

Is there an alternative to high-risk bases?

MILITARY NECESSITIES & POLITICAL UNCERTAINTIES

by Michael Vlahos

Overseas bases go against the American grain. Associated in popular imagination with the emanations of nineteenth-century imperialism, their retention today seems anachronistic, their expansion sinister. Yet this nation has held a global grid of bases since the 1940s; and though shrunk from 150 major naval and air bases in its cold war heyday to a mere 30 today, it remains the underpinning of U.S. global strategy. However reluctantly, the United States has assumed a global commitment, and it has fashioned a strategy of containment to sustain it. American bases abroad are the physical manifestations as well as the emotive symbols of that historic strategy. As such, they help not only to identify America's place in a changing world but also to determine whether such change warrants a reorientation of strategy.

How essential are overseas bases? How will the gathering opposition to them at home and abroad further constrict the capacity of the U.S. to defend its interests? In view of recent events, such as the fall of the shah in Iran and an increasing antipathy to our presence in Greece, Spain, and elsewhere, it is necessary for us to examine the role of overseas bases in the context of alternative American strategic postures. For instance, should the United States simply hold on to its remaining positions as long as it can, regardless of the political cost, or should we seek substitutes in friendlier places, on as-yet-unexploited U.S. territory, or perhaps in a technological *deus ex machina*? And in the absence of adequate substitutes, should certain bases be abandoned before they become untenable? If retention actually exacerbates regional instability, might it not be time to reconsider or even abandon some long-held notions of what constitutes a "vital national interest" in certain regions of the world?

SCOUTING THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The emergence of U.S. bases abroad in the last century marked a national coming-of-age, a world power debut. Overseas posts were seen as the touchstone of, as well as the stepping stones to, our national destiny. Within a Dar-

winian world view, they were the underpinning of economic interests critical to future growth, even to national survival. Through the political application of naval force, the national interest could be upheld, including a market sphere that encompassed both the New World and the Pacific Basin.

The imperial urge for bases was a projection of historic American patterns of expansion onto an oceanic scape. The new strongpoints would mean new American territory: small, strategically precious pieces of the Philippines, of Cuba, of Panama, as well as the whole of Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Even in the era of Third World supineness, however, states like Peru and Haiti managed to resist persistent U.S. coaxing to cede portions of their native earth.

By 1910 the Progressive urge in the U.S. had interred the imperial impulse. The nation was left with a disjointed string of outposts and with two very contrary notions about bases: First, that any sort of sovereign and perpetual presence abroad was tantamount to American imperialism; second, that such fortified outposts, and the ability to project battleship power, were important not merely to the defense of American soil but to the extension of economic and political interests. The tension between these two positions could be safely ignored so long as there was no immediate threat to the Americas.

The fall of France in 1940 changed all that. Nazi air bases in French West Africa could threaten the Western Hemisphere. The United States desperately needed a line of outposts, and FDR's own security vision demanded a community of association. (The notion of "collective security" thus has its origin in Roosevelt's idea of pan-American security.) In order to gain the required bases and yet maintain unity and harmony within the alliance, the new posts were negotiated with great care. It was firmly established as principle that bases would be created only where there was collective need and when both the U.S. and the host nation desired it; that the rights of use accorded the U.S. would have the consent and support of the host government; and that such rights would be exercised in a manner consistent with the needs, customs, and dignity of the host nation.

The imperatives of security in a time of transoceanic threat challenged American diplomatic skills. They also created the expectation that overseas bases would be the fruit of complex negotiations, would have limited tenure,

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would be restricted in use, and would be costly to rent. Above all, they would be a temporary fixture of a threatening world situation, the resolution of which would permit their early dismantling. Thus had the brusque hand of imperialism been replaced by the manners of the diplomat.

Immediately after the Second World War, the U.S. was forced to abandon the concept of an idealized world order based upon the United Nations and a concert of big powers. By 1950 the Soviet Union was recognized as America's postwar antagonist. The Korean War pointed up the need for both global commitment and forward deployment. To sustain the "Free World," it was announced, the Soviet Union would be contained along the rim of Eurasia.

Containment demanded a network of bases to confront the most demanding Soviet challenges in Europe and Korea and to permit a selective response to limited Communist provocations in more marginal areas. The perceived limitations of our conventional forces persuaded the Eisenhower administration to rely primarily on nuclear weapons to enforce its policy of containment. Given the short-legged



bomber technology of the time, it was necessary to establish forward positions, on the very edge of the Soviet glaci.

ASSUMING THE MORTGAGE

In considering the problems of overseas bases today, American discomfort is often compounded by the memory of the ease with which the U.S. erected the superstructure and assumed the mortgage for a global network of bases. We tend to overlook, however, the unique conditions that permitted the United States to accomplish this:

- A large number of bases were already available, an inheritance of the recent world war—among them, 434 naval bases alone.
- The Euro-colonial empires were still largely intact and provided a ready-use infrastructure.
- The emergence of permanent alliances, especially NATO, endowed a sense of permanence to bases in critical theatres.
- The immediacy of the perceived threat persuaded most Free World nations to grant open-ended access to U.S. forces—even to nuclear strike forces.
- The British policing posture along the Central Tier—from Cyprus to Singapore—freed the U.S. from commitment in Southwest Asia and the Indian Ocean, permitting it to focus on two theatres: Western Europe and the Western Pacific.
- U.S. stature and rectitude were seemingly unimpeachable and could be exploited without apparent limit.

By 1960 the U.S. postwar base network was complete, with more than 150 major installations and thousands of minor posts (3,800 in Japan alone) ringing the Communist heartland.

At the time of John F. Kennedy's inauguration, the strategy of containment had reached its apogee. This period saw the cresting of postwar national exuberance. It seemed for a moment that America's sense of global purpose was not simply to defend but to extend the Free World and its institutions. It was also a period that saw a shift in containment strategy in response to two major new developments. The first of these, the growth of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, ended the doctrinal sway of "massive retaliation" and encouraged reliance on conventional responses to local threats. The second development, a series of provocations by the Soviet Union in the Third World, presented the prospect of new and frequent strategic combat in the shadow places of the globe.

The base network had no difficulty implementing the new posture of "flexible response," shifting from nuclear forward deployment to conventional force operations. As the springboard of counterinsurgency initiatives, overseas bases in Southeast Asia became the center of a protracted war. Of the more than one million American military personnel assigned in 1969 to the network of U.S. bases in thirty-three countries, nearly 60 per cent were lending support in the Vietnam conflict.

The expanded use of American bases outside such traditional areas as the industrialized NATO nations and Japan had a deep impact on the ex-colonial world. The period of the Vietnam war was the same one that witnessed the emergence of the iconography of the Third World. And as more and more people came to view America's war in

Indochina as fitting a new pattern of imperialism—and no longer of containment—the overseas base became its symbol.

ASSESSING THE DAMAGES

Vietnam was a multilayered strategic trauma for the United States. First, it seemed to signal an end to America's postwar mission, destroying public support for extended global containment. Second, war expenditures channeled precious defense resources away from other areas of procurement; a postwar domestic backlash led to a decline in real terms in military spending, further reducing American forces. Third, the diplomatic initiatives that were intended to offset the destructive inheritance of the war—*détente* with Russia and rapprochement with China—only accelerated most Americans' feeling of disengagement from the Eurasian theatre of containment and its bases.

Two related developments further weakened the overseas network. First, Britain withdrew its forces "East of Suez," the keystone of the Central Tier of containment. At the moment the U.S. was least able to fill a sudden Indian Ocean void, it was saddled with another Eurasian arena. Second, Vietnam spawned a "revisionist" definition of America's global role, one that tended to strip it of its reputation for worthiness and credibility as an alliance partner. Even traditional Western and Third World allies began to pull away and, while doing so, rewrote the terms of the relationship, notably with regard to the U.S. bases on their soil.

The United States base network declined quickly. The loss of Vietnam delivered key bases directly into the hands of former enemies. The loss of British strong points at Singapore and Aden weakened the management of flexible response outside of NATO and Japan. By the late 1970s the number of major United States air and naval bases had fallen to fewer than thirty. Many of those that remained were subjected to renegotiation. In the Philippines, in Greece, in Spain, in Panama—in each of these it took protracted, seemingly interminable wranglings and elegant diplomatic choreography merely to keep crucial outposts open. Often the U.S. found its movements severely restricted, as was nakedly obvious during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, when Spain denied landing rights at U.S. bases to American aircraft enroute to the Levant.

Despite such losses and restrictions, bases are still very much needed, even in the Third World. Although the "Nixon Doctrine" renounced open-ended intervention, it recognized that the basic ability to respond globally must not be lost. The Carter administration attempted to develop the Nixon approach into an absolute strategic reorientation: It was implied that the U.S. would intervene only in defense of Western Europe, Japan, and Australia; the rest was negotiable. In the administration's view, the American garrison in South Korea was an anachronism. The same was said of Subic Bay and the Panama Canal Zone—where strident demands by the host government seemed to render them expendable in any case.

This shrunken global posture did not last long, however. Events in Afghanistan, Iran, Central America, and elsewhere forced a reluctant administration to shore up what remained of containment's physical shell: the overseas base network. But how much was there—*is* there—to work with?

America's historical experience with overseas bases established a set of norms, or strategic "truths," that will continue to shape this nation's approach to national security:

1. Bases are important to basic national security. As first demonstrated at the turn of the century, the American public accepts a definition of its defense perimeter—including concrete outposts—at transoceanic distance from the continental U.S.

2. Overseas bases should reflect host-nation consent through negotiation and host-nation support through a system of collective security. Bases acquired through the gelling of collective defense treaties are "good." In contrast, bases garnered through bilateral self-interest or strategic sweeteners are necessary perhaps but ultimately "bad," lacking the imprimatur of a security community.

3. The U.S. should feel secure in its tenure and sure of the host government's support of its base rights. A position that might soon become untenable should be divested before it becomes a liability.

4. Bases should be maintained only in free states with free institutions. Although to establish base rights with a particular dictatorship may recommend itself strategically, the very terms of such a relationship run contrary to basic American values.

Today, some 480,000 U.S. military personnel are on active duty in Europe, Japan, South Korea, and Australia or in Navy task groups at sea. Thus a global policy that considers NATO and Northwest Asia bases as indispensable military encampments is even more entrenched than at the height of the cold war. Where ticklish matters continue to be raised—as in negotiations with Greece and Spain—they are more a consequence of the host government's attempt to advance its own country's goals than they are a reflection of real problems over a U.S. presence. Greece uses base rights as a lever against American aid to Turkey. Spain has publicly linked the base issue to a resolution of its claims to Gibraltar. Each is unlikely to give up precious American leverage in such matters by asking the U.S. to leave.

America's base problems are in the Third World, where we have a mere 22,000-man presence. The United States faces a number of challenges in the developing world—not simply from Soviet surrogates or rogue clients but from autonomous states and regional powers that wish to exploit Western needs and interests. In addition, the Soviets have been able to project their power even more forcefully in recent years. With the introduction of full-size carrier battle groups, the Soviets will soon have still more options and greater influence in Third World crises. Accordingly, it is arguable that Western bases in the Third World are more important now than at any time since 1945.

In fact, the U.S. has only three major installations in this "new world": in the Philippines, on Diego Garcia, and in the Panama Canal Zone. The first is unstable and expensive; the second is small, exposed, and barely adequate; the third has been signed away. Forced to rely on such a skeletal structure, the United States is vulnerable to even small shifts in the order of affairs.

America's present base position in the Third World can be summed up as a series of insurmountable issues:

- Increasing insecurity about tenure undercuts the value

of bases for contingency planning and the framing of long-range strategic goals.

- The great susceptibility of such bases to host-nation threats lessens their utility in the conduct of operations.

- The cost of retention has skyrocketed, necessitating ever-larger tribute payments to salve the bruised dignity of the host regime.

- Terms limiting the use of bases are now a normal part of lease renegotiations, and it can thus be expected that any U.S. military operation must obtain the permission of the host nation.

- Bases build up an investment stockpile over the years that, in light of the above, can become an investment wasted.

- The more critical Third World bases become to the survival of U.S. interests, the fewer there seem to be and the more tempting and concentrated a target they become—for limited war, for internal political actions, or for "terrorist" assault.

PROVIDING FOR THE FUTURE

Is there an alternative to such high-risk bases short of simply abandoning the U.S. commitment to an area? Yes. It is expensive, but no more so than is a twenty-year investment in a land base. I refer to a mobile, modular floating base employing semisubmersible offshore plat-

form technology that has already been developed. Such a platform may be as large or as modest as a particular contingency or theatre demands. It would be capable of servicing a fleet task group of one or two carrier battle groups; and an integral floating dock would permit escort maintenance under combat conditions. The floating base would tend to a flock of depot ships, offering the option of mating prepositioned equipment and incoming personnel in a secure environment. It would also operate medium transport aircraft and long-range AWACS and ASW patrol aircraft, thus providing oceanwide sea control as well as a mobile airfield.

The concept is not a new one. Two similar ideas have been discussed. One, the Integrated Supership System (ISUS), involves treasure and technology beyond imagining. Another, the Mobile Operational Large Island (MOLI), is geared to an airforce-airlift mission and conceived as a straightforward substitute for the loss of land-base rights. What the U.S. needs, in fact, is a cross between a ship and an island. It needs an operational mobile base—or, rather, it needs three: one for the Indian Ocean, one for the Western Pacific, and one to support NATO and its southern flank.

Thus would the U.S. obtain a secure foothold where the strategic stress is greatest and its ability to respond weakest. [WV]

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