

Pentagon to realign domestic US military bases

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The massive restructuring of the American military infrastructure announced last Friday has been treated in US media and political circles almost exclusively as a parochial matter. The focus has been on the local impact of base closures: which facilities will close, lose jobs or expand, or the prospects that political influence in Washington can shift this or that decision at the margins. There has been little commentary on what the proposed realignment of US military bases—both at home and abroad—reveals about the political and military strategy of American imperialism.

From a socialist and internationalist standpoint, however, such considerations are uppermost. The conquest of Afghanistan and Iraq has confirmed the global military predominance of US imperialism. In sharp contrast to its devastating economic decline, expressed in the mammoth US balance of payments and federal budget deficits, America exercises almost unchallenged military superiority over any potential rival. The Pentagon budget exceeds the military spending of the next 25 countries put together.

Under these conditions, where the Pentagon decides to locate its military hardware and personnel has the utmost significance for the people of the world, particularly for those who are the most likely targets of military action by Washington. There has been much commentary and analysis, particularly in specialized foreign policy publications, over the redeployment of American forces from their traditional Cold War bases in central Europe to new bases further east.

US forces are now spread out across a vast area stretching from the former Yugoslavia to Afghanistan. This includes new bases in Kosovo, Bulgaria, Romania, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, as well as military access short of full basing rights in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Pakistan. This web of relationships is creating what amounts to an American “cordon sanitaire” separating Europe and Russia from the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. American forces along this belt look south as well as north—combined with the occupation of Iraq, Washington has effectively drawn a noose around Iran, likely its next major target for military aggression.

The restructuring of military bases on US soil must be analyzed from this same standpoint: what it suggests about the preparations of the US ruling elite, both for military action abroad and, of equal importance, for military intervention within the United States itself, against future domestic social and political unrest.

There will no doubt be those who dismiss such concerns as

“alarmist,” but why should one assume that military strategy guides the deployment of American troops only outside the continental United States, and not within it? As the *Washington Post* described the latest military restructuring, it represents “a large-scale reshuffling of forces to organize them for the type of conflicts envisioned over the next 20 years.”

The Bush administration has already created, for the first time in US history, a centralized command on the North American continent. The Northern Command, headquartered in Colorado, was established after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—another of the military initiatives, like the invasion of Iraq, for which 9/11 served as a pretext. Its existence insures centralized control of all military forces on US soil, should a terrorist attack or civil unrest make Washington unusable as a military headquarters.

The most salient aspect of the latest Pentagon restructuring plan is the continuing geographic shift in military resources from the Northeast and Midwest (and to some extent, from the West Coast) to the South and Southwest. Of the 30,000 net loss in military-related jobs, half comes from just three closings in New England: Portsmouth Navy Yard in Maine, Otis Air Force Base in Massachusetts, and the Groton, Connecticut, submarine command. Thousands more personnel are being moved out of the Northeast with the closure of Brunswick Naval Air Station in Maine, Niagara Falls Air Reserve station in New York, Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and the Willowgrove Naval Air Station and Pittsburgh Air Reserve Base in Pennsylvania.

There are, to be sure, some base closings in the South, including the Naval Air Station in Pascagoula, Mississippi, Ft. McPherson in Georgia, and three in Texas: Ingleside Naval Air Station, the Red Rock Army Depot and Brooks City Depot in San Antonio. But these are more than offset by shifting of additional military resources from the North and East and an influx of 70,000 Army troops from overseas, especially Germany. Fort Bliss, Texas, for instance, will gain 11,354 soldiers as the 1st Armored Division returns from Germany.

The Army is being concentrated within the borders of the continental United States, building up from 26 to 40 brigades. The additional forces will all be located in the South and West, with the biggest increases at Fort Benning, Georgia, Fort Carson, Colorado, and Fort Riley, Kansas, as well as Fort Bliss.

The majority of US nuclear assets are being redeployed to the deep South as well: all B1-B long-range bombers are being consolidated into Texas, with the closure of Ellsworth Air Force

Base in South Dakota. Construction, servicing and deployment of nuclear submarines are also being shifted to the South. After the closure of the Groton submarine command, Navy personnel will be moved to Virginia, Georgia and Florida.

There have been a few cautious references in the press to the geographic imbalance in the US military structure. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the cuts “hammered many Northern and Midwestern states and gave the military an increasingly Southern accent.” *Newsweek* magazine spoke of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s planning for “a broad shift of bases away from the North and the East—the epicenter of defense through the 19th and 20th centuries—and out to the South and, to a lesser extent, the West.”

Time cited the comments of defense analyst Loren Thompson of the Lexington Institute, who told the magazine “the geographical migration of the military out of the Frost Belt and into the Sun Belt” was “striking.” The magazine noted the political overtones of the shift: “Northern states such as Connecticut, Maine and New Jersey will lose more than 19,000 military and civilian jobs at the facilities on Rumsfeld’s hit list, while three Southern states, Georgia, Alabama and Texas, will have a net gain of 16,237 jobs. Although Rumsfeld insists the realignments will help transform the military into a ‘more agile’ force, with the armed services operating jointly at more bases, the shift south and west conveniently benefits the GOP, which dominates those regions.”

There are two other important aspects of the restructuring. While the 33 major base closings is comparable to previous rounds in 1988, 1991, 1993 and 1995, there is a far greater effort to close or consolidate smaller bases, with about 800 minor facilities being phased out. The Pentagon strategy envisions the creation of much larger “megabases,” virtual military cities with 40,000, 50,000 or even more personnel, largely insulated from the surrounding civilian population. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine units will share space instead of occupying separate facilities as in the past.

There will also be a significant shift in military assets from within the Washington Beltway to suburban areas 20 miles or more from the urban center. Fort Belvoir, Virginia, with 23,000 personnel, will nearly double in size with the shift in 18,000 military and civilian workers from inner suburbs like Arlington and Alexandria. A similar shift will take place into Fort Meade, Maryland, north of the capital.

Security considerations are said to be uppermost in this shift, since most office buildings in the denser inner suburbs cannot meet new anti-terrorism standards such as being set back 80 feet or more from the nearest roadway. The shift also suggests that the Pentagon views a catastrophic event in Washington, DC, as virtually inevitable, making it only prudent to move some facilities outside the “blast radius.”

There are certainly global strategic considerations involved in the repositioning of military forces within the continental US. During the Cold War, when the Pentagon was focused on a likely conflict with the USSR, it deployed forces along the northern US border, closest to the circumpolar routes that afforded the most direct path to Soviet targets. Today, when American imperialism is waging wars in the Middle East—as well as contemplating interventions in the Caribbean basin and northern South

America—bases on the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico are more useful.

But it would be disastrously shortsighted to ignore the implications of this redeployment for domestic politics and the democratic rights of the American people. It is not just a matter of a Republican administration rewarding Republican-leaning states with government contracts and jobs—which is as far as the commentary in the corporate-controlled media goes.

The American military is, in the final analysis, an instrument of the capitalist ruling elite to safeguard their economic and political domination at home. How and where American military forces are stationed inside the US has long been related to the need to use force to guarantee social stability.

For instance, the network of National Guard armories in major US cities was created after the massive and violent railway workers’ strikes of 1877, which challenged the power of the first generation of industrial “robber barons.” National Guard troops were used repeatedly over the next century to control or crush outbreaks of the class struggle.

The US ruling elite has a much more recent example to ponder: during the breakup of the USSR in 1991, where military forces were located was of prime importance. A key issue was to determine which of the successor states would retain the nuclear assets of the USSR. Ultimately, given Russia’s preponderance over the other breakaway states, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, which had considerable nuclear weapons stocks on their soil, agreed to give them up and cede a nuclear monopoly in the region to Moscow.

There is no reason to believe that, were a similar breakup to take place in American society, the outcome would be peaceful. On the contrary, the intense social and economic polarization within the United States could well take the form of violent conflicts along regional lines. The 2000 and 2004 presidential elections have already produced increasing public discussion about the growth of political polarization in the country, while the division of the US into “red states” and “blue states” has obvious parallels to the battle lines drawn in the American Civil War.

There is no doubt that Pentagon planners are aware of such considerations and were influenced by them in their recommendations on the base restructuring. In that context, the decision to redeploy American military forces in such a way as to give a heavy preponderance to the South and Southwest has the most ominous implications.



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