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U.S. MILITARY PROBLEM LIES IN NUMBERS, NOT GEOGRAPHY

PARIS -- The Bush administration's decision to reduce the number of American soldiers stationed abroad is a belated reaction to a U.S. military deployment gravely outdated since the end of the Cold War, maladapted even to the current official strategic scenario. Even reduced in troop strength, the vast U.S. global military base system will remain at odds with how the world is developing.

Taking troops out of one place and moving them to another does not increase their total number. Closing German, Korean or Okinawan bases will not send more troops to Iraq. These base closures and redeployments in any case will take years, not months.

The whole question of America's worldwide base system remains sadly confused by ideology and vested interest. Why should U.S. troops still be in Germany? Germany is under no threat. But why should forces be moved to Poland or Romania instead? Neither of those countries is tangibly threatened.

The political climate is easier in Poland or Romania, and bases there undoubtedly are cheaper to run, thanks to lower maintenance and logistical costs (but bases have to be newly built or adapted to U.S. needs).

There is also a question prompted by historical experience, as well as principle, that eventually will make trouble. Why should states under no threat, at peace with the world, have American troops stationed within their borders?

When President Vaclav Klaus of the Czech Republic was asked a few years ago about the transfer of U.S. bases to his country, he replied simply that the Czechs have had quite enough

of foreign troops in their republic.

The American bases are justified as forward deployment in the nation's supposed global commitment to international stability. But American forces are rotated to Iraq from bases in the United States as easily as from European and Asian stations. The strain is how few troops there are, rather than where they are.

The manpower problem primarily affects reserve and National Guard forces, overly relied upon in planning the non-conscript army, and not meant for prolonged deployment in a war of ideological choice rather than necessity. The regular army is severely stretched.

If the Iraq occupation and resistance go on for years (which is the conventional and necessary assumption made in the Pentagon, although possibly not the realistic one), the regular army (and Marine Corps) will have to be expanded, which John Kerry is proposing. However, the Iraq war is discouraging enlistments, even though real (rather than official) unemployment rates are high in the U.S., due to the number of young unemployed not on official rolls.

There is a political significance in the troop redeployment expected in Europe. It is thought likely to convey the message that ex-Communist Europe is now America's Europe -- Washington's "disaggregated" Europe -- and its ally in a search for influence inside the expanded European Union.

The apparently pro-U.S. political and economic bias of the new European Commission, which upsets both Paris and Berlin, is taken, by the suspicious, as evidence already of competitive alignments. Warsaw and Bucharest (or Sofia and Tallin), however, will eventually find that their essential interests are in Europe, not in North America.

There is continuing pressure to enlarge the U.S. presence in the Middle East, in order to defend Israel and American oil interests. This will be true even if the U.S. is "defeated" in Iraq. But that outcome -- in my view unfortunately assured -- will make the Middle East an even more controversial and costly zone of action for the United States than already is the case.

The global base system rests on the assumption that it is true and useful to consider the "war on terror" as truly a war, with globally deployed armies and air forces the right way to wage it.

That idea, in my view, is false, and potentially damaging. The evidence suggests that American bases tend to destabilize, provoking nationalist or religious resistance. This was the case in the

If the war on terror is really global, then every American base in the Islamic world (and even elsewhere) is potential generator of a new "foyer of terrorism." What the Pentagon sees as a global system of security bases, of a kind that was justified when there was a conventional military threat from the Soviet Union, makes little sense if the real threat of terrorism comes from people quietly installed in Manhattan, Paris or London.

What does the control of Najaf in Iraq, or the chase for bin Laden in the mountains of Afghanistan, have to do with them? We already know that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq had nothing to do with terrorism.

The United States needs to re-deploy its forces, but in a much more profound redeployment than this one. / By William Pfaff

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