The flags of the United States and Royal Air Force flying at RAF Fairford.
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Air_Force_in_the_United_Kingdom#/media/File:United_States_and_Royal_Air_Force_Flags.JPG)

Do People Like Having US Military Bases in their Country? New Public Opinion Research

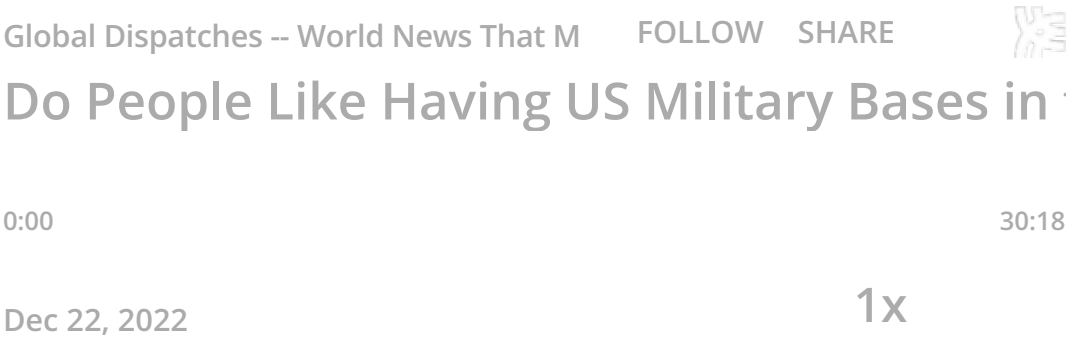
Mark Leon Goldberg (https://undispatch.com/author/levi-sharpe/) December 21, 2022

The United States has several hundred military bases scattered across the world. But how do citizens within countries hosting US troops feel about those bases and US military personnel?

In this episode, we are joined by Carla Martinez Machain, who conducted groundbreaking public opinion research on how exposure to a US military presence in an allied country impacts attitudes towards the US government, military and Americans more generally.

Carla Martinez Machain is a professor of political science at the University of Buffalo and is co-author of the new book "Beyond the Wire: US Military Deployments and Host Country Public" Opinion, with Michael A Allen, Michael E Flynn, and Andrew Stravers.

We discuss the sheer scope of US basing around the world before having a broader conversation about the relationship between US bases, public opinion, and foreign policy.



(https://spoti.fi/2FcRRa8)

(HTTPS://APPLE.CO/32DHXH9)APPLE PODCASTS (HTTPS://APPLE.CO/32DHXH9) | GOOGLE PODCASTS (HTTPS://PODCASTS.GOOGLE.COM/FEED/AHROCHM6LY91BMRPC3BHDGNOLMXPYNN5BI5JB20VCNNZ) | SPOTIFY (HTTPS://SPOTI.FI/2FCRRA8) | PODCAST ADDICT (HTTPS://BIT.LY/2GEEPAS) | STITCHER (HTTPS://BIT.LY/2FMHWWC) | RADIO PUBLIC (HTTPS://RADIOPUBLIC.COM/GLOBAL-DISPATCHES-WORLD-NEWS-THA-6VAXY9)

Transcript lightly edited

How Many Countries Host United States Military Bases?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:02:12] Obviously the number of countries that host U.S. military personnel and or bases varies every year. Right now, it is, you know, somewhere around 175 countries.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:02:24] And there are 193 countries in the United Nations, so it's almost everywhere.

Carla Martinez Machain [00:02:29] Exactly right. So almost every country hosts some amount of U.S. troops. Now, of course, there's a lot of variation, right? So, it can range from tens of thousands to — well, we're not even thinking about Marines at the embassy, but smaller deployments that would be like 50 personnel on a training mission — and so there's a lot of variation in that. What we focus on more are some of the larger deployments that the U.S. has historically sent abroad. So, some of the bigger hosts, but there certainly is this global presence, right? So at least since the end of World War Two, the U.S. has maintained a global presence, there's variation, I think recently there's been a bit of a trend towards downsizing some of these deployments, so moving away from the larger legacy deployments like we would see in Germany and Japan, maybe downsizing some of those a bit, moving more towards Lily-Type Basing where you use a local host to launch maybe some operations somewhere else, and also expanding the geographic range of which countries are hosting U.S. troops. So, if we look at more recent years, there's been more countries that received troops, but also a smaller number of troops per country.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:03:45] What's an example of that?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:03:48] Well, sub-Saharan Africa in general, as a region traditionally did not receive a lot of U.S. military deployments, I think since the global war on terror. And when there were these concerns about al Qaeda and affiliates gaining some ground in sub-Saharan Africa, there were several countries that saw an increase in their deployments in Africa, and not just because of the influence of al Qaeda affiliates, but also because there's a bit of a competition going on with China for influence in various regions. And sub-Saharan Africa is certainly one where there is some of that competition between the U.S. and China for influence.

WHERE ARE THE BIGGEST UNITED STATES MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS LOCATED?

Mark L. Goldberg [00:04:30] So where are the larger deployments of U.S. troops around the world? I think most listeners would be familiar with, like Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany, which is a big one, Japan, South Korea still host large numbers of U.S. troops. Where else?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:04:47] Some of the bigger ones, like you said, are Japan, Korea, Germany, Poland hosts a lot; England, a more traditional ally, hosts troops as well; Belgium, Turkey has hosted troops in the past as well; Kuwait, the Philippines. In general, a lot in Europe, a lot in Asia, and as I

mentioned, Africa has seen an increase in terms of a bigger base. Djibouti in Africa would be a larger one there. Latin America does not really host big deployments. We did do some fieldwork in Latin America, but those have traditionally been smaller ones, other than when the U.S. had their large military installation in Panama.

WHAT ARE BILATERAL RELATIONS?

Mark L. Goldberg [00:05:34] So before we get into your research, I'm curious to learn what the existing social science reveals about the impact of these foreign deployments on bilateral relations between the host country and the United States. Is there any good data or research that suggests what the impact bilaterally of these deployments might be?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:06:02] Yes, so I think that a lot of the work that has been done on basing begins with the question of why are these military bases there, right? So why the U.S. and the host country reach this agreement. The theory about that is that it's basically about a hierarchy in the international system where the United States is trying to establish this U.S. led world order and so having these bases in these countries are a way of establishing that hierarchy where it has influence over the host country. And in many of them, they're also serving a deterrence purpose. So, they're allies of the U.S. and having U.S. troops there is meant to serve as a trip wire, where if that country were to be attacked, the U.S. would be triggered into defending the host. So traditionally, this has been seen as a bilateral relationship where the U.S. is providing security and the host country is providing the policy concession of allowing the U.S. to have its troops stationed there. So that's at the level of the agreement that is made between the two countries; that's what the theory would tell us. Now, in terms of then what effect having these foreign troops has on the host country: there's been a lot of research about the negative effects hosting the troops can have for the host country, for example, about how having U.S. troops present has led to crime against members of the host country population, which then is, of course, costly for the leader, that has accepted the U.S. military into their country because they're harming their population. Or, for example, the military activities are leading to environmental harm, or very simply, it's seen as a form of imperialism, which a lot of the population would not view positively, and so that can be politically costly for leaders, and that can, in many cases, lead to also strain between the host country and the U.S.

HOW ARE UNITED STATES MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS VIEWED BY PEOPLE IN THE HOST COUNTRIES?

Mark L. Goldberg [00:08:13] So that leads, I think, indirectly to what I find so fascinating about your research, which seeks to study, unlike previous studies which looked at state to state relations, you're seeking to understand and learn how citizens within the hosting countries view U.S. military personnel.

Essentially, you're conducting fascinating public opinion research with key foreign policy implications. Before we go into your findings, can you just explain your study? How did you set up your research and conduct this research and where did you test public attitudes?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:08:56] One thing I wanted to mention was, you know what you were just saying, right? Where we look at the public and I think part of our motivation for that was if you think of this hierarchy in the international system and this world order, it is lacking the micro foundations. So, we understand why countries accept a foreign military presence but what about the population? The people who actually have to have these bases in their communities. What is it that makes an individual be willing to have that? That was their motivation for looking at that at the more micro level. And so, in terms of the study and how we conducted it, we think of it as a mixed method approach. So, we have the large observation quantitative part of it, which is based on these surveys, and then also we wanted to have a more qualitative aspect to it where we actually conducted fieldwork, did interviews with both elites and also members of civil society groups, journalists, activists, and that was the main idea behind the project as a whole. So basically, what we did was that we conducted large scale surveys in 14 different countries that hosted U.S. troops. So, the 14 countries we surveyed were Australia, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, the Netherlands, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, and the UK. So, we were trying to get some geographical variation, but also still countries where there was a large enough U.S. military presence that a person randomly selected from the population would have some decent probability of having interacted with the U.S. military or having been affected by it. In each one of those 14 countries, we surveyed approximately 1000 people each year and we did that over three years — 2018, 2019 and 2020 — which, of course, as we all know was an interesting year to be doing surveys. So basically, each year we had 14,000 respondents and total 42,000 respondents. So that was the survey part of it, and then in terms of fieldwork, we did fieldwork in six different countries.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:11:12] And you know, what is I think notable about each of those 14 countries is that they are countries that are not at conflict, I guess maybe with the exception of the Moro Liberation Front insurgency in the Philippines, but I can't remember if by 2018 that had been concluded. But generally speaking, these are not countries at hot conflict. These are just countries that are at peace and have U.S. large deployments as well.

Carla Martinez Machain [00:11:38] Right, and that was a big part of the motivation for the project. So, we weren't so much interested in studying how it is that the U.S. military interacts with the population in the conflict setting, because there is already a lot of good research about that, about hearts and minds and how you manage that. And also, because if it's a country at conflict and the US is fighting alongside it, we do understand better why the population would have a motivation to have foreign troops present: It's because they're helping them defend them, or on the flipside, it's because they're invading them. But what about these peacetime settings? How is that that the population interacts with the U.S. military? Why do they accept them? Why do they reject them? And that's what seemed most interesting to us.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:12:23] So what did you find after conducting quantitative and qualitative research across 14 countries?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:12:31] One quick thing that I wanted to mention was that for the qualitative research, we did also go to Latin America. So we went to Panama, which had previously hosted a large US military presence in the Canal Zone and then also to Peru, which conducts several joint military exercises with the U.S. We didn't run surveys there because neither one of those countries currently has a large enough U.S. military presence to really give us that sample we wanted. But we did want to get an idea at least qualitatively of what is going on with perceptions in Latin America. But, yes, what did we find? Well, I think that the first initial finding was that having contact with the U.S. military, either you personally having interacted with a service member or having someone in your social network have some interaction with a U.S. service member, it shifted respondents away from saying they didn't have an opinion about the U.S. military. What it did is made it more likely that they would say, either I strongly dislike the U.S. military, or I strongly like it, feel positively towards it. So, it shifted them in both directions. One thing we found that was surprising was that the positive effect was actually larger than the negative one.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:13:58] So they went from indifferent to having strong feelings, and most people you surveyed had strong feelings positively as opposed to negatively in terms of their interactions with U.S. troops on their soil.

Carla Martinez Machain [00:14:14] Right. So basically, people who had had an interaction, either personally or someone in their social network had with the U.S. military, those were the ones which shifted in either direction, but the positive effect was bigger than the negative one.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:14:31] And why do you think that is?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:14:34] So what we argue in terms of the theory is that it's about humans being social animals, right? So, we generally like to interact with other people. The more we interact with them, the more we see that they are like us and similar to us and that we have things in common. And so, you know, political psychology actually tells us that when we have biases against certain groups of people, if we interact with them, and the setting of that interaction matters, of course, and we can talk more about that in a bit. But when we interact with other groups who we have biases against, we're more likely to shed those biases and feel more positively towards those groups. I think that in these settings, most of the interactions that occur between deployed service members and the communities tend to be these casual, maybe shallow but simple, vaguely positive interactions. So, we chat with someone in line at the supermarket; we both pick up our children from the same kiddie soccer league, things like that. I think that most of these interactions tend to be positive, maybe on the shallower side for the majority, but positive, right? And so that would lead us to believe that because the modal form of interaction is positive, then people update on U.S. service members, they drop some of their biases and are more likely to feel positively towards them.

WHY DO DIFFERENT HOST COUNTRIES REACT DIFFERENTLY TO UNITED STATES MILITARY DEPLOYMENTS?

Mark L. Goldberg [00:16:11] That's fascinating. I'm curious, did your models test for race and ethnicity? So, in countries that are perhaps more demographically similar to the United States, were there any differences between countries that are less demographically similar to the United States? Like were interactions in Japan different than interactions, say, in the United Kingdom?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:16:37] Yes. Ethnicity and ethnic identity are this entire chapter in the book. So, there's two sides to it. One, is there a common ethnicity, culture, language, even with the United States? And is that having an effect? But also, something else we were interested in was within a country, do ethnic minorities have a different experience than the majority? So first, to answer your question, yes. So, I think somewhere like England — well, England tends to have positive perceptions to begin with — but when we were carrying out the qualitative fieldwork, the interviews, one of the places we went to was England. We were in Lakenheath where there's a big U.S. military presence and just from talking to people that kept being brought up over and over again, right? So, the common language, the common culture that makes it a natural setting for these positive interactions to take place for people to like each other. That said, even in countries where there wasn't that common language, common ethnicity, whatever it is we want to refer to, we still saw the effect, right? So again, it's more pronounced in some countries than others that the local context certainly matters but even in countries where there wasn't the common language or common ethnicity, those who had had personal interactions or someone in their networks had had an interaction, those were also again pushed in both directions with the positive effect tending to be bigger than the negative one.

DO COUNTRIES RECEIVE A FINANCIAL BENEFIT FROM HOSTING THE UNITED STATES MILITARY?

Mark L. Goldberg [00:18:17] That's fascinating. I'm curious also to learn to what extent the economic activity generated by having a large presence of U.S. troops in a community affects that community's perception of the U.S. troops there.

Carla Martinez Machain [00:18:37] So we also asked a question about whether individuals received a financial benefit from the military presence and whether someone in their network did receive financial or economic benefit from the U.S. military presence. And that also had a positive effect on your perceptions. And that's something that we also heard from the interviews: that people's businesses would benefit, that landlords would benefit from renting to U.S. service members. There's also a negative side, of course. So having a U.S. military presence in your neighborhood, for example, can drive up rent prices for the locals, things like that. But it certainly has a positive economic impact and in fact, from talking to some of the U.S. military service members who we interviewed, they would tell us that they would

purposely, for example, hire local contractors when they needed something built on base to try to keep that money in the community and benefit, because they understand that that is something that the community likes. What I found most interesting, though, was that that effect of contact holds even when we statistically control for the economic effect. So, what we wanted to make sure was that it wasn't just economics driving it, and even taking economics into effect, whether someone got a financial benefit or not, that contact effect still held.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:20:08] Your research is fascinating to me, partly because to the extent that we sort of hear about regular American interactions with host country citizens, oftentimes it's through the lens of crimes that troops have committed against local populations. You know, there have been high profile stories, for example, in Okinawa of U.S. troops committing vast offenses, sexual offenses, rape crimes against people on the island. Do those crimes and misdeeds by American troops abroad have lasting impact on local community perceptions of Americans in the country?

HOW IS CRIME HANDLED BETWEEN DEPLOYED UNITED STATES SERVICE MEMBERS AND HOST COUNTRY COMMUNITIES?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:20:57] Yes, and actually, in the book, we have an entire chapter where we speak about crime. So, you're right that one of the bigger problems that you have when you deploy the U.S. military is that you are going to have service members commit crimes against the local population. And that can affect not only the individual who experience the crime, but the community as a whole, make them feel less safe, make them angry, make them want to protest. So, experiencing a crime is one of the strongest determinants of protest against the U.S. military. In our survey, we actually asked individuals if they had been the victim of a crime committed by a U.S. service member, and if so, which crime it was, which is something that is sensitive to ask but we did want to do that because sometimes relying on local crime data can be very difficult. We know that there's underreporting for certain types of crimes. For example, things like rape tend to get underreported. In addition, because of the power dynamic between the U.S. military and the local population, some of these crimes are less likely to go reported. So, you know, while there's certainly the possibility that people could be lying about their experience, we thought it was important to directly ask the population about this. And so, we found some interesting effects. In terms of the types of crimes that occur, some of the more common ones can be things like burglary, robbery. There's also, like you said, sexual assault, rape, things like that. And so, we wanted to understand how that was interacting with contact in order to effect perceptions of the U.S. military. When we were doing fieldwork, we also asked some of the commanders and some of the other service members we interviewed, what were they actually doing to try to decrease crimes committed by service members against the population? Because when you talk about these high-profile crimes, they're the ones in Okinawa; there have been some in Panama. And in many cases — and this we heard from people at embassies — even if you try the perpetrator, right, even if you show that they are being

punished for the crime, that can harm the relationship with the community. So even if the person gets caught, gets tried, it doesn't matter, right? They said in many cases, whatever you do with a criminal doesn't matter because it has still damaged that relationship significantly.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:23:36] So if your key finding is that large deployments of U.S. troops tend to engender positive attitudes towards them by the host communities, at least in countries that are not in conflict, what are some of the key foreign policy lessons that you would derive from that finding?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:23:58] Well, I think just to clarify, we think it engenders both positive and negative, it just happens that the positive is larger, but that negative one is still there. In terms of policy, I think something that we stress in the book is that the base commanders, those who are actually in charge of these deployments, they should focus on, first of all, getting rid of the negative interactions. So, the crime, you know, the drunken bar fights, the intimate partner abuse by U.S. service members against perhaps their partner, who might be a local in that country, they need to do things to reduce those negative interactions. So, things like having courtesy patrols in bar districts to make sure that barfights don't break out, having a ride system so that when service members go out and are drinking, they don't drive drunk and cause an accident. But also reaching out to communities. So, when we talked to some of the staff at some of these bases, some of them were civilian, and they talked about how they do outreach to the communities. And so, they maybe have meetings with local mayors and provide a forum for them to say this is the problem we have with the base; it's creating traffic; do something so that we don't have to deal with your rush hour traffic, maybe direct people in a different direction. And so, you know, the U.S. tendency has tended to be that to avoid the negative interactions they sometimes shut down. So, they'll keep the base separate from the community. They don't allow service members to leave the base. They give them a supermarket, a movie theater, everything on base to avoid the negative interactions. But what we argue is that you might avoid the negative interactions, but then you're also getting rid of the positive ones that have the potential to establish that goodwill. In addition, just by shutting down a base, it doesn't mean that you're getting rid of all the negative effects on the community. You're still polluting; you're still being viewed as imperialistic by the local population, and in fact, you know, a lot of the people we talked to — I remember one example from Panama, would react to U.S. bases being closed down and secretive by thinking that they were up to no good. So, they would say, well, we don't really know what's going on in there; they must be planning to invade Venezuela. Or they must be — well, kind of funny, the Germans, they said that they actually had to bring in some of the local mayors because they wanted to verify that they were actually recycling inside the U.S. military base. So that's a very innocuous example. But the idea that when you shut down, it's not solving all your problems. Again, I want to stress that interaction has both positive and negative effects, but we think that engagement with local communities is a better prescription than just shutting down the base and isolating it from the local community.

WHAT ARE LILYPAD-TYPE UNITED STATES MILITARY BASES?

Mark L. Goldberg [00:27:16] So when we started our conversation, you noted that the general trend in terms of U.S. basing is away from these like massive bases in Europe and Japan and South Korea and towards more Lilypad-Type Bases, particularly in sub–Saharan Africa. How could the lessons from your research be applied towards those kinds of Lilypad-Type Bases in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of strengthening broader U.S. strategic goals in the region?

Carla Martinez Machain [00:27:50] I think it carries over. So obviously in a smaller base or, you know, when you're sending a smaller deployment to a base that is the host countries base, not an American base, you don't have the potential for that big economic impact that you would get in Okinawa or in Ramstein. But you still have the potential to have your personnel, if they are interacting with local populations, have those interactions be positive ones, still engage in outreach. So, you know, previously in our work, we looked at some of these smaller, more humanitarian type deployments that the U.S. conducts in Latin America, where, for example, they might send 50 military personnel to vaccinate livestock. And that's the sort of thing that is small and builds goodwill. So, if you have some deployment and they're doing training, they're doing something else, having a day of outreach, making sure that you're doing cultural training with your personnel before they deploy, to make sure that they're not doing things that are insensitive to the local population, that sort of thing — maintaining the more positive interactions even in a smaller deployment.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:29:11] Carla, thank you so much for your time.

Carla Martinez Machain [00:29:13] Thank you.

Mark L. Goldberg [00:29:21] Thank you for listening to Global Dispatches. Our show is produced by me, Mark Leon Goldberg, and edited and mixed by Levi Sharp.

Previous
A New Plastics Treaty Is Being Negotiated at the UN: What You Need to Know (https://undispatch.com/plastics-treaty/)

Next
A New Study Shows How to Counter Violent Extremism Through "Social Cohesion" (https://undispatch.com/a-new-study-shows-how-to-counter-violent-extremism-through-social-cohesion/)