout the course of that conflict. They then remained there for decades as both a deterrent and a threat to territorial or hegemonic ambitions by other powers in Northeast Asia. Over that period, the rationale for the continuing presence of U.S. troops on Korean soil was as a defense against a southern invasion by North Korea; after the Nixon troop draw down in the early 1970s, the defense became a tripwire, a kind of guarantee to the South Korean government of U.S. support and assistance. As South Korea developed into a stable, democratic society and an increasingly sophisticated economy, the role of the troops was further redefined, becoming a guarantee to the nations of the region that the U.S. remains committed and engaged, a friend to all but a friend prepared to respond to situations it does not like with nuclear-capable forces on land, in the air and at sea. As an occasional eyewitness to the lengthy negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program in the 1990s, I was often struck by how little overt reference was ever made to the U.S. military presence on North Korea's southern border and to the east across the Sea of Japan. The American security community believed then, and still believes, that the presence of U.S. military units on the Korean peninsula and in Japan is an asset in the ongoing uncertainty about North Korea and now a counter to growing Chinese influence in Northeast Asia. What's wrong with this belief is that the foreign affairs and national security community of the U.S. has not fully considered changes in the host countries, technological developments, and altered geopolitical conditions.

At the same time, the American government was engaged in negotiations with the government of South Korea over the Status of Forces Agreement and the future of the large base in downtown Seoul which houses not only the United Nations command but also the U.S. Command. These negotiations were sometimes, and perhaps consistently, viewed within the U.S. government as an opportunity to shift relocation and base maintenance costs to the South Korean government. There was a certain amount of pragmatism at play: the American government and military were comfortable enough with the

existing base locations that they were unwilling to move. Korean government funding of the relocation was not

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simply a necessity but also an incentive to change things around at a time when the U.S. was still buzzing with talk of a peace dividend after the end of the Cold War. For most of the 1990s, domestic politics determined much U.S. foreign and security policy. The overriding view of Korea was that a rapidly developing economy could now underwrite the cost of maintaining U.S. bases, often with no knowledge or understanding of the many factors affecting Korean attitudes and willingness to consider paying, for example, relocation costs. In short, the leaders of the negotiations failed to grasp the complexity of the issue from the Korean side, and saw it in fairly simplistic terms from their own position.

What holds true for U.S. bases in Korea holds true for American military establishments throughout the region. The rationale has changed over time but the policy makers view a substantial military presence in this and every other region as vital to U.S. interests ranging from promoting stability—consider the risk of a flawed succession process in Pyongyang as one example—to projecting American influence into growing markets and new trading partners like Vietnam. The current enchantment with military power is atypical of American society but has now persisted for more than thirty years, so it could shift radically at any time. On the other hand, resurgent Chinese economic, political and military power worries some political leaders and policy makers in the U.S. These “hawks” are currently in a minority and not yet an influence on base policies but even the moderate majority prefer maintaining existing bases to the risk of reducing or reconfiguring the U.S. military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Which is to say that the United States, often seeing itself as a nation dedicated to change, is deeply conservative in its approaches to the rest of the world.

Although this sounds gloomy, domestic U.S. factors could, over time, influence public opinion and eventually government decision-makers to favor withdrawals and reconfiguration. Immediately after the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks, political differences over domestic issues and the economy became much less of a factor and a sort of bipartisan unity prevailed for several years. Political differences are once again important, and this time, unlike in the 1990s, there are major economic interests at stake. If economic problems continue to plague the country, genuine reductions to military spending may result.

Base closings may not be very high on the list of any politician's priorities, but stationing troops abroad is expensive in both the long and short term. Bringing the troops home is, politically-speaking, more

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popular than cutting weapons development and manufacturing programs that result in significant job losses. Ten years of seemingly fruitless entanglement in Afghanistan and Iraq have soured many Americans on the idea of military engagements abroad, and efforts by Congress and the Executive branch to reduce Pentagon budgets, although still tentative and superficial, have begun. For the short term, however, any change along the Pacific Rim is unlikely, largely because of the focus on Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, Iraq. In short, the Asia-Pacific region has lost the prominence it once enjoyed among America's foreign affairs community and political leadership. Since 2001, its focus has been the Muslim world, and specifically Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Iraq. That focus may eventually reallocate additional forces from the Pacific Rim to the Persian Gulf but will probably not eliminate the presence of U.S. bases in Japan and Korea.

Turning to the American peace movement, it, too, is focusing on issues other than U.S. bases in the Asia-Pacific region. Some attention has been paid to the Seoguipo naval base construction but the thrust of activists' work for the past several years has been directed toward disengagement from Iraq and Afghanistan and a deep reduction in the military budget in favor of fewer cuts to social services. Another segment of the peace movement has been making headway on nuclear disarmament issues, encouraged by statements by eminent figures like George Schultz and Henry Kissinger as well as by President Obama's evident desire to make progress in reducing nuclear arsenals. All of these movement goals affect the U.S. military posture in Asia and the Pacific in various ways but the ignorance about and acceptance of American bases on foreign land which characterizes most Americans extends to members of the peace movement. Bases in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf are the bases foremost in the thoughts, words and actions of American activists, not because of any broadspread questioning of the policy of stationing troops in other lands, but because of the active conflicts in those areas which expose American soldiers for no clear gain.

In light of the last sixty-seven years, it is unlikely that U.S. troops will leave either Iraq or Afghanistan completely for many years, although their numbers are declining for the moment. As in western Europe, as in Japan and Korea, the U.S. military presence is likely to linger for decades. Peace activists

want to bring the troops home, but for most the elimination of overseas establishments is a lower priority than ending active U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq. So far, this has

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been a realistic but disheartening description of the current state of discussion of U.S. bases in Asia and the Pacific. There are, however, signs of hope, some of which I have referred to in passing.

One hope-giving sign is the increasing amount of discussion about making substantial reductions in the military budget. There are bipartisan proposals in Congress to make deep cuts in military spending, and there have been for at least the last two decades proposals to restructure U.S. forces. The combination of budget reductions and restructuring will have to include changes in the configuration of U.S. military bases overseas, although it is difficult to say what changes might take place. Relocation of some military assets from Northeast Asia to the Persian Gulf is likely but relocation most likely will not include total withdrawal. For members of the U.S. peace movement and for Americans at both ends of the political spectrum whether pacifists or not, total withdrawal of American military forces from foreign nations is a cherished goal, but a distant one.

The realization by elected and appointed policy makers that the current form and level of U.S. military engagement with the rest of the world cannot be sustained is also informed by the ongoing recession, out of which a truly bipartisan consensus that federal spending must be reduced seems to be forming. That consensus is still taking shape, and there are many debates ahead about which programs to keep, which to cut and which to transform. It is clear, however, that the size and shape of the U.S. military forces are critical issues. It is useful in this regard to recall that most U.S. peace activists are advocates for social justice and therefore working hard to preserve social service programs funded by the federal government as well as working to cut military spending and end military involvement outside our borders. To the extent we work with those focused primarily on economic injustice, we can create more pressure on policy-makers to preserve social programs and cut military spending.

Finally, there is an alternative vision of the American military which sees its capabilities reshaped to become less a projection of American power across the globe and more a true self-defense force. Such a contraction would be in line with the historical demobilization of American military forces after major wars, from the War of Independence to 1945. As a transitional phase, some suggest the use of

military capacity for humanitarian relief efforts, environmental mitigation, and even economic development work. All these notions should be explored as to their cost, political feasibility and likely

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benefits, but all of them can be used to justify forward deployment of U.S. military resources, that is, foreign bases. Thank you for your attention.

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