

Exploring a Civil Resistance Approach to Examining U.S. Military Base Politics: The Case of Manta, Ecuador

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U.S. troops withdrew from the forward operating location (FOL) in Manta, Ecuador, in 2009 after a decade of presence. The withdrawal was celebrated not only by Ecuadorian activists, who had protested the FOL since it was established in 1999, but also by anti-U.S. military base movements around the world, which became connected through the transnational “No Bases” network and considered this a “people’s victory.” To advance our understanding of the role of such movements and their agency in U.S. military base politics, I borrow from civil resistance literature that holds a pluralistic view of power and examine the campaign to close the FOL in Manta through the lens of this conceptual framework, which revealed some limitations to the approach. I discuss areas that require further improvements in order for the framework to offer more rigorous explanations of anti-U.S. military base campaigns and their outcomes.

Keywords: U.S. military bases; civil resistance; social movements; transnational activism; Ecuador

Introduction

In March 2007, a transnational activist network called “No Bases” network¹ held its first international conference in Quito and Manta, Ecuador. The network was formed as a result of the increased activism against U.S. military bases abroad during and after the 2003 Iraq War, connecting groups and campaigns that had been contesting American military bases in their local communities around the world. Ecuadorian activists had protested the Forward Operating Location (FOL)² in the coastal city of Manta, established in 1999 as part of the U.S. anti-narcotics surveillance mission in South America. The Defense Ministry’s Assistant Secretary Miguel Carvajal attended the No Bases conference on behalf of President Rafael Correa, whose 2006 election promises included closing the Manta FOL, and confirmed to the audience that Ecuador would not renew the U.S. lease of the base upon its expiration in 2009 (Becker 2007). True to its commitment, the Correa administration

¹ For more details about the network, see Van der Zeijden (2010).

² FOLs are established in existing airfields operated by the host governments.

submitted a nonrenewal decision to the U.S. Embassy in July 2008 (Yeo 2011, 87), signaling a victory not only for the Ecuadorian activists opposing the base agreement, but also for the overall No Bases network. The network's coordinator, Wilbert van der Zeijden, (2009) proclaimed: "The closure of the Manta base was a victory for all Ecuadorians, a victory shared by hundreds of similar campaigns around the globe that have been working together since 2003."³ This sentiment was also expressed by Foreign Minister Fander Falconí, who stated at the ceremony marking the U.S. withdrawal that the return of the Manta Base was "a victory for sovereignty and peace."⁴

What role do anti-U.S. military base campaigns play in shaping and influencing U.S. basing politics around the world? Was the closure of the FOL in Manta actually a "people's victory" against the U.S. military, as claimed by activists in Ecuador and beyond? To address these questions, this essay explores an application of the "civil resistance approach" to understanding the change in the U.S. military presence in Ecuador. I introduce a theoretical framework focused on a pluralistic model of power, examining how people may impact the U.S. military base policy through nonviolent action. The essay then presents a case study of the anti-U.S. military base activism in Manta, Ecuador, with a focus on the movement's tactics as well as other political factors that were in play between 1999 and the 2009 withdrawal. The case study reveals limitations of the framework, which will require further conceptualization. I conclude this analysis by outlining implications of the study.

Understanding Resistance against U.S. Military Bases

To date a number of studies on the U.S. military presence have been conducted in various disciplines, including political science, anthropology, and geography.⁵ Some focus on individual cases with a detailed historical narrative on the particular base, while others are comparative, often examining conditions and structures that shape politics surrounding U.S. bases such as elite relations with the United States and domestic political transitions. Table 1 below summarizes explanations provided by some of the comparative studies on U.S. foreign military base politics, using Okinawa and Manta as examples.

While insightful and parsimonious, such explanations overlook the role of anti-military base activism and the diversity in movement organizations and tactics. Regarding this point, Amy Austin Holmes (2014) challenges the dominant assumptions about U.S. military base politics, particularly their focus on the U.S. presence as the primary agency in understanding changes in U.S. base policies. She states: "many scholars have not taken seriously the possibility that local conditions or agencies could impact the network of U.S. bases and its adherent policies and strategies" (19), while she finds

³ Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Spanish are my own.

⁴ See the statement at: <https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/ecuador-recupera-su-soberania-en-manta/>.

⁵ For examples of previous research, see: Calder 2007; Cooley 2008; Davis 2015; Enloe 1989; Fitz-Henry 2015; Gerson and Birchard 1991; Gillem 2007; Holmes 2014; Johnson 2000; Johnson 2004; Kawato 2015; Lutz, ed. 2009; Vine 2011; Vine 2015; Bitar 2016; Yeo 2011

that “certain protest activities had a direct impact on the U.S. military presence and essentially circumvented host-nation elites” (23).

Table 1: Explanations Offered by Previous Studies⁶

	Okinawa, Japan	Manta, Ecuador
Calder (2007)	Compensation politics – stable basing contract	-
Cooley (2008)	Consolidated democracy – stable basing contract	Politicization of the base during political transition
Yeo (2011)	Strong security consensus among elites	Weak security consensus among elites
Kawato (2015)	Symbolic concession (disempowering domestic institution)	Policy change through persuasion

To address this challenge and to examine the narrative of Manta and other examples of shifts in the U.S. basing policy, such as Vieques, as being “people’s victories,” I propose a movement-centered study on resistance against U.S. military bases, with a specific focus on the civil resistance approach.⁷ For the purpose of this study, I adopt the following definition of civil resistance: “the use of methods of nonviolent action by civil society actors engaged in asymmetric conflicts with authorities not averse to using violence to defend their interests” (Schock 2015, 2).⁸ Civil resistance is often referred to using other terms, such as nonviolent action, passive resistance, nonviolent struggle, and people power (Zunes, Merriman, and Stephan 2017), which are sometimes used interchangeably. In comparison to the study of social movements and revolution, which focuses on structural sources, political context, social bases, and mobilization, the analysis of civil resistance and nonviolent action tends to put emphasis on strategy, techniques, and mechanisms of change. Concepts used in civil resistance literature would be useful in understanding the effectiveness of anti-U.S. military base activism, for example: the relative importance of agency over structure (Ackerman 2007); determination of why certain series of actions lead to successful or unsuccessful outcomes (Schock 2013); and a pluralistic model of power, where authorities derive their power from the obedience of

⁶ Cooley and Kawato do not discuss the base in Manta in their studies, but this table attempts to apply their arguments to this particular case.

⁷ Examining base politics using the civil resistance perspective is not an entirely new approach. The Global Nonviolent Action Database (<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/>) compiled by Swarthmore College, includes a handful of anti-U.S. military base campaigns such as the one in Vieques, Puerto Rico, as cases of nonviolent actions, examining the campaign methods based on Sharp’s list of 198 methods of nonviolent action and evaluating their outcomes. Overall, campaigns against U.S. military bases have used a wide range of nonviolent tactics, including mass protests, marches, rallies, blockage and occupation of sites, and forming human chains to block access to construction activities, as well as court cases, petition drives, lectures and educational activities to raise awareness and apply political pressure. In some cases, state authorities and police have resorted to using physical violence against the protesters or arresting them.

⁸ Schock (2015, 2) discusses various elements that go into defining the term civil resistance. For example, he notes that it involves widespread activities to challenge a particular power, regime or policy; it is a collective action; it avoids using violence; it is carried out by mostly civilians; and it is a form of asymmetric conflict. For other definitions, see: Sharp 1999, 567; Sharp 2005, 547; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 12; Zunes, Merriman, and Stephan 2017.

the people (Martin 1989; Sharp 1973, 1112; Sharp 1980; Sharp 2003, 11–12; Zunes, Merriman, and Stephan 2017).

Conceptualizing Power in Base Politics

We can explore the idea of studying challenges to U.S. military presence abroad through the lens of civil resistance in order to provide a new perspective to understand power in contentious politics surrounding those bases. According to Sharp’s conceptualization of power,⁹ the United States or the host nation would not be able to impose a U.S. base on a community if the people did not provide consent. In return, by withdrawing their support, communities and campaigns against the base would be able to increase the political cost of the U.S. military presence, thereby leading to a policy change. Table 2 below provides an overview of perspectives on power holders in analyzing contentions surrounding U.S. military bases abroad, and how such conceptions result in various explanations for policy shift.

Table 2: Power in Base Politics

	United States as the main power holder	Host nation as the main power holder	“People” as the main power holder
<i>Questions to ask</i>	Did the particular base hold strategic importance to the United States? Was there alternative site available?	How strong was the elite consensus about the importance of bilateral alliance with the United States? Was there regime change or political transition?	Was the campaign against the base effective in removing the pillars of support? How did the campaign’s tactics respond to opportunities and challenges?
<i>Explanations for shift in base policies</i>	The military base’s strategic significance for the United States determines U.S. base policies.	The host nation elites’ ideas about the role of security alliance determine U.S. base policies.	Campaign strategies and tactics determine U.S. base policies.

I am not suggesting that these different conceptions of power are mutually exclusive, but rather that they provide a conceptual framework to rethink the question of agency in studying the U.S. military base politics, as suggested by Holmes, instead of assuming the primacy of the United States as the primary agency. The U.S. government in fact recognizes that public protests and unrest against its military bases can pose access risks. The U.S. Department of Defense refers to “factors that

⁹ Sharp identifies six channels through which people provide sources of power to the rulers: (i) authority or legitimacy; (ii) human resources; (iii) skills and knowledge; (iv) intangible (psychological and ideological) factors; (v) material resources; (vi) sanctions (Sharp 1973, 1112; Sharp 2003, 11–12). Based on this consent-based conceptualization of power, when people withdraw their consent to obey their rulers, they are able to shift the power dynamics. Nonviolent action provides ways for a ruler’s subjects to actively withdraw the bases of support.

constrain full use of test and training ranges, negatively impacting military preparedness and safety” as “encroachment issues” and stresses the importance of community relations and outreach in managing such matters (U.S. Department of Defense 2002, ii). Similarly, a RAND report developed for the Office of the Secretary of Defense notes that local opposition to U.S. military bases can pose significant access challenges and specifies that factors influencing the outcomes of such oppositions include regime type, size of the U.S. presence, and type of access relationship (Lostumbo, et al. 2013).

Case Study: Manta, Ecuador

In this section I will discuss the “successful” case of the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the Manta Air Force Base in Manabí province, Ecuador, in 2009 and the anti-base organizing leading up to it. I use the case study to examine the usefulness of the conceptual framework of power elaborated in the previous section and identify areas that require further formulation and development. The analysis provided below is based on limited information from semistructured interviews with two key informants (one with a former anti-base activist and the other with a security studies scholar), as well as academic books and journals, activist materials, websites, and news articles available in English and Spanish.

The FOL in Manta and the campaign against it

In 1999, U.S. military forces withdrew from Panama under the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty, necessitating a search for replacement facilities for the continuation of counternarcotic operations in the region. One of the sites selected by the U.S. Department of Defense was Manta, and by April 1999, the United States and Ecuador concluded an interim agreement followed by a ten-year lease signed in November to establish a forward operating location (FOL) in Manta (Yeo 2011, 88). During this time, a group of Ecuadorian peace activists based in Quito presented their concerns that the leasing agreement did not follow normal government processes and questioned its constitutionality.¹⁰ Among the active organizations concerned about the issue was the Peace and Justice Service of Ecuador (Servicio, Paz y Justicia del Ecuador, SERPAJ-E), which started alerting other civil society groups of the Manta base leasing issue as early as March 1999. Quito-based NGOs researched the issue, comparing the Ecuador-U.S. agreement to other countries’ base agreements, and presented the findings to the congress, the president, and their contacts in Manta. A coalition formed in 2001, including organizations such as SERPAJ-E, the Regional Human Rights Advisory Foundation (Fundación Regional de Asesoría en Derechos Humanos, INREDH), Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (Asamblea Permanente de Derechos Humanos, APDH), Young Men’s Christian Association-Ecuador (Asociación Cristiana de Jóvenes del Ecuador, ACJ-E), and the Anti-Corruption Network (Serrano 2006; Coalición No Bases Ecuador 2010; Yeo 2011).

¹⁰ Interview with a former Ecuador No Bases Coalition member, February 2018.

The activities carried out by the anti-base groups largely fall into three categories: (1) grassroots mobilization in the city of Manta and Manabí province (1999-2007); (2) political campaigning around the presidential election and National Constitutional Assembly (2006-2008); and (3) internationalization of the movement (2003-2007). The campaign struggled to gain support from the people of Manta, as the local populations largely approved of the FOL.¹¹ The rhetoric used by anti-base groups, such as references to “the infringement of national sovereignty,” was foreign to people living in the community, and organizations faced challenges to bringing the local residents on board.¹² Fitz-Henry (2015) quotes Luis Saavedra of INREDH as stating: “When we began, the people called us traitors... We had 0% support in Manta...” (113).

Anti-base groups including the Tohali Anti-Imperialist Movement, the Land Defense Committee of Portoviejo, and ACJ-E continued to hold educational activities such as forums, cultural events, and public debates to inform the local populations of the effects of the military presence (Yeo 2011, 93). The groups also organized some direct actions, for example, the “taking of the base” in 2000—a symbolic act performed by activists of various organizations who entered the Manta base by sea to place Ecuadorian flags on the coast. They were briefly arrested by the Ecuadorian military and investigated after the action. As years went by, more concerns emerged from the local communities, including the eviction of peasant families, the sinking of fishing vessels and the disappearance of fishermen, the interdiction of vessels with migrants, limitations on fishing operations for “security” reasons, and the risk to populations living close to shooting polygons. Marches, concerts, and other awareness-raising activities were held to mobilize the local populations, and victims of military activities played a key role in such mobilizations. Up to 2,000 people participated in marches conducted in the cities of Manabí and Portoviejo between 2001 and 2003 (Coalición No Bases Ecuador 2010). There also were mobilizations of indigenous people in 2004, along with protests against the free trade agreement (Comisión de Asuntos Internacionales y Seguridad Pública 2009). Activists recall that during this time the Ecuadorian government, particularly under the pro-U.S. Gutiérrez administration, largely ignored or tried to undermine claims against the U.S. military presence, refusing the requests of anti-base groups to engage in dialogue (Saavedra 2007).

The political environment began to shift when the National Congress voted to replace President Gutiérrez with Vice President Alfredo Palacio in April 2005. Key personnel in the administration voiced views that the Manta FOL lease should not be renewed, and Foreign Affairs Minister Francisco Carrión met activists of the Ecuador No Bases Coalition (Saavedra 2007). In this context, prior to the late-2006 general elections, some of the anti-base activists first mobilized against

¹¹ While it is generally argued that local support for the FOL partially resulted from its perceived economic benefits, this view is contested by Erin Fitz-Henry (2015), who claims that local support stemmed from the inability of anti-base activists to dovetail local concerns and the U.S. military personnel’s ability to frame their presence in support of local political discourses. She argues that those in support of the FOL framed their claims as municipal sovereignty, as opposed to the claims of national sovereignty presented by anti-base activists. Fitz-Henry also cites the long history of regionalism in Ecuadorian cultural politics, where the people of the Coast, including Manabí, consider the Coast and the central government in the Sierra (and Guayaquil) as rivals. Thus, in Ecuador local identities and political discourses, often shaped in opposition to those from the highlands, are more central to people’s loyalties.

¹² Interview with a former Ecuador No Bases Coalition member, February 2018. Also see Fitz-Henry (2015).

one of the candidates, Álvaro Noboa, and later campaigned for Correa,¹³ as his election campaign agenda aligned with many of the issues for which NGOs advocated, including the withdrawal of the U.S. troops from the Manta Base.¹⁴ Anti-base sentiment was also shared by the majority of the country's population at that time (Fitz-Henry 2015). Following his election as president of Ecuador, Correa called for a referendum on establishing a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution for the country. Held in April 2007, the referendum was approved by over 80.0%, followed by elections in September for the assembly, to which one of the leading activists from the *Coalición No Bases Ecuador* was elected.¹⁵ The new constitution, approved on September 28, 2008, includes as its Article 5: "Ecuador is a peaceful territory. We will not permit the establishment of foreign military bases or foreign facilities with military aims. It is prohibited to cede national military bases to foreign armed or security forces" (qtd. in Serrano N. and Tamayo G. 2008). In addition, as mentioned earlier, a nonrenewal decision on the Manta Base had been submitted to the U.S. Embassy in July 2008.

The Ecuador No Bases Coalition (*Coalición No Bases Ecuador*) and its constituent groups also decided to internationalize their efforts and expand solidarity with groups abroad. For example, they participated in World Social Forums, met Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, and attended a meeting hosted by Honduran environmental activist Berta Cáceres. As early as 2001 the groups also coordinated visits by international delegations to the Manta Base, including representatives from organizations like the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). The transnational "No Bases" network, for which the Ecuador No Bases Coalition served on the international steering group, held its first international conference on foreign military bases in March 2007 in Quito and Manta. More than 1,500 individuals from 42 countries attended the conference, which was supported by the mayor's office in Quito and attended by Defense Ministry Assistant Secretary Miguel Carvajal. The last day of the conference was a demonstration in Manta, where approximately 3,000 individuals marched toward the base (*Coalición No Bases Ecuador* 2010).

In 2009, U.S. forces withdrew from the Manta FOL, ending the ten-year military presence. The brief narrative above suggests that anti-base activists played vital roles throughout the decade. Though concerns about the Manta base were at times overshadowed by other prominent issues, such as the financial crisis and dollarization in 2000 (Yeo 2011, 92), activists kept the issue alive. They continued to work on raising awareness, particularly in the city of Manta and surrounding communities, where support for the military presence was strong. When political opportunities arose with the presidential election and the National Constituent Assembly, those participating in the Ecuador No Bases Coalition seized them and then continued to ensure that Correa's promise to close the FOL was kept. The campaign was also effective in generating international attention and pressure, especially through its participation in the No Bases network and organization of the network's 2007 conference.

¹³ Interview with a former Ecuador No Bases Coalition member.

¹⁴ Ibid. Also a number of organizations and individuals endorsed Correa on November 15, 2006. <http://www.llacta.org/organiz/coms/2006/com0553.htm>.

¹⁵ Interview with a former Ecuador No Bases Coalition member.

These factors indicate that an effective anti-base campaign may create and solidify conditions that favor their claims.

People power in Manta?

Examination of anti-U.S. military base organizing in Manta through the lens of civil resistance, however, elucidates several assumptions and questions that need to be addressed in order to make the analytical framework more robust. First, in analyzing anti-military base campaigns as a civil resistance struggle, I initially assumed that the relationship between the host nation state and the movement was antagonistic. However, this was not truly the case for the movement in Ecuador, at least in the climax of their campaigning, when they had a political ally whose agenda overlapped with the campaign's goals, including the closure of the Manta FOL and, more broadly, rejecting U.S. influences on the country's politics and economy. Thus, the campaign's strategies were to support Correa as the candidate, and once he was elected, continue to hold him accountable and create additional assurances, such as Article 5 of the new constitution. Their tactics differed from campaigns in some other countries, like Japan (Okinawa), or South Korea, where confrontations and tensions between the host government and activists at times have resulted in physical violence and forced relocation. However, such tactics are quite consistent with the civil resistance literature, which highlights the importance of identifying and securing the support of particular government allies in achieving a campaign's goals, especially when doing so can exploit divisions and tensions within a governing coalition.¹⁶

In fact, the case of Ecuador is often discussed as an example of the host government elite's role in determining base policy outcomes, and anti-base activists corroborate that Correa was instrumental in demanding the U.S. withdrawal. Some experts claim that the decision to demand the U.S. departure derived from the very asymmetrical nature of the original agreement in which Ecuador had gained nothing (Rivera 2012). The elite-centered explanation could imply that President Correa stayed consistent in his position against the U.S. forces, regardless of the activist pressure. In one of my interviews, a security expert stated that, in his view, there was no "mobilization" per se; there were NGO-led activities between approximately 2002 and 2007, but those subsided once it became clear that the new administration was firm on its position.¹⁷ Yeo (2011) holds the more nuanced view that the strong activist presence was critical in taking advantage of the political opportunity presented by the weak security consensus among Ecuadorian elites. Taking those considerations into account, the civil resistance framework would need to address the relationship between the state and the movement and the processes through which activists exert influence on political elites.

Second, and relatedly, the analysis of resistance campaigns against U.S. military bases from a civil resistance perspective would require an understanding of who the target or the opponent is. In civil resistance literature, where the primary focus has been on pro-democracy movements in authoritarian regimes, studies have explored how nonviolent campaigns helped shift power from the oppressor. For the anti-base campaigns, is the primary target the host nation, or the United States? Or

¹⁶ See: Schock (2005 and 2015).

¹⁷ Interview with an Ecuadorian security scholar, February 2018.

could it be both? How do such campaigns formulate their strategies to remove support for the systems upon which the U.S. military bases are placed? What are the roles of the activists and campaigns within the United States? These are the questions often debated among anti-base activists (Becker 2007), but they are also important questions to explore when conducting an academic study of those movements.¹⁸

Finally, the mobilization in Ecuador started from the national level among Quito-based activists, rather than from the grassroots level within the local community. Extensive ethnographic work in Manta by Fitz-Henry (2015) reveals that local residents were often not only supportive of the FOL, but also critical of the anti-base activists, whom they saw as foreign to them.¹⁹ She argues that many of the activists came from other cities and countries, and their arguments did not resonate with the people of Manta; thus, the non-activist residents of Manta questioned why outsiders should decide the fate of their own community. This dilemma is also discussed in the civil resistance literature, particularly in connection to the notion of “legitimacy.” Carter states: “People power claims its legitimacy from expressing the rights, needs and wishes (often long suppressed) of ‘the people.’ But many actual examples of people power also illustrate the ambiguities of defining who ‘the people’ are” (2003, 3). The case of Manta is interesting not only because it offers ambiguity regarding whose interests the movement represented, but also because the campaign was able to achieve its objective *despite* the lack of local support from “the people.” Put differently, the case illustrates the broad scope of the notion of “the people,” and how President Correa successfully shifted the framing of “the people” (*el pueblo*) from local community members, whose interests and identities are often formed against regional rivals, to national Ecuadorian interests, articulated as against the hegemonic regional imperialism of the United States.

Conclusion

This research note explored an alternative framework for examining resistance campaigns against U.S. military bases abroad. It proposed a movement-centered study building on civil resistance literature, using its conceptualization of power. It then tested the framework using the case of Ecuador, where the bilateral agreement concerning the Manta Base was terminated in 2009, despite the U.S. desire to renew the lease. Initially, my intention was to use the conceptual framework to evaluate how the Ecuadorian movements’ strategies and tactics may have led to the favorable outcome of the campaign, specifically assessing how the campaign waged power against its own government and the United States. This framing was based on the assumption that the closure of the FOL in Manta was the victory of “the people,” whose demand for justice and sovereignty rejected the presence of the U.S. military forces.

¹⁸ Randle (2002) points out the potential limit of civil resistance when the opponent has limited dependence on the cooperation of the population, and he posits as an example resistance against an aggressor establishing a military base.

¹⁹ See Footnote 11.

However, analysis of the case quickly revealed the story's greater complexity and several limitations to the framework, including its ambiguity about the relationship between activists and host government elites, identification of the movement's main opponent, and the assumption that anti-U.S. military base campaigns are mass mobilizations led by the communities most affected by the presence of the U.S. forces, which was clearly not the case in Manta. Future research should improve the conceptual framework, especially by taking into account the nuanced relationship and interactions between the movement and host government elites, where in some cases the host government may utilize physical violence and other means to repress activists, while in other instances, the movement may take advantage of divisions within the host government leadership.

Additionally, the question of who are the participants in the movement and whose interests they represent must be addressed, in order to understand the role of legitimacy in gaining local support and how it may or may not affect campaign outcomes. In this regard, the campaign may also target local communities in favor of the military presence through nonviolent action; some evidence of this was found in Manta, where activists consciously conducted educational and other awareness-raising activities, yet this aspect was not fully investigated in this research note. Finally, future research should examine other cases where organized, mass-based resistance campaigns against U.S. military bases have been prevalent, including: Okinawa, Japan; South Korea; and Vieques, Puerto Rico. If successful, such research will offer new insights into the study of resistance campaigns against U.S. military bases.

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