Review - Base Towns

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Base Towns: Local Contestation of the U.S. Military in Korea and Japan
By Claudia Junghyun Kim
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The U.S. military basing network has been the subject of much scholarly inquiry over the years, and much of this literature can be divided into one of three lines of inquiry. First, what explains the distribution of bases around the world? Why does the United States establish military bases in the places that it does, why do some foreign governments want (or refuse) to host U.S. bases, and how do U.S. policy-makers and their foreign counterparts use different narratives to legitimize the presence of those bases?

Second, regardless of what policy-makers and military officials think about basing, do military bases actually do what they are meant to do? Do they successfully advance U.S. interests? Or are there conditions under which they are more or less likely to have their intended effects? We see such debates play out on the question of whether small, so-called tripwire forces have any deterrent effect.

Claudia Junghyun Kim's *Base Towns: Local Contestation of the U.S. Military in Korea and Japan* joins a third line of inquiry that has focused more on the subnational politics of basing. Such work considers how activists as well as local and regional governments interact to shape decisions about where individual bases will be established, maintained, expanded, moved, minimized, or abandoned. *Base Towns* contributes to this literature by focusing on anti-base social movements. That is, even where foreign governments welcome a U.S. military presence, bases and their externalities often generate local contestation. Bases vary in the degree of contestation they provoke, however, and it is this variation that Kim seeks to explain.

Within the U.S. military basing network, bases in South Korea and Japan have held particular importance in U.S. foreign policy. The number of facilities in each country suggests as much — Kim (p.13) cites a 2018 Pentagon report as listing 514 "officially acknowledged U.S. military installations," including 83 and 121 sites in South Korea and Japan, respectively. In explaining why bases generate varying degrees of local contestation, Kim thus focuses on twenty of the largest U.S. military bases in these two countries — ten each in South Korea and Japan — and the surrounding "base towns" from which varying degrees of contestation emerge.

Drawing on interviews with activists, participant observation, and a dataset of protest events targeting those twenty bases between 2000 and 2015, Kim argues that local-level contestation of U.S. military bases emerges through a confluence of three key factors — the scope of planned changes to the basing status quo in a given town and the extent to which activists can take advantage of those changes to generate an anti-base social movement; whether the activists' framing of the issue is sufficiently resonant with the broader, non-activist population; and whether activists can successfully attract third-party support from local political elites.

Among the three factors that Kim argues shape local contestation to U.S. military bases, it is not necessarily one factor that predominates. Rather, she posits an additive, contingent relationship between these factors — the more disruptive a planned change is to the status quo, the more activists frame their movement in terms of local, pragmatic concerns rather than more abstract, ideological concerns, and the more successfully they can recruit allies among

local elites, the more likely the activists are to generate high levels of anti-base contestation. Especially on the latter two points, however, successful activism can come at a cost; if activists are generally more radical — i.e., more interested in removing the American basing presence — than the non-activist population, framing their movement in mundane, highly localized terms and working with local political elites offers a path toward incremental gains, but it ultimately concedes the possibility of more radical change.

Base Towns makes especially notable contributions that are reminiscent of Cynthia Enloe's Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics. First, it suggests that the politics of military basing — to say nothing of other private or public uses of space — is grounded in a 'politics of sight'. Getting a foreign sovereign to acquiesce to the maintenance of a U.S. military base on its soil can be a challenge in its own right, but if the base is to be a lasting presence, the host government and the U.S. government alike need to have reasonable confidence that the local population will tolerate the base's presence. One way to encourage local toleration of a military base is to simply make it unobtrusive enough that it does not provoke costly backlash. "Most bases have managed to slip into the daily lives of the nearby community," Enloe writes (1990, 66), but that is not a permanent characteristic. Kim's work complements Enloe's in showing that it is precisely when major changes in a base's operations disrupt the status quo that this ability to hide in plain sight is most precarious.

Second, Kim argues that activists are most likely to succeed in attracting the support of local citizens and officials when they can frame their opposition to bases in pragmatic terms. While Kim (pp.43-46, 86-87) catalogues a wide array of such mundane concerns — ranging from car accidents to environmental degradation — some of the most frequent, salient concerns that recur throughout the book are related to gender, sexuality, and sexual violence. That is, Kim's examination of local-level contestation builds on Enloe's (1990, 67) argument that, "A foreign base requires especially delicate adjustment of relations between men and women, for if the fit between local and foreign men and local and foreign women breaks down, the base may lose its protective cover." Kim (pp.34, 73) shows exactly how this dynamic "breaks down" in an incident of rape by U.S. servicemen that galvanized anti-base protests in Okinawa and in activist campaigns about the "decadent culture and AIDS" that U.S. soldiers would allegedly spread. Prostitutes, moreover, recur as a social concern for both politicians and activists — with bases perhaps leading countries to be "overrun by mixed-race children and *panpan* (street prostitutes)" — and as individuals subjected to violence by U.S. servicemembers in ways that have sparked anti-base contestation (pp.39, 87, 122).

All told, *Base Towns* is an impressive work of empirical depth and theoretical ambition, but perhaps most important is its normative thrust. That is, Kim's work casts a harsh light on the myriad consequences that people face simply for living near U.S. military bases, and it asks us to act as if those people and their lives matter. What U.S. officials have derided as "interminable dialogue over parochial issues," she argues, "must continue".

About the author:

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