

Overview

Projecting power through the overseas deployment of military personnel is central to how great powers exert influence abroad. Since the end of World War II, the United States has had a virtual monopoly on military basing through its network of allies and overseas facilities. However, that monopoly is eroding as competitors like China seek to expand their own overseas military presence and access. This project explores the social, political, and economic nature of the interactions between host-state populations and foreign military personnel. These interactions have substantial implications for great powers' ability to build host-country support for foreign deployments, bases, and access. The project compares the influence-building efforts of the United States and China in current and prospective base-host countries. Across regime types, local populations—which may have concerns about crime, pollution, and sovereignty—can influence the scope of foreign military access. This project proposes a one-year plan of studying three countries where basing access is increasingly the subject of great power contestation: Cambodia, Djibouti, and Kenya. The project will include mass public surveys in all three countries as well as fieldwork to conduct elite interviews in Djibouti.

Intellectual Merit

The proposed research project focuses on three basic science research aims that will result in major insights into international relations theory, political economy, international security, and data: exploring how elites and the public in host states view existing or potential U.S. and Chinese military presences in their countries; understanding how these views are shaped by economic incentives and contact with U.S. and Chinese citizens, especially military personnel; and exploring the social, economic, and political effects of great power military deployments in lower-income and lower-middle-income states, thus building on previous research that has focused overwhelmingly on deployments in upper-income states.

Foundational works treat great power competition for bases as the province of states and their elite decision-makers. However, recent scholarship shows the public has an important say in policy. How a great power's military personnel behave within a host state can shape how permissive the host government is. The three countries chosen vary in how much influence each major power has and allows our research design to use both observational and experimental questions to gauge public and elite perceptions. The data will enable international relations, political science, economics, psychology, and sociology scholars to answer questions about the relationship between mass attitudes and state behavior.

The project will contribute to basic social science research in two primary bodies of scholarship. First, the project will contribute to the literature on foreign military bases and access by showing how great power competition shapes the domestic foundations of support for basing. Second, the project will contribute to the literature on how great powers use foreign policy tools to influence other countries by expanding it to a new dependent variable—support for great power bases—and by comparing how effective economic incentives and contact with U.S. and Chinese citizens are in shaping that support.

Broader Impacts

This project has impacts on scholarship, enhancing understanding of influence in the security domain and the sources of leverage in sovereign bargaining over military access. This project also has impacts on policy, informing U.S. national security debates over the impact of China's growing economic investments in countries that host military presence. This research will also reach across borders, demonstrating how the military-adjacent communities can minimize harm and foster positive relations with foreign host communities. The research team purposefully includes diverse and underrepresented voices in the project. There is gender, national, and ethnic diversity among the investigators, and our recruitment of a research assistant from the University of Miami, a Hispanic-Serving Institution, will target NSF-defined groups of underrepresentation in the sciences by advertising investigators will take such status into primary consideration when hiring for the position. The project further includes plans to host a student workshop on experimental design in surveys and a research presentation that will help to disseminate our results, lessons learned, and methodological insights for the community, both on the University of Miami campus.