

Nygaard Notes

Independent Periodic News and Analysis

Number 682

December 23, 2021

The U.S. as Global Cop

The United States Department of Defense is the largest employer in the world. Its 3.2 million employees make it larger than WalMart. Larger than McDonald's. Larger than Amazon. On the other hand, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the governmental agency responsible for distributing global aid worldwide, has about 3,500 employees. So, by this reckoning, the Department of "Defense" is more than 900 times the size of USAID.

The reason that the word "Defense" has quotation marks around it should become clear as we proceed. In the meantime, I'll refer to the DoD as the War Department, the name by which it was known from 1789 to 1947. I think it's more accurate.

Among the War Department's 3.2 million employees, more than 300,000 are active-duty forces or civilian employees working at, or in support of, U.S. military bases abroad. On February 4, shortly after he took office, President Biden ordered Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to have a look at all these U.S. forces deployed overseas to ensure that "our military footprint is appropriately aligned with our foreign policy and national security priorities."

The results of this study, which is called a Global Posture Review, were sort-of announced on November 29th. What do I mean by "sort-of"? Well, I discuss this sleight-of-hand media event elsewhere in this issue, but first let's do our own Global Posture Review (it won't take 10 months, as did the official one) so we can understand what they're talking about, and what they are not talking about.

First of all, what is this "global posture" that is being reviewed? The Stimson Center think tank tells us that "The United States maintains the largest active troop presence abroad of any country in the world, with over 170,000 active duty military personnel stationed

overseas as of March 2021."

[Interesting side note: The man for whom the Stimson Center is named—Henry L. Stimson—served in the federal government, not once but twice, as the Secretary of the War Department.]

So, 300,000 people are now stationed around the world as employees of the War Department. What are all these people doing? Here are some facts about the U.S. network of foreign military bases, courtesy of the Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition:

1. The U.S. maintains an estimated 750 military base sites in 80+ foreign countries and colonies/territories.
2. The U.S. has 75-85% of the world's foreign military bases. The United Kingdom has 145, Russia has between 12 and 36. China has 8.
3. The U.S. spends an estimated \$55 billion a year to build and maintain overseas bases, with an estimated total of \$80+ billion a year in total spending on bases and personnel abroad.
4. To put that number in human terms, moving half the \$55 billion spent on bases could pay for more than 200 million covid tests, 200 million N95 masks, 250,000 infrastructure jobs, and 400,000 vets with VA health care.

It's No Accident

In an interview with the Evanston Roundtable last month, Northwestern University historian Daniel Immerwahr noted that "It's no accident that the U.S. has the world's largest military or indeed that the U.S. military is the world's largest employer and that it has those hundreds of military bases. There's no other

continued on page 2

Greetings,

Three weeks ago, on the inside pages of the New York Times, I read a story about the release of something called a "Global Posture Review," which is an official review of the massive system of U.S. military bases that circle the planet. "Oh, that's a good thing to report on," I thought. "An awareness of the physical infrastructure needed to maintain a global empire; that's got to be a good thing!" Well, I suppose it could be. But I decided to look a little deeper into the story, or what could have been the story, and the result is what you are reading right now.

As the old saying goes, "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." And so it is with Empire. As U.S. power declines—economically, diplomatically, morally, technologically—what remains is the hammer: Military power. Just last week the U.S. Senate voted, 88-11, to authorize \$768 billion in military spending for fiscal 2022. A good chunk of that will be spent on foreign military bases, which is the subject of Nygaard Notes #682. As you read it, there are a few ideas that I hope you'll consider.

One is this: Protecting national security is different than enforcing an imperial order. Here's another one: Local police forces were created to enforce an unequal and stratified social order, just as the nation's military forces have been set up to enforce an unequal and stratified global order.

Finally, when you're finished reading this issue, see if you don't agree with the statement made by one of the sources I quote here, who said that we live in a society in which we are "constantly being told by leaders of both parties that the whole world is out to kill us and that that's why we've got to go to war to kill them first."

See what happens when you read a little bit beyond the headlines? You end up with a double-sized issue of Nygaard Notes, that's what you end up with.

And, to all of you who made the recent Nygaard Notes Pledge Drive one of the most successful EVER, this is the kind of stuff you're helping to make possible. I couldn't do it without your support.

Gratefully yours,
Nygaard

Cop from page 1: country that comes close. That's because the U.S. has arrogated to itself the role of being the global cop and assumes that any global conflict is U.S. business and it will be the ultimate arbiter of force on the planet."

In the past 10 years the U.S. has deployed its military in numerous countries, including not only the well-known operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, but also Libya, Somalia, Uganda, Yemen, Turkey, Mali, and Cameroon. There are likely more that haven't been publicly acknowledged. And there are surely

more military interventions to come. Recall the President's repeated promise that "we're going to retain an over- the-horizon capability"—that is, the ability to launch attacks from outside of targeted countries, anywhere in the world. And in order to be able to attack anywhere in the world, the United States needs to have soldiers and weapons everywhere in the world. And that's just what we see when we review our "global posture."

Not everyone in the world is happy about this. Read on... ◆

“A New President but Not a New Country”

Back in October I remarked that “For decades, U.S. economic and political power has been waning as the global order evolves to a multipolar future in which the U.S. is one among several, or many, regional powers.” Evidence supporting this statement continues to accumulate.

Consider, first of all, the fact that not everyone is happy about the U.S. strategy of maintaining the military might needed to retain its dwindling global power. In recent months there have been a number of media reports like this one from the Gallup Poll people, released in October: “Six months into Joe Biden's presidency, approval ratings of U.S. leadership around the world had largely rebounded from the record-low ratings observed during the Trump administration.”

Well, that sounds pretty good, until you read beyond the headline to see that global “approval” of U.S. “leadership” rebounded to a pretty low level, less than 50 percent, in fact: “A new Gallup report shows that as of early August 2021, across 46 countries and territories, median approval of U.S. leadership stood at 49%. This rating is up from the 30% median approval at the end of Donald Trump's presidency and matches the rating during former President Barack Obama's first year in office in 2009. However, while the 49% median approval rating for U.S. leadership so far under Biden compares favorably with ratings during the Obama administration, the 36% disapproval rating is also higher than any of those under Obama. Still, disapproval under Biden is seven percentage points lower than the final disapproval rating under Trump—a record-high 44%.”

That 49 percent figure is, of course, an average. If one digs a bit deeper one finds stories like this one, in USNews from January 20th of this year: “In Australia, a report from the Lowy Institute titled, ‘Is Our Love Affair with America Over?’ explains that while Australians would prefer Biden to Trump, they also increasingly believe that the U.S. has changed for the worse, with a record low holding favorable views of the country. Another report by the European Council on Foreign Relations, which surveyed 11 European countries, found that 6 in 10 Europeans believe the

U.S. political system is broken.” That’s “broken,” as in “not prepared to lead anything.”

The point was underlined in an opinion piece by Washington Post columnist Brian Klaas this past June. Under the headline “The World Is Horrified by the Dysfunction of American Democracy,” Klaas acknowledged that U.S. allies are “beyond delighted that the Trump presidency has ended.” Then he noted that, “buried in that story about the United States' post-Trump redemption is some seriously bad news: U.S. allies see our democracy as a shattered, washed-up has-been. We used to provide a democratic model for the world, but no longer. The chaos, dysfunction and insanity of the past several years have taken a predictable toll.”

A democratic model? Maybe, although the chaos, dysfunction and insanity of U.S. imperialism has been going on a lot longer than the past several years, as I have discussed in these pages on many occasions. But we’ll leave that aside for now, and acknowledge that the Trump years made things more uncomfortable than usual for U.S. allies, whose status as allies has traditionally meant, among other things, that they have generally not had to defend themselves against U.S. military attacks.

Speaking of allies being uncomfortable, consider this comment that I found in a January 2021 report from the establishment think tank The Center for Strategic and International Studies: “It is important to note ... that recent Pew and Gallup polls – two of the most respected sources of polling data in the world – sound strong warnings that the U.S. has seen a major reduction in partner and other outside support in recent years – to levels roughly similar to outside support for China and Russia.”

Especially China. Check out this comment from a recent study published in *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs*: “There has been a spectacular transformation in the global politics of foreign aid as China has, in a few decades, moved from being a recipient of aid to being one of

from page 3 →→ the largest donor states in international development.” The result is that “China is emerging as a key state actor in international development – a sector that has been dominated by the United States for decades.” We get a hint of the meaning of this when we consider how excited everyone got last month when President Biden signed the infrastructure bill. I do think that’s worth getting excited about, but it’s remarkable that virtually nobody in this country has even heard of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, about which the Council on Foreign Relations said last March, “The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese President Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy undertaking and the world’s largest infrastructure program, poses a significant challenge to U.S. economic, political, climate change, security, and global health interests.” (I discussed the BRI briefly in Nygaard Notes #569, back in 2015.)

The reduction in support for U.S. “leadership” is not limited to the formerly-expected support from the rich nations, who have benefitted from the rules-based international order policed by the U.S. For example, Klaas tells us that “In Afrobarometer surveys of public opinion across Africa, China has pulled even with the United States.” A Pew survey in 2019 found that roughly 50 percent of respondents in Brazil, Mexico and Argentina reported having a “favorable opinion” of China, while only 26 percent had a favorable opinion of the United States.

Back to the allies. As Biden was about to take office, the European Council on Foreign Relations released a

report on “How Europeans see Biden’s America.” The 27-page report began by saying that “Americans have a new president but not a new country. While most Europeans rejoiced at Joe Biden’s victory in the November US presidential election, they do not think he can help America make a comeback as the pre-eminent global leader.”

The ECFR’s report summary included the following points, which might surprise U.S. readers: “Europeans’ attitudes towards the United States have undergone a massive change. Majorities in key member states now think the US political system is broken... They evaluate the EU and/or their own countries’ systems much more positively than that of the US – and look to Berlin rather than Washington as the most important partner... There are geopolitical consequences to American weakness. A majority believe that China will be more powerful than the US within a decade and would want their country to stay neutral in a conflict between the two superpowers. Two-thirds of respondents thought the EU should develop its defence capacities.”

U.S. planners are aware of the declining power of the U.S. Empire, and they’re aware of the shrinking support for U.S. leadership in Africa and Latin America and Europe and Asia. So, when they decide to undertake a review of the global military “posture” of the U.S. at this historical moment, what questions should we be asking, and who gets to ask those questions? ◆

Nothing to See Here, Folks!

The Global Posture Review ordered by President Biden on February 4th—a study of all U.S. forces deployed overseas—was supposed to tell us whether or not “our military footprint is appropriately aligned with our foreign policy and national security priorities.” I said that the results of the 10-month GPR were “sort-of” announced on November 29th. Here’s what I meant:

The advocacy group *Defense Priorities* tells us that “the U.S. global defense posture is a crucial element of American defense strategy and military planning

[as it] encompasses the size, location, types, and capabilities of its [foreign-based] military forces” around the world.”

Gil Barndollar, senior fellow at Defense Priorities, suggests that the first place to look when trying to understand a nation’s military strategy is the budget. But he then says, “America’s national defense strategy is also demonstrated by where it deploys forces and maintains bases. Overseas bases enable the United States to project power by providing hubs for transportation and logistical sustainment. ↗↗↗

→→ Air bases are the most obvious example, given the fuel and maintenance needs of modern military aircraft. Naval bases provide sites for refueling, replenishment, and repair, as well additional security for both vessels and crews. Land bases permit the staging of ground forces and maintenance and repair of weapons and vehicles.”

[Military euphemism translation: “Project power” = “Attack”]

A report on this huge and costly global military “footprint” seems like something that U.S. citizens should know about, right? As I noted earlier, we are talking about more than 300,000 soldiers and civilians working around the world at a cost of more than \$80 billion a year. For perspective: Russia’s entire military budget is about \$62 billion a year. It’s worth noting how the U.S. media treated this important report upon its release last month.

The first thing one notices is that only two newspapers in this country—the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal—bothered to mention it at all. The Times put it on page 15.

The headline of the Times article read “Biden Military Review Leaves Troops Where They Are, for Now,” and the lead paragraph tells us that “Pentagon officials announced the results of a nearly yearlong review of the country’s military presence abroad on Monday, but the recommendation included few changes in the positioning of American troops.”

The opening paragraph in the WSJ read “A Pentagon review of military resources world-wide plans to make improvements to airfields in Guam and Australia to counter China but contains no major reshuffling of forces as the U.S. moves to take on Beijing while deterring Russia and fighting terrorism in the Middle East and Africa.”

The Times echoed the emphasis on “taking on Beijing, saying “the most substantive change in the unclassified portion of the review appears to be improvements at airfields in the Asia-Pacific region.” They also noted that, according to Mara Karlin, the War Department official who presided over the press briefing, the U.S. “troop presence in Africa would be

‘appropriately scoped’ to monitor terrorism threats across the continent.”

The Reuters news service also reported on the press conference, quoting a “senior U.S. defense official” as saying that “The review did not lead to any major changes in the distribution of U.S. troops around the world.”

So, according to the few news organizations that bothered to cover the release of the GPR, we hear that the plan is to “leave troops where they are,” that the review “contains no major reshuffling of forces,” and that we should expect no “major changes in the distribution of U.S. troops around the world.” In other words, “Nothing to see here, folks! Move along...”

But there *is* something to see here. And that’s the fact that there ARE American troops “around the world,” ready to attack anyone, anywhere, at any time. This might be considered to be big news in another place, at another time.

Going a little off the mainstream path, it occurred to me that the “no news here” reporting might actually be due to the fact that there really WAS no meaningful information presented at the November 29th briefing. Take a look at the italicized bits in the following few examples.

A report from that day that appeared in the U.S. Naval Institute’s “USNI News” led off by saying “In a press briefing Monday afternoon, Mara Karlin, who is performing the duties of the deputy under secretary of defense for policy, shared highlights of the review, which *will not be released for the public*, she said, citing classification for security reasons and to protect the confidentiality of consultations the country did with allies and partner countries.”

I quoted the Reuters report earlier, but I didn’t mention that the “senior U.S. defense official” that they cited “briefed reporters *on the condition of anonymity*.” Indeed, the headline of the article was “Pentagon *Releases Few Details* after Months-long Review on Global Posture.” And, after quoting the

Nothing to see *from page 5*

anonymous “official” saying that the review “called for improving U.S. military infrastructure in Guam and Australia,” Reuters admitted that said official “declined to provide details on other potential moves because *the report has mostly been classified.*”

It seemed rather bizarre to me that the Pentagon held a press conference about the release of a report in which the presiding official informed reporters that the report which was the subject of the press conference “has mostly been classified” and thus “will

not be released for the public.” How, then, would reporters know that there are no changes planned, or that there is no “re-shuffling” coming up? How, indeed, would reporters know anything?

For starters, reporters could talk to some sources that have a different perspective than the official, often anonymous, sources upon which the few available reports on the GPR release relied. Not only could those sources perhaps offer different answers to the questions that were asked by the news organizations that reported on the GPR, they might ask—and answer—different questions entirely. As the following essay will show. ◆

Maybe There IS Something to See

We’ve seen that the just-completed Global Posture Review (GPR) was intended to tell the President whether or not “our military footprint is appropriately aligned with our foreign policy and national security priorities.” And I’ve also pointed out that the small amount of media coverage the report received was entirely dependent on official sources, many of them anonymous, who told us next to nothing about what was in the report. But perhaps more important is the lack of dissenting voices in the news coverage, voices that could not only offer different answers to reporters’ questions, but could ask different questions entirely, questions that would give context and meaning to the entire idea of this “posture” that spans the globe.

Stephen Wertheim, of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft in Washington, DC, last year published a book entitled “Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of US Global Supremacy,” in which he sought to answer a seemingly-simple question: “When was the choice made to install the United States as the dominant military power across the globe?” (He says it was 1940, but the specific year is not of concern to us at the moment.)

In an interview with Vox News (published, apparently coincidentally, on November 29th, the day the GPR was released), Wertheim told interviewer Alex Ward, “I worry that—in a world where the foremost threats to the American people are pandemic disease and

climate change—America will continue to define its biggest threats in military terms, even if they aren’t.” Even if they aren’t military threats, that is.

Wertheim wasn’t talking about the Global Posture Review, but he could have been when he said: “Since 1991 [i.e. the fall of the Soviet Union], I think almost everybody has lost out, aside from the major defense firms and some ruling elites. America’s strategy has been incredibly destructive for people throughout the greater Middle East, and of course, the Iraq War resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. And I don’t think the American people have won out, either. I think that we have gotten less safe and more fearful as a society as a result of constantly being told by leaders of both parties that the whole world is out to kill us and that that’s why we’ve got to go to war to kill them first.”

Northwestern University historian Daniel Immerwahr, whom I quote elsewhere in this issue, asks us to look at the U.S. “footprint” in the world from an entirely different perspective: “One might prefer the form of U.S. engagement with the rest of the planet to be nonmilitary. When there are problems afoot, the question should be not who needs to be bombed, but who needs to be helped? What refugees need to be admitted into the country? Where does health care need to be provided? And so on.”

The interviewer to whom Immerwahr was ↗↗↗

→→ speaking asked “What would it look like for the United States to withdraw from its role as global cop?” Immerwahr responded, “For starters, there would be a drastic drawdown in the number of bases we maintain overseas, as well as efforts to shrink the size of the military. Even the generals suggest we shouldn’t have as many bases as we do. And then we’d be investing in diplomacy in a more earnest way . . . I think Americans are going to have to prepare to relinquish their role of global primacy – either because this is the kind of global privilege that no one should have, or because they will have to give it up no matter how they feel about it, as the relative size of the U.S. economy shrinks globally. Such a drawdown

of military would mean a return to greater normalcy, to a time when the United States was one country among others. The U.S. would have interests, it would conduct diplomacy around those interests, with humanitarian concerns, and give foreign aid around the concerns. But it would not act as the final arbiter of every political question and ultimately the just and final purveyor of force on the planet.”

Which leads us to a group that really should have been quoted in the stories about the GPR, a group called The Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition, or OBRACC. The following essay will tell you a little bit about them. ◆

The Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition

The Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition, or OBRACC, is a project of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, from whence comes this issue’s “Quote” of the Week. They do research and advocacy aimed at just what their name says: Reducing the size and reach of the massive U.S. military infrastructure that supports U.S. imperial ambitions.

Back on March 4, exactly one month after President Biden ordered his Global Posture Review, OBRACC sent him a letter. Entitled “Transpartisan Letter to President Biden on the U.S. Global Posture Review and Closing Military Bases Abroad to Improve National and International Security,” the letter starts out by noting that Biden’s GPR “has the potential to be a singularly important initiative in U.S. history.” Then it says that the three dozen scholars, activists, military analysts, and others who signed the letter “find broad agreement about nine reasons to close foreign bases and improve national and international security in the process.” Here are the nine reasons:

1. Overseas bases cost taxpayers billions every year.
2. Overseas bases are now largely obsolete thanks to technological advancements.
3. Overseas bases entangle the U.S. in wars. Bases dotting the globe fuel hyper-interventionist foreign policy by making war look like an easy solution ...
4. Overseas bases increase military tension. Rather than deterring adversaries, U.S. bases can exacerbate

security threats by antagonizing other countries into greater military spending and aggression.

5. Overseas bases support dictators and repressive, undemocratic regimes. Scores of U.S. bases are in more than 40 authoritarian and less-than-democratic countries...

6. Overseas bases cause blowback. In the Middle East in particular, U.S. bases and troops have provoked terrorist threats, radicalization, and anti-American propaganda.

7. Overseas bases damage the environment. Bases abroad have a long track record of damaging local environments as a result of toxic leaks, accidents, the dumping of hazardous materials, and base construction. The DoD does not hold itself to the environmental protection standards established for domestic bases...

8. Overseas bases damage America’s international reputation and generate protest. Because people tend not to like their land occupied by foreign militaries, it’s unsurprising that bases abroad generate some degree of opposition almost everywhere they’re found...

9. Overseas bases are bad for families. Deployments overseas can separate military personnel from their families for months and years, damaging relationships.

The list in the actual letter is much more thorough, and very compelling. I edited it down for length.

to page 8 →→→

Bases from page 7

You can read the whole letter—and much more—at the OBRACC website: www.overseasbases.net/

The list of signatories is impressive, and includes people like Medea Benjamin, Co-director, Codepink for Peace; Phyllis Bennis, Director, New Internationalism Project, Institute for Policy Studies; Noam Chomsky; Daniel Immerwahr, who is quoted elsewhere in this issue of the Notes, and; Stephen Wertheim, also quoted herein.

The letter concludes with a simple and eloquent plea: “In the interest of national, global, and fiscal security, we urge President Biden and Secretary Austin,

supported by Congress, to begin a process to close bases overseas and relocate military personnel and families to domestic bases, where there is well-documented excess capacity.”

The Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition is hardly the only example of anti-imperialist organizing that I could cite. But the point that there IS anti-imperialist organizing going on, invisible though it may be to those who rely on the mass media for information about the evolving role of the United States in a rapidly-changing world order. Our job is to understand as best we can the nature of that order, and to do our part to create a new order, one in which the United States is not the global cop, but is just one country among others. ♦

“Quote” of the Week:

“Many Overseas Bases Should Have Been Closed Decades Ago”

Despite the withdrawal of U.S. military bases and troops from Afghanistan, the United States continues to maintain around 750 military bases abroad in 80 foreign countries and colonies (territories). These bases are costly in a number of ways: financially, politically, socially, and environmentally. U.S. bases in foreign lands often raise geopolitical tensions, support undemocratic regimes, and serve as a recruiting tool for militant groups opposed to the U.S. presence and the governments its presence bolsters. In other cases, foreign bases are being used and have made it easier for the United States to launch and execute disastrous wars, including those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. Across the political spectrum and even within the U.S. military there is growing recognition that many overseas bases should have been closed decades ago, but bureaucratic inertia and misguided political interests have kept them open.

That’s the opening paragraph from Quincy Brief No. 16, “Drawdown: Improving U.S. and Global Security Through Military Base Closures Abroad,” published on September 20, 2021 by the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft in Washington DC <https://quincyinst.org/>

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