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US Empire of Bases Grows

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

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It was Jan. 15, 2004, and TomDispatch had only been in existence for a year when Chalmers Johnson, author of the prophetic book *Blowback* (published in 2000 and a bestseller after the 9/11 attacks), did a piece for this site titled “[America’s Empire of Bases](#).” He wrote then: “Due to government secrecy, our citizens are often ignorant of the fact that our garrisons encircle the planet. This vast network of American bases on every continent except Antarctica actually constitutes a new form of empire — an empire of bases with its own geography not likely to be taught in any high school geography class. Without grasping the dimensions of this globe-girdling Baseworld, one can’t begin to understand the size and nature of our imperial aspirations or the degree to which a new kind of militarism is undermining our constitutional order.”

It was a benchmark essay for TomDispatch and a theme — the unprecedented way Washington was garrisoning the planet — that Johnson would return to repeatedly and that others of us would take up. This mattered because, despite the crucial role that Washington’s empire of bases played in the American way of war and its dreams of global dominance, bases were then, and remain today, a phenomenon [largely ignored](#) in the mainstream media.

In 2004, the Pentagon was, for instance, already building the first of its [505 bases](#), the biggest among them meant to be “[enduring](#),” in Iraq — [American ziggurats](#), I called them at the time. Some of these were [large enough](#) to qualify as full-scale American towns, with PXs, fire departments, bus routes, the usual range of fast-food joints, Internet cafes, and the like — and yet it was the [rare American reporter](#) who saw a story of any sort in them, even when visiting one of them. The same was true in Afghanistan, where the U.S. was building (and is still upgrading) 400 or more bases. No one even bothered to try to count them up until Nick Turse [did so](#) in

February 2010 for this site. (Ann Jones took TomDispatch readers [onto one of them](#) in August of that same year.)

In his books and at TomDispatch, Johnson put significant effort into trying to come up with a number for the bases the Pentagon garrisoned outside the United States. In January 2011, Turse returned to that task and found that number to be [well over 1,100](#). Again, it's not a figure you normally see reported in the mainstream. In March 2010, John Feffer [reminded](#) TD readers of just how far the Pentagon would go to hang onto a single major base, among so many, on the Japanese island of Okinawa.

One of the last essays Chalmers Johnson published at this site before his death in 2010 was entitled "[Dismantling the Empire](#)" and it was concerned with just how the U.S. could downsize its global mission and end its empire of bases. David Vine, anthropologist and author of *[Island of Shame: The Secret History of the U.S. Military Base on Diego Garcia](#)*, has been touring American bases for the past three years. In a major survey of the changing shape of our Baseworld, he suggests that unfortunately it isn't shrinking at all, and that "dismantling" isn't yet on the American horizon. This means that — until the mainstream finally stumbles upon the import of this story — TomDispatch has little choice but to stay on the bases beat for the foreseeable future. (To catch Timothy MacBain's latest Tomcast audio interview in which Vine discusses his experiences with the Pentagon's empire of bases, click [here](#) or download it to your iPod [here](#).) *Tom*

The Lily-Pad Strategy

How the Pentagon is quietly transforming its overseas base empire and creating a dangerous new way of war

by David Vine

The first thing I saw last month when I walked into the belly of the dark grey C-17 Air Force cargo plane was a void — something missing. A missing left arm, to be exact, severed at the shoulder, temporarily patched and held together. Thick, pale flesh, flecked with bright red at the edges. It looked like meat sliced open. The face and what remained of the rest of the man were obscured by blankets, an American flag quilt, and a jumble of tubes and tape, wires, drip bags, and medical monitors.

That man and two other critically wounded soldiers — one with two stumps where legs had been, the other missing a leg below the thigh — were intubated, unconscious, and lying on stretchers hooked to the walls of the plane that had just landed at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. A tattoo on the soldier's remaining arm read, "DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR."

I asked a member of the Air Force medical team about the casualties they see like these. Many, as with this flight, were coming from Afghanistan, he told me. "A lot from the Horn of Africa," he added. "You don't really hear about that in the media."

“Where in Africa?” I asked. He said he didn’t know exactly, but generally from the Horn, often with critical injuries. “A lot out of Djibouti,” he added, referring to [Camp Lemonnier](#), the main U.S. military base in Africa, but from “elsewhere” in the region, too.

Since the “Black Hawk Down” deaths in Somalia almost 20 years ago, we’ve heard little, if anything, about American military casualties in Africa (other than a strange report last week about three special operations commandos killed, along with three women identified by U.S. military sources as “Moroccan prostitutes,” in a mysterious [car accident](#) in Mali). The growing number of patients arriving at Ramstein from Africa pulls back a curtain on a significant transformation in 21st-century U.S. military strategy.

These casualties are likely to be the vanguard of growing numbers of wounded troops coming from places far removed from Afghanistan or Iraq. They reflect the increased use of relatively small bases like Camp Lemonnier, which military planners see as a [model](#) for future U.S. bases “scattered,” as one academic [explains](#), “across regions in which the United States has previously not maintained a military presence.”

Disappearing are the days when Ramstein was the signature U.S. base, an American-town-sized behemoth filled with thousands or tens of thousands of Americans, PXs, Pizza Huts, and other amenities of home. But don’t for a second think that the Pentagon is packing up, downsizing its global mission, and heading home. In fact, based on developments in recent years, the opposite may be true. While the collection of Cold War-era giant bases around the world is shrinking, the global infrastructure of bases overseas has exploded in size and scope.

Unknown to most Americans, Washington’s garrisoning of the planet is on the rise, thanks to a new generation of bases the military calls “[lily pads](#)” (as in a frog jumping across a pond toward its prey). These are small, secretive, inaccessible facilities with limited numbers of troops, spartan amenities, and pre-positioned weaponry and supplies.

Around the world, from Djibouti to the jungles of Honduras, the deserts of Mauritania to Australia’s tiny Cocos Islands, the Pentagon has been pursuing as many lily pads as it can, in as many countries as it can, as fast as it can. Although statistics are hard to assemble, given the often-secretive nature of such bases, the Pentagon has probably built upwards of 50 lily pads and other small bases since around 2000, while exploring the construction of dozens more.

As Mark Gillem, author of *[America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire](#)*, [explains](#), “avoidance” of local populations, publicity, and potential opposition is the new aim. “To project its power,” he says, the United States wants “secluded and self-contained outposts strategically located” around the world. According to some of the strategy’s [strongest proponents](#) at the American Enterprise Institute, the goal should be “to create a worldwide network of frontier forts,” with the U.S. military “the ‘global cavalry’ of the 21st century.”

Such lily-pad bases have become a critical part of an evolving Washington military strategy aimed at maintaining U.S. global dominance by doing far more with less in an increasingly competitive, ever more multi-polar world. Central as it’s becoming to the long-term U.S. stance, this global-basing reset policy has, remarkably enough, received almost no public attention, nor

significant Congressional oversight. Meanwhile, as the arrival of the first casualties from Africa shows, the U.S. military is getting involved in new areas of the world and new conflicts, with potentially disastrous consequences.

Transforming the Base Empire

You might think that the U.S. military is in the process of shrinking, rather than expanding, its [little-noticed](#) but enormous collection of bases abroad. After all, it was forced to close the full panoply of [505 bases](#), mega to micro, that it built in Iraq, and it's now beginning the process of drawing down forces in Afghanistan. In Europe, the Pentagon is continuing to close its massive bases in Germany and will soon remove two combat brigades from that country. Global troop numbers are set to shrink by around 100,000.

Yet Washington still easily maintains the largest collection of foreign bases in world history: [more than 1,000](#) military installations outside the 50 states and Washington, D.C. They include everything from decades-old bases in Germany and Japan to brand-new drone bases in [Ethiopia](#) and the [Seychelles](#) islands in the Indian Ocean and even resorts for military vacationers in [Italy](#) and [South Korea](#).

[In Afghanistan, the U.S.-led international force still occupies more than 450 bases. In total, the U.S. military has some form of troop presence in approximately 150 foreign countries, not to mention 11 aircraft carrier task forces — essentially floating bases — and a significant, and growing, military presence in space. The United States currently spends an estimated \\$250 billion annually maintaining bases and troops overseas.](#)

Some bases, like Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, date to the late 19th century. Most were built or occupied during or just after World War II on every continent, including [Antarctica](#). Although the U.S. military vacated around [60%](#) of its foreign bases following the Soviet Union's collapse, the Cold War base infrastructure remained relatively intact, with 60,000 American troops remaining in Germany alone, despite the absence of a superpower adversary.

However, in the early months of 2001, even before the attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration launched a major global realignment of bases and troops that's continuing today with Obama's "Asia pivot." Bush's original plan was to close more than one-third of the nation's overseas bases and shift troops east and south, closer to predicted conflict zones in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The Pentagon began to focus on creating smaller and more flexible "forward operating bases" and even smaller "cooperative security locations" or "lily pads." Major troop concentrations were to be restricted to a reduced number of "main operating bases" (MOBs) — like Ramstein, Guam in the Pacific, and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean — which were to be expanded.

Despite the rhetoric of consolidation and closure that went with this plan, in the post-9/11 era the Pentagon has actually been expanding its base infrastructure dramatically, including dozens of major bases in every [Persian Gulf](#) country save Iran, and in several Central Asian countries critical to the war in Afghanistan.

Hitting the Base Reset Button

Obama's recently announced "[Asia pivot](#)" signals that East Asia will be at the center of the explosion of lily-pad bases and related developments. Already in [Australia](#), U.S. Marines are settling into a shared base in Darwin. Elsewhere, the Pentagon is pursuing plans for a drone and surveillance base in Australia's Cocos Islands and deployments to Brisbane and Perth. In [Thailand](#), the Pentagon has negotiated rights for new Navy port visits and a "disaster-relief hub" at U-Tapao.

In the [Philippines](#), whose government evicted the U.S. from the massive Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base in the early 1990s, as many as 600 special forces troops have quietly been operating in the [country's south](#) since [January 2002](#). Last month, the two governments reached an agreement on the future U.S. use of Clark and Subic, as well as other repair and supply hubs from the Vietnam War era. In a sign of changing times, U.S. officials even [signed](#) a 2011 defense agreement with former enemy Vietnam and have begun negotiations over the Navy's increased use of Vietnamese ports.

Elsewhere in Asia, the Pentagon has rebuilt a runway on tiny Tinian island near Guam, and it's considering future bases in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei, while pushing stronger military ties with [India](#). Every year in the region, the military [conducts](#) around 170 military exercises and 250 port visits. On South Korea's [Jeju island](#), the Korean military is building a base that will be part of the U.S. missile defense system and to which U.S. forces will have regular access.

"We just can't be in one place to do what we've got to do," Pacific Command commander Adm. [Samuel Locklear III](#) has said. For military planners, "what we've got to do" is clearly defined as isolating and (in the terminology of the Cold War) "containing" the new power in the region, China. This evidently means "[peppering](#)" new bases throughout the region, adding to the more than 200 U.S. bases that have encircled China for decades in Japan, South Korea, Guam, and Hawaii.

And Asia is just the beginning. In Africa, the Pentagon has quietly [created](#) "about a dozen air bases" for [drones](#) and [surveillance](#) since 2007. In addition to Camp Lemonnier, we know that the military has created or will soon create installations in Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauritania, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Seychelles, South Sudan, and Uganda. The Pentagon has also investigated building bases in Algeria, Gabon, Ghana, Mali, and Nigeria, among other places.

Next year, a [brigade-sized force](#) of 3,000 troops, and "likely more," will arrive for exercises and training missions across the continent. In the nearby Persian Gulf, the Navy is developing an "[afloat forward-staging base](#)," or "[mothership](#)," to serve as a sea-borne "lily pad" for helicopters and patrol craft, and has been involved in a [massive buildup](#) of forces in the region.

In Latin America, following the military's eviction from Panama in 1999 and Ecuador in 2009, the Pentagon has [created](#) or [upgraded](#) new bases in Aruba and Curaçao, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, and Peru. Elsewhere, the Pentagon has [funded](#) the creation of military and police bases capable of hosting U.S. forces in Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica,

and even [Ecuador](#). In 2008, the Navy reactivated its Fourth Fleet, inactive since 1950, to patrol the region. The military may want a base in [Brazil](#) and unsuccessfully tried to create bases, ostensibly for humanitarian and emergency relief, in [Paraguay](#) and [Argentina](#).

Finally, in Europe, after arriving in the [Balkans](#) during 1990s interventions, U.S. bases have moved eastward into some of the former Eastern Bloc states of the Soviet empire. The Pentagon is now developing installations capable of supporting rotating, brigade-sized [deployments](#) in Romania and Bulgaria, and a missile defense base and aviation facilities in [Poland](#). Previously, the Bush administration maintained two CIA [black sites](#) (secret prisons) in Lithuania and [another](#) in Poland. Citizens of the Czech Republic [rejected](#) a planned radar base for the Pentagon's still unproven missile defense system, and now Romania will host ground-based missiles.

A New American Way of War

A lily pad on one of the Gulf of Guinea islands of [São Tomé and Príncipe](#), off the oil-rich west coast of Africa, helps explain what's going on. A U.S. official has described the base as "[another Diego Garcia](#)," referring to the [Indian Ocean base](#) that's helped [ensure](#) decades of U.S. domination over Middle Eastern energy supplies. Without the freedom to create new large bases in Africa, the Pentagon is using São Tomé and a growing collection of other lily pads on the continent in an attempt to control another crucial oil-rich region.

Far beyond West Africa, the 19th century "[Great Game](#)" competition for Central Asia has returned with a passion — and this time gone global. It's spreading to resource-rich lands in Africa, Asia, and South America, as the United States, China, Russia, and members of the European Union find themselves locked in an increasingly intense competition for economic and geopolitical supremacy.

While Beijing, in particular, has [pursued](#) this competition in a largely economic fashion, dotting the globe with strategic investments, Washington has focused relentlessly on military might as its global trump card, dotting the planet with new bases and other forms of military power. "Forget full-scale invasions and large-footprint occupations on the Eurasian mainland," Nick Turse [has written](#) of this new 21st-century military strategy. "Instead, think: special operations forces... proxy armies... the militarization of spying and intelligence... drone aircraft... cyber-attacks, and joint Pentagon operations with increasingly militarized 'civilian' government agencies."

Add to this unparalleled long-range air and naval power; [arms sales](#) besting any nation on Earth; humanitarian and disaster relief missions that clearly serve military intelligence, patrol, and "hearts and minds" functions; the rotational deployment of regular U.S. forces globally; port visits and an expanding array of joint military exercises and training missions that give the U.S. military *de facto* "presence" worldwide and help turn foreign militaries into proxy forces.

And lots and lots of lily-pad bases.

Military planners see a future of endless small-scale interventions in which a large, geographically dispersed collection of bases will always be primed for instant operational access. With bases in as many places as possible, military planners want to be able to turn to another

conveniently close country if the United States is ever prevented from using a base, as it was by Turkey prior to the invasion of Iraq. In other words, Pentagon officials dream of nearly limitless flexibility, the ability to react with remarkable rapidity to developments anywhere on Earth, and thus, something approaching total military control over the planet.

Beyond their military utility, the lily pads and other forms of power projection are also political and economic tools used to build and maintain alliances and provide privileged U.S. access to overseas markets, resources, and investment opportunities. Washington is planning to use lily-pad bases and other military projects to bind countries in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America as closely as possible to the U.S. military — and so to continued U.S. political-economic hegemony. In short, American officials are hoping military might will entrench their influence and keep as many countries as possible within an American orbit at a time when some are asserting their independence ever more forcefully or gravitating toward China and other rising powers.

Those Dangerous Lily Pads

While relying on smaller bases may sound smarter and more cost effective than maintaining huge bases that have often caused anger in places like [Okinawa](#) and [South Korea](#), lily pads threaten U.S. and global security in several ways:

First, the “lily pad” language can be misleading, since by design or otherwise, such installations are capable of quickly growing into bloated behemoths.

Second, despite the rhetoric about spreading democracy that still lingers in Washington, building more lily pads actually guarantees collaboration with an increasing number of despotic, corrupt, and murderous regimes.

Third, there is a [well-documented pattern](#) of damage that military facilities of various sizes inflict on local communities. Although lily pads seem to promise insulation from local opposition, over time even small bases have often led to anger and protest movements.

Finally, a proliferation of lily pads means the creeping militarization of large swaths of the globe. Like real lily pads — which are actually [aquatic weeds](#) — bases have a way of growing and reproducing uncontrollably. Indeed, bases tend to beget bases, creating “[base races](#)” with other nations, heightening military tensions, and discouraging diplomatic solutions to conflicts. After all, how would the United States respond if China, Russia, or Iran were to build even a single lily-pad base of its own in Mexico or the Caribbean?

For China and Russia in particular, ever more U.S. bases near their borders threaten to set off new cold wars. Most troublingly, the creation of new bases to protect against an alleged future Chinese military threat may prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: such bases in Asia are likely to create the threat they are supposedly designed to protect against, making a catastrophic war with China more, not less, likely.

Encouragingly, however, overseas bases have recently begun to generate critical scrutiny across the political spectrum from Republican Sen. [Kay Bailey Hutchison](#) and Republican presidential candidate [Ron Paul](#) to Democratic Sen. [Jon Tester](#) and *New York Times* columnist [Nicholas Kristof](#). With everyone looking for ways to trim the deficit, closing overseas bases offers easy [savings](#). Indeed, increasingly influential types are recognizing that the country simply can't afford more than 1,000 bases abroad.

Great Britain, like empires before it, had to close most of its remaining foreign bases in the midst of an economic crisis in the 1960s and 1970s. The United States is undoubtedly headed in that direction sooner or later. The only question is whether the country will give up its bases and downsize its global mission by choice, or if it will follow Britain's path as a fading power forced to give up its bases from a position of weakness.

Of course, the consequences of not choosing another path extend beyond economics. If the proliferation of lily pads, special operations forces, and drone wars continues, the United States is likely to be drawn into new conflicts and new wars, generating unknown forms of blowback, and untold death and destruction. In that case, we'd better prepare for a lot more incoming flights — from the Horn of Africa to Honduras — carrying not just amputees but caskets.