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# Military bases

## US bases in the UK and UK bases overseas – what they are and what they do

United States forces have had a continuous presence in the United Kingdom since the Second World War. Located throughout Britain, US military bases have contributed to illegal and immoral drone strikes, the transportation of weapons for military operations overseas, mass surveillance and the globally destabilising missile defence system. And now it looks like US nuclear weapons will even be based here.

As pillars of American global dominance, these bases severely undermine UK sovereignty. With negligible control over the actions American forces have undertaken from within UK territory, the British government has consequently been implicated in activities which may well have violated international law and have certainly resulted in civilian fatalities.

The UK also has military bases throughout the world. Like their US counterparts, these bases have undertaken deadly military operations, launching fatal drone strikes and bombing campaigns as well as undertaking expansive covert surveillance.

This briefing will firstly explore US bases in the UK, highlighting their history, legal basis and toxic impacts. The latter half will then consider UK bases overseas, examining the ways in which these bases have contributed to global instability and inequality.

## US military bases in the UK

Why do we have US bases in the UK?

There are currently 10,000 US military personnel, civilian staff and family members posted in the UK, mostly stationed in major military bases.

Initially arriving in the UK as part of the Allied efforts against Nazi Germany, US forces remained here throughout the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and are still here today.

The legal framework for these bases is the Status of Forces Agreement. This was agreed between NATO and the UK in 1951 and became accepted into UK

law via the Visiting Forces Act of 1952. These agreements allow military forces to operate within, and with the consent of, the host state.

## Where are the US bases in the UK?

During the 1990s there were approximately 100 US bases in the UK. 13 remain today: RAF Lakenheath, RAF Croughton, RAF Welford, RAF Fairford, RAF Feltwell, RAF Upwood, RAF Barford St John, RAF Blenheim Crescent, RAF Fylingdales, RAF Menwith Hill, RAF Mildenhall, RAF Alconbury and RAF Molesworth.

## Who controls these bases?

Whilst most of these bases are named Royal Air Force (RAF) stations, usually they are leased by the US for the purpose of US Air Force (USAF) operations. As such, whilst the physical buildings comprising the bases are usually the property of the Ministry of Defence (MoD), very little of what happens in them is controlled by the British government.

Largely, this is because the primary framework which legislates for these bases – the Status of Forces Agreement and Visiting Forces Act – ultimately reserves jurisdiction of US personnel to the US. Furthermore, as this legislation was created prior to the development of several of the technologies these bases use, such as intelligence gathering and surveillance technologies, the legislation outlining permitted activities is outdated. This severely limits the UK's legislative control of the numerous activities which employ these technologies.

It is also extremely difficult for the British public to know what is happening on these bases. The MoD has strengthened the military by-laws which also apply to RAF bases, making them so stringent that activities such as taking photographs and failing to collect dog waste from near the bases can be criminal offences.

As such, British control of these bases remains negligible, and public insight into their activities remains severely curtailed. Despite operating on UK territory, these bases are firmly under American control.

## What do these bases do?

Some of these bases, such as RAF Lakenheath, act as airfields for US fighter planes. Lakenheath is the largest US Air Force base in the UK and hosts the US's 48th Fighter Wing. This force is tasked to provide 'worldwide responsive combat airpower and support' which is 'capable of dominating any adversary'. Examples of this 'domination' includes the bombing of Libya in 1986 as well as launching combat and support missions for US involvement in Afghanistan and the Iraq war.

Other RAF bases perform intelligence and communication functions, such as RAF Menwith Hill in North Yorkshire. Controlled by the US's National Security Agency (NSA), Menwith Hill is the largest military spy base in the world outside the US. Here, the NSA undertakes surveillance and intelligence gathering for drone and other military operations. The base is also used to support US missile defence as a downlink station for space-based components. The powerful radar system at RAF Fylingdales, also in North Yorkshire, serves as part of the US/UK Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) and by the US to help monitor space activities and target missile interceptors if needed.

In addition to operating air fields for humanitarian and military missions, intelligence gathering, surveillance, and missile defence operations, these bases perform refuelling, operational support, training, and munitions storage functions. These bases have also been used to transport US weapons for illegal military activity, such as RAF Mildenhall in 2006.

## US nuclear weapons

It is believed that RAF Lakenheath is now being prepared to host US nuclear weapons. The US Department of Defense has added the UK to a list of NATO nuclear weapons storage locations in Europe being upgraded under a multimillion-dollar infrastructure programme.

RAF Lakenheath previously hosted US free-fall nuclear bombs until they were withdrawn in 2008, following consistent anti-nuclear protest. The return of US nuclear weapons to Britain constitutes a further undermining of prospects for global peace. The US is the only country to locate its nuclear weapons outside its own borders and this major increase in NATO's capacity to wage nuclear war in Europe is dangerously destabilising and must be opposed. Immoral and potentially illegal strikes

Several of these bases have provided information for US forces to conduct illegal, fatal drone strikes. As Amnesty International has highlighted, at least four RAF bases in the UK are involved in the production of data used for targeted drone strikes which have risked violating international law.

According to The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, US drone strikes have killed between 800 and 1,750 civilians since 2010. Many of these strikes have been enacted using data gathered from bases inside the UK.

This has been corroborated by the investigative journalist platform The Intercept. From leaked Pentagon papers, The Intercept has shown that the NSA has used Menwith Hill to assist in targeted killing operations. The base's spying programmes enable the NSA to locate particular individuals or groups of suspects and subsequently target drone strikes against them.

The UK government continues to state that US operations are carried out with its knowledge and consent – yet if this is true, this means that the British government has condoned drone strikes and military operations which have killed civilians and suspected terrorists without due legal process, such as a trial.

## Compliance with UK law

As well as assisting with fatal drone strikes, the use of these bases for surveillance by the US may not be compliant with UK legislation.

Currently, all secret surveillance and investigation conducted by UK public bodies is regulated by the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA). However, there is no requirement to monitor US compliance with this act.

This legislative failing has most famously resulted in RAF Croughton being used to funnel back to Washington data obtained from NSA eavesdropping on German Chancellor Angela Merkel's mobile phone in Berlin in 2017. A diplomatic crisis followed and, combined with the UK's role in providing data for drone strikes in Yemen, has led to cross party support for the development of greater scrutiny of US base activity.

## A destabilising US missile defence system

By continuing to host these bases, the UK continues to uphold its 'special relationship' with the US, including lending support for the US missile defence programme.

CND has long highlighted the asymmetry of the US missile defence system, as it could allow the US to initiate a first strike without fear of retaliation. This significantly increases the likelihood of nuclear weapons being used – with the bases putting Britain on the front line.

The involvement with the US missile defence system not only puts the UK at risk in any future US war, it also condones and supports a globally destabilising system which endangers any progress being made on nuclear disarmament.

In an age of mounting global instability, the UK should not be supporting this destructive technology by allowing components of the US missile defence system to be housed in the UK.

## UK military bases abroad

It is not just the US which houses destructive military bases abroad. The UK also has bases overseas which are often used to launch deadly military operations in conjunction with US forces.

## **Where are these bases?**

UK military forces have a presence throughout the world. This is in large part due to the extensive deployment of UK troops via NATO to over 80 countries globally. However, the UK also maintains its own permanent bases overseas in addition to its NATO commitments.

Research by Declassified UK has revealed that the UK has a military presence in 145 sites in 42 countries, meaning that the UK has the second largest military network in the world, after the United States.

## **Why does the UK have these bases?**

Foreign military bases can be used for controlling populations and resources, as places from which an occupying power can project military power and political influence.

Unlike US bases in the UK, not all of the UK's bases were established during the Second World War. Some, such as the RAF base in Cyprus, were established in the immediate wake of Cyprus's independence from Britain in 1960. Others were created more recently, such as the Royal Navy base in Bahrain, which opened in 2018.

Generally, the UK has established bases in areas it formerly colonised or still does, as with current British Overseas Territories – areas of land which fall under the jurisdiction of the UK. As such, the UK uses its existing ties to countries or its current control of overseas territory as the means to establish military bases abroad.

The UK government cites defence, the preservation of global and regional stability, ally building, UK leadership and tactical support as the reasons for this extensive overseas presence.

## **What do these bases do?**

These bases perform a range of functions, including military operations, covert surveillance and communications monitoring, forces training, munitions storage, logistics, operational support and missile defence functions.

Generally speaking, foreign military bases are seen as a threat to a host nation's security, safety and sovereignty. They can also contribute to violations of civil liberties and international humanitarian law.

## **Military strikes**

Many of these bases have been used as launch centres for bombing campaigns. This can be seen in the case of the RAF base in Cyprus, RAF Akrotiri. This was used as a military outpost for the illegal bomb strikes in Syria that were conducted jointly with the US and France in April 2018.

This base was also used to conduct operations in Afghanistan and during the Iraq war. An investigation launched by The New York Times has found that in Iraq alone, these strikes have produced 31 times more civilian deaths than official numbers suggest, and that one in five of the coalition strikes investigated resulted in civilian deaths.

## **Surveillance**

Information from documents leaked by Edward Snowden has revealed the huge scale of surveillance undertaken by the US using a global network of spy bases established with the cooperation of a number of allied states, including the UK.

At the previously unknown British-run internet monitoring station in Oman, intelligence is gathered by extracting data from the undersea fibre-optic cables that come to the surface there and pass through the region.

The secretive and expansive nature of this surveillance network presents clear ethical and political issues, while the opaque nature of these bases has prevented any meaningful in-depth investigation.

## **Investments in repressive regimes**

Several of the UK's overseas military bases fall in countries that have poor human rights records.

For instance, Bahrain, home of the UK's Naval Support Facility, has been implicated in mass arrests, torture, the elimination of free speech and the violent crackdown of protests leading to several deaths. Yet the UK has downplayed these abuses, instead choosing to spend £40 million for the creation of its military base.

## **Global inequality**

Many of these bases are in areas which the UK formerly colonised, and as such their presence continues to replicate this exploitative relationship.

This can be seen in the case of Diego Garcia. Whilst this is a US base, the UK has provided the territory for it by transforming the Chagos archipelago of its former colony into the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). Also, as part of this process, the indigenous population was removed from the archipelago and forbidden from returning.

## **The destructive 'special relationship'**

As described above, a number of problematic activities have been undertaken in conjunction with the US. The UK foreign bases therefore serve as a physical manifestation of the special relationship with the US, and it is from these bases that the US and UK have been able to implement destructive foreign policy decisions, causing wide-spread destruction and loss of life. In order to disentangle itself from this relationship, the UK must close its military bases abroad.

## **Conclusion**

By permitting the US to use MoD bases, the UK is complicit in drone strikes, targeted killing operations, illegal surveillance and civilian deaths. Data collected from British territory has become weaponised in the hands of the US government, and these activities are taking place on British soil without adequate UK oversight or input.

Furthermore, UK bases abroad have enabled the UK and US to launch military operations which have resulted in the loss of civilian life, as well as perpetuating global instability and inequality.

It is clear that both US bases in the UK and UK bases abroad pose a significant threat to human life and endanger global

stability. It is time to scrap all foreign military bases.

■ *Note: For the purpose of this briefing, CND will consider both installations where troops and equipment are stationed outside the boundary of their own country, and installations which assist the military with communications or intelligence gathering functions, as a 'military base'.*

