Democratic Deficiencies and the Price of Security
Diplomacy, Environmental Justice, and Genuine Security for Guam and the Mariana Islands

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Abstract

This article provides an interdisciplinary analysis of the interconnected challenges stemming from military deterrence strategies in the Indo-Pacific region, with a specific emphasis on their health and environmental impacts. The focus is on illuminating how military actions in the Western Pacific and South China Sea not only influence geopolitical stability but also carry profound implications for disabled veterans and Indigenous communities. Employing a diverse methodology that integrates federal documents, local news sources, scholarly literature, and fieldwork on Guam, this article utilizes the principles of procedural justice and genuine security as frameworks to comprehend the historical complexities and contemporary challenges in the non-self-governing Mariana Islands. Recommendations are put forth for inclusive dialogue and proactive policy changes that respect the voices and well-being of those most affected. This article serves as a clarion call for a paradigm shift in our approaches to security and justice, especially in contexts where military, health, and environmental concerns intersect.

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The Indo-Pacific region stands as a fulcrum of global geopolitics, witnessing a power struggle between superpowers such as the United States and China for influence and control. The strategic importance of this area, which encompasses vital sea routes and burgeoning economies, necessitates the implementation of various military deterrence strategies. While these strategies aim to maintain a geopolitical balance, their impacts often extend beyond the realm of international politics, raising pressing concerns about the health and well-being of disabled veterans and Indigenous communities connected to these contested spaces.¹

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Through a critical lens, this article provides perspectives on democratic deficiencies and sovereignty limitations faced by two non-self-governing territories: Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Situated within the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), these communities continually navigate around and within US geopolitical maneuvers and Department of Defense (DOD) military construction projects. The case studies presented here are deeply relevant both to the local communities impacted by militarization in the locations and as examples of how processes are being felt elsewhere, such as in Okinawa, the Philippines, and Hawai’i.

Focusing on the everyday lived experiences of the people of the Mariana Islands, we highlight areas of concern regarding sovereignty, environmental impacts, and veterans’ needs. Drawing from local news publications, interdisciplinary academic journal articles, government-created reports, military documents, as well as our lived experiences on Guam from 2023, we emphasize the imperative to understand the historical context in which military matters are decided and implemented in the region, with a specific focus on the island of Guam.

We highlight inconsistencies in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, which emphasizes a commitment to an Indo-Pacific region characterized by freedom, openness, connectivity, prosperity, security, and resilience. While the approach to accountable democratic governance deserves applause, and the statement supporting “Indo-Pacific governments’ capacity to make independent political choices” merits celebration, the reality for the communities in the Mariana Islands differs significantly. The political context surrounding military construction unveils a complex culture with a lengthy history. Residents on Guam align with the Strategy that the US endorses, advocating for governments to “make their own sovereign choices, consistent with their obligations under international law.”

We conclude with policy recommendations for the United States, as the community persistently calls for procedural justice, genuine security, and fulfillment of veterans’ requests. US federal government efforts must intensify to address the lack of representative democracy for the residents, broaden national security concerns to encompass genuine security, and acknowledge the contributions of island regional communities to preparing the US for war. Lastly, the US citizens of the Mariana Islands are serving in the US Armed Forces at the highest rates per capita and are owed veteran health care that is culturally appropriate and readily accessible.

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A Strategic Location

Situated 900 miles north of the equator in the Western Pacific, Guam and the 14 islands to the north, politically organized as the CNMI, have played a central role for seafarers, conquistadors, Imperial Japanese marshal admirals, fleet admirals, and sailboat captains for nearly 4,000 years. Located approximately 2,000 nautical miles east of the Philippines, the Mariana Islands offer crucial resources, with land and fresh water being paramount in the vast Oceania region.

Guam is referred to as a *lynchpin* for US military strategy.\(^3\) Today, Andersen Air Force Base (AAFB) on Guam boasts the greatest fuel storage capacity in the US Air Force, standing at 66 million gallons. Airmen refer to Guam as “the gas station

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of the Pacific.” However, AAFB is not just an “unsinkable aircraft carrier”; it sits above the largest freshwater source on the island, the Northern Lens Aquifer. Moreover, AAFB is not just the “Forward Edge of the Indo-Pacific”; it occupies land controversially transferred between the US federal government agencies instead of returned to the original landowners pre–World War II (WWII).

The US military history in the Mariana Islands is often presented through WWII successes, yet the tensions of military control over the lands, seas, and people persist and are more recent. Guam remained under the US Naval security clearance program, granting the Navy wartime authority to deny entry to civilian visitors for security reasons until 21 August 1962. Pres. John F. Kennedy signed an executive order rescinding the Secretary of the Navy’s power to restrict entry to Guam, based on the 1941 Executive Order 8683 from Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt, which established the Guam Island Naval Defensive Sea Area and Guam Island Airspace Reservation.

Following the lifting of military control over civilians and the island of Guam, the US Congress passed the Elective Governor Act in September 1968. This act shifted direct control of Guam’s government away from the US Department of the Interior and into the hands of local leaders who had long advocated “to break the colonial-style power of our executive branch.” The late 1960s witnessed a significant increase in economic development while moving toward enhanced political freedom.

Presently, the locally elected Governor of Guam, Lourdes “Lou” Leon Guerrero, operates within a limited political arrangement. Invited by the Defense Leadership Forum to be the keynote presenter for the 2023 Pacific Defense Conference, she confirmed the importance of Guam’s location in her opening remarks. She reiterated that there is “no denying that Guam is arguably the most consequential territory within the Indo-Pacific for national security and missile defense, and

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medical services are essential to that security.” She seized the opportunity to emphasize the importance of medical services owed to US veterans on the island and accessible to US citizens who call Guam home. Through her speech, she provided insight into expanding the concept of security to genuine security. While the location is undoubtedly crucial, the United States has obligations to its citizens and veteran residents, who have the right to consent to what happens to their island. Billions of dollars in military construction projects continue despite well-founded community concerns regarding the lack of political decision-making power and control over lands and freshwater resources, with ongoing and unremedied detrimental environmental impacts. Furthermore, remaining on the periphery and often excluded from US federal social programs, health impacts—including compensation for nuclear testing, Agent Orange, and the lack of services offered to veterans—reflect neglect and unfulfilled previous promises.

Below, we briefly highlight one element of the increased military presence in the Pacific region and the specific impacts on Guam concerning one individual DOD project. Presently, an extremely expensive Marine Corps relocation and the controversial Live-Firing Range Complex at the not preferred location are unfolding. The current military expansion on Guam represents the largest peacetime military construction since WWII. The DOD’s Future Years Defense Program (FYDP) includes USD 7.3 billion in military construction from FY2024 through FY2028. The Marine Corps is relocating 5,000 Marines currently stationed in Okinawa, Japan, to a new Marine Corps Base on Guam that opened in 2020. The Missile Defense Agency is planning an additional USD 1.7 billion to implement an integrated missile defense system on Guam.

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Relocation of the III Marine Expeditionary Force from Okinawa to Guam


Commencing in the early 2000s, the US and Japan had been negotiating to relocate the Marine Expeditionary Force due to local resistance against the sexual violence committed by servicemembers against the Okinawan community.\footnote{Kozue Akibayashi and Suzuyo Takazato, “Okinawa: Women’s Struggle for Demilitarization,” in The Bases of Empire: The Global Struggle against U.S. Military Posts, ed. Catherine Lutz (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 243–69, http://www.jstor.org/} Members of Guam’s local leadership were unaware of these policy decisions and only learned of the military plans through Japanese-speaking newspapers.\footnote{Lisa Linda Natividad et al., “Fanhita 2023 Day 3: Security, Sovereignty, and the Path to Peace, Panel; The New Missile Age–Centering Guam’s Genuine Security,” Commission of Decolonization, YouTube, 31 October 2023, https://www.youtube.com/} Even the Governor of Guam’s office was not involved nor offered any consulting process or mechanism.

In 2009, the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Guam and Mariana Islands Military Relocation: Relocating Marines from Okinawa, Japan to Guam was released in nine volumes, 22 chapters at 11,000 pages. Taking more than five years to create, it is the longest in US history, with the community and local agencies granted only 45 days to submit their comments. The DOD is required to hold these events and collect comments due to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); however, the policy does not contain any binding language.

The community expressed their outrage about the project verbally at the public scoping hearings administered by the DOD. People were also requested to submit their written comments into white trash cans. The number of comments in opposition was extraordinary in DOD history, with more than 10,000 written comments submitted, second only to the 30,000 produced by residents in the CNMI in 2015.\footnote{Sylvia Frain, “‘Make America Secure’: Media, militarism, & climate change in the Marianas Archipelago,” Te Koakoa Pacific Journalism Review 24, no. 2 (2018), 229, https://doi.org/}
In addition, federal agencies also expressed their concern. In February 2010, the US Environmental Protection Agency conducted a mandatory review of the DEIS, giving the document the lowest possible rating: “Unsatisfactory: Inadequate information (EU3).” Even the nonpartisan RAND Corporation’s study on “relative costs and strategic benefits” of the relocation found, “Guam is an expensive option, one that comes without proof that the investment would yield improved security. Marines also need training ranges to be ready to operate in these contingencies. Furthermore, if the Navy does not dedicate ships in Guam or close by in the region for those Marines to use for deployments, then Guam becomes more of a garrison than a launching pad for a quick reaction force.”

When the final environmental impact study was released, the only planning difference was wastewater treatment, which was spaced out over a longer period. No other community concerns were addressed, despite the 10,000 comments. While the community has used the US Department of Justice process to ensure the DOD follows the NEPA legally, the underlying issue remains—Guam’s status as a non-self-governing territory. Even US federal legal frameworks are limited, and successful lawsuits only buy time. Further, in international law, this form of consultation is not the same as consent as Blue Ocean Law outlined this year. Requesting from the United Nations, “we are asking the Committee to remind the United States that its militarization of Guam amounts to a violation of international law,” due to the lack of “free, prior and informed consent.”

Brigadier General Vicente Tomas “Ben” Garrido Blaz, the first Indigenous Chamorro person from the Mariana Islands to become a general officer in the Marine Corps and a former (non-voting) delegate to the US House of Representatives, raised the issue of the disparities for US citizens in Guam and ongoing injustices. A WWII survivor himself, he wanted to be treated fairly, which guided

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his quest for equity and Guam’s self-determination.\textsuperscript{22} Ironically, instead of honoring his vision for the island and its people, the DOD chose to name the contentious new Marine base after him: Camp Blaz.\textsuperscript{23}

**Security, Sovereignty, and Democratic Deficiencies**

The people, lands, and oceans of the Mariana Islands, along with over a million square miles surrounding them, continue to bear a disproportionate burden for the continental United States. Residents shoulder the weight of being utilized as a preparation location for geopolitical competition, navigating the impact of how the US approaches geopolitical tensions while claiming to promote national security through force.

The 2023 Commission on Decolonization’s *Fanhita: Security, Sovereignty and the Path to Peace* conference engaged with the community to discuss Guam’s role in geopolitics and its pursuit of sovereignty.\textsuperscript{24} On the panel, “The New Missile Age—Centering Guam’s Genuine Security,” Dr. Kuper began by explaining traditional security ideologies, where there is a “thing” that must be protected by the US military. In Guam’s case, it is, in fact, the continental United States that faces potential “threats.”

The US military assumes responsibility for safeguarding this thing against threats, accomplished through security forces. Guam functions as merely a component of a broader plan—a staging location for the security response. The presence of the United States in Guam is exclusively for US security interests, not local Guam security. The United States prioritizes its own interests and utilizes Guam as needed to protect the mainland rather than ensuring the protection of Guam and its US citizens. Kuper concluded that what is “good for US security is not always good for Guam security—it is not zero-sum nor does security trickle down.”\textsuperscript{25}

The panelists did share that representatives from Joint Region Marianas were invited to participate, contribute to the conversation, and respond to questions; however, no DOD personnel arrived to present.


\textsuperscript{24} Natividad, Kuper, and Bettis, “Fanhita Day 3.”

\textsuperscript{25} Kuper, Bettis, and Underwood, “Strategic Island Thinking FORUM.”
US allies in Japan and South Korea have the decision to fight and join US forces, along with a framework for engagement through Status of Force Agreements (SOFA). These agreements are negotiated, but since Guam lacks sovereignty and is considered “US soil,” there is no SOFA, and even the US Constitution does not fully apply given Guam’s status as an unincorporated territory. True representative democracy does not exist in Guam, significantly impacting its local security.26 The Governor of Guam recently conveyed to the United Nations that “the military buildup and increasing military activity will impact the environment, culture, so-

26 Natividad et al., “Fanhita Day 3.”
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ciety and economy on Guam. But the freely associated states of Micronesia and representatives from the US all have more say in how military activity in the region proceeds than Guam does.”27

Throughout history, military strategic considerations have consistently been cited as a reason against local sovereignty, and efforts of self-determination are perceived as anti-American and antimilitary. Simultaneously, military construction continues, and recruitment into the Armed Forces is at the highest rate anywhere in the United States. The perception is that the United States recruits individuals to fight for freedom and democracy elsewhere, but upon returning to Guam, they can no longer vote for the commander in chief or receive full veterans’ benefits.28

This duality as a democratic deficiency encompasses limitations at the international level, with no control over foreign policy—depriving the people of Guam of a say in “our international destiny, to live and thrive to our fullest extent.”29 Guam’s local leaders are excluded from crucial policy decisions that directly and often destructively impact the island communities. Despite being US citizens, there is no representation in the US democratic system.30 With these sovereignty limitations, it is asserted that “Democracy does not live here.”31

To safeguard continental US national interests through defensive and offensive missile systems, there is an escalation in destructive impacts on the island and its people. The pursuit of guaranteed security and environmental threats in preparing for conflict overlooks the genuine security needs of the community and veterans.

The Duality of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Guam serves as a refueling stop for airplanes carrying US officials on speaking tours expressing their “ironclad commitment to democracy.”32 The United States assures small island nations in the region that it will intervene if their sovereignty is infringed upon by others. The Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States (2022)

31 Natividad et al., “Fanhita Day 3.”
states, “The United States is committed to an Indo-Pacific that is free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient” and opposes countries that employ “coercion.”  However, the situation in Guam highlights a potential inconsistency with these stated goals.

The strategy’s emphasis on a “free and open” Indo-Pacific without coercion underscores the importance of allowing island nations and territories (specifically Taiwan) to make sovereign choices. However, leaders in the Pacific region perceive these principles as “unevenly applied” depending on US needs. The global praise for Guam, which lacks sovereignty due to the denial of those same rights by the United States, revolves around the island’s strategic significance and geopolitical importance.

The US national security mission, based on freedom and democracy, falls short on Guam and even negatively impacts military families. If the United States were genuinely committed to the Indo-Pacific strategy, efforts would be made, as human rights and international law require, to address these democratic deficiencies and provide genuine security.

**Contemporary Security Issues:**

**Genuine Security, Environmental Impacts, and Veterans’ Requests**

**A Target without Bomb Shelters**

Instead of fostering a sense of increased security, Guam finds itself as a major target consistently featured in war-game simulations. China is well aware that the United States is poised to launch lethal power from Guam. Instead of prioritizing diplomacy, the DOD is proposing a USD 1.5-billion Enhanced Integrated Air and Missile Defense System. The absence of shelters or comprehensive plans

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to manage an attack on Guam raises concerns that the ongoing construction and fortification efforts may, in fact, render the island (and its people) more of a target.\(^\text{38}\)

While Taiwan and Japan have established shelter infrastructure and evacuation plans, Guam currently lacks any such provisions. The current advisor for Guam Homeland Security confirms that “there are no bomb shelters on Guam,” while the previous advisor, George Charfauros, explained, “It’s simply not feasible to have a bomb or fallout shelter as it only takes 14 minutes for a missile to reach Guam from North Korea.”\(^\text{39}\) This underscores why national security concerns should not solely focus on the continental United States but also address real, immediate threats and the preparations for war. Adopting a genuine security lens that centers on Guam, the next section outlines crucial considerations that must also be considered.

**Genuine Security for Guam**

The concept of security must undergo expansion and a shift from traditional to genuine. This involves incorporating locally relevant security concerns, encompassing environmental security, including typhoon preparation, climate change adaptation, and access to clean drinking water. It extends to economic security, access to education and employment, as well as food security, and access to affordable housing and a reasonable cost of living.

The Governor of Guam recently conveyed to the United Nations, “Our genuine security extends far beyond considerations of military and defense and encompasses the resilience of critical infrastructure, the mitigation of the ongoing impacts of climate change and the pursuit of regional peace and prosperity.”\(^\text{40}\) Similarly, the Center for Pacific Security recommends that DOD leadership adopt a different approach to national security, emphasizing genuine security and diplomacy first.\(^\text{41}\)

In addition to genuine security, we contend that environmental justice, and specifically procedural justice, must take center stage in this context. *Environmental justice* is described as the achievement of both distributive and procedural forms of justice.\(^\text{42}\) *Distributive justice* entails the equitable allocation of both environmen-

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\(^{40}\) Taitano, “Governor to UN.”

\(^{41}\) Pacific Islands Security Center, “About Us.”

tal resources and negative impacts across different communities and within communities. Procedural justice involves the implementation of decision-making processes that are fair and inclusive to all impacted participants.43

Returning to Governor Leon Guerrero’s keynote at the 2023 Pacific Defense Conference, she broadened the approach to security to include health. “Together, we can design and build human health security to support our people of Guam, as well as a steady state of peacetime, contingency and crisis operations. Beyond defense systems hardware, human health security is certainly a strategic attention item for my government, the US Indo-Pacific Command, the Department of Defense, and US Congress,” she said.44

**Environmental Impacts**

The *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* continues against countries that are “undermining human rights and international law, including freedom of navigation.”45 Simultaneously, boaters are endeavoring to document the diminishing access to fishing grounds due to the Live-Fire Training Range on the Marine base.46 Immediate dangers include contamination of freshwater aquifers due to ammunition, the clearing of limestone forests, and the loss of endangered species.47

Moreover, the heightened restriction of access to ancestral lands and oceans produces a similar impact to the erasure of cultural knowledge. The environments in the Marianas carry profound significance beyond their strategic value. A future trajectory marked by substantial militarization is likely to jeopardize social-ecological systems that have already endured considerable harm.

**Environments of the Marianas**

Guam, the largest and southernmost island in the Marianas Archipelago, is part of a chain of islands including Rota, Tinian, Saipan, and Pagan to the North. The majority of freshwater reserves are located in the Northern limestone aquifer,

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while the Southern section of Guam contains rivers that runoff into the ocean.\textsuperscript{48} Crucial US military installations in the Marianas, such as AAFB and the new Marine Corps Camp Blaz, are situated in the Northern section where vital freshwater reserves lie.

Along the coasts, coral reefs play a crucial role in Guam’s ecological health, with barrier reefs encompassing almost the entire island, excluding natural bays and areas dredged for military or industrial purposes.\textsuperscript{49} These reefs are instrumental in sustaining thriving and diverse fisheries and coastal ecosystems relied upon by Chamorros and Carolinians for thousands of years. Notably, the reefs across the Marianas boast some of the richest biodiversity in any location within the United States.\textsuperscript{50} Coastal strand and mangrove ecosystems are also prevalent throughout the Marianas, contributing to typhoon resilience and the prevention of coastal erosion.\textsuperscript{51}

Terrestrially, the Marianas historically harbored significant biodiversity and numerous endemic species found nowhere else in the world. However, many of these species are now critically endangered, including fauna such as the Guam kingfisher, Guam rail (ko’ko’), and Mariana eight-spot butterflies, facing threats from ecosystem destruction and other stressors.\textsuperscript{52} The little Mariana fruit bat and bridled white-eye, once prominent in the Marianas, were declared extinct in 2023.\textsuperscript{53}

On Guam, Ritidian (also called Litekyan) is home to a limestone forest with deep cultural and ecological significance. This site in Northwest Guam faces significant degradation and land use conversion due to the construction of Camp Blaz. Currently, Ritidian is part of the Guam National Wildlife Refuge, safeguarding 370 acres of coral reefs and 830 acres of limestone forest and other terrestrial environments.\textsuperscript{54} The \textit{Serianthes nelsonii} tree species, commonly called the “North-
ern Tree” on Guam and “Fire Tree” on Rota, is another endemic species critically threatened by military development.\(^{55}\) Many of the plant species in Ritidian and across the Marienas are crucial for traditional ecological practices and Indigenous medicine.\(^{56}\) The relationships shared among the peoples and environments of the Marienas underscore the existence of interrelated social-ecological systems rather than a nature isolated and distinct from the people depending upon it.

### Histories of Degradation

All these environments and social-ecological systems have undergone degradation and continue to face threats from processes of development and militarization. The essential environmental systems of freshwater aquifers, coastal ecosystems, and terrestrial ecosystems have all experienced harm throughout the Marienas.

Freshwater systems on islands, like those in the Marienas, are often precarious in the face of rapidly growing populations. Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, military bases on Guam and associated military activities on Tinian, Saipan, Pagan, Rota, and other islands have led to population increases, placing greater demand on freshwater resources. For instance, from 1970 to 2010, water extracted from the northern Guam aquifer nearly tripled.\(^{57}\) Additionally, the operation of bases like AAFB exposes freshwater resources on Guam to potential pollution with various harmful chemicals. This was evident in the 1980s when hazardous waste led to the contamination of drinking water in and around AAFB with the carcinogenic trichloroethylene (TCE).\(^{58}\) This includes polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in the drinking water and decades of toxins in the waterways.\(^{59}\)

Similar patterns of contamination have unfolded across coastal areas in the Marienas. A stark instance of chemical exposure dates back to 1962 when the US Coast Guard Long Range Navigation Station on Cocos Island was destroyed by Typhoon Karen, leading to the dispersal of harmful pollutants, including polychlo-

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\(^{55}\) Center For Biological Diversity et al v. U.S. Department of the Navy et al.


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chlorinated biphenyls (PCB) and heavy metals such as lead and cadmium. Researchers have illustrated that in Merizo Village, adjacent to Cocos Island, significantly higher concentrations of these pollutants persisted for decades, contributing to elevated cancer rates and cancer mortality in this village compared to the rest of Guam.60 Additionally, disturbingly high concentrations of harmful PCBs, heavy metals, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) have been identified in sediments and marine organisms in multiple locations across Guam.61 Similar heavy metals and organic contaminants have been detected in corals in Tinian due to military activities dating back to WWII.62 Chemical contamination and unexploded ordinances from WWII and bombing range testing in preceding decades still persist in parts of Tinian and Saipan, both in marine ecosystems and on land.63

The erosion of landscapes across the Marianas has long been exacerbated by external factors such as bombing throughout WWII and the presence of persistent invasive species like wild boars. As early as the Spanish colonial period, invasive species were introduced, resulting in the decimation of local populations of birds, trees, and other species.64 Further deleterious legacies of WWII have manifested through the destruction of cliffsides for strategic outposts, the clearing of beaches for amphibious assault landings, and other processes.65

The Marianas are also grappling with diverse impacts from climate change, which is deeply intertwined with militarization. Institutions such as the US military contribute significantly to emissions, and the processes of war and colonialism have consistently both exacerbated climate change and impeded climate change

adaptation in a just manner. One climate impact facing the Marianas is increased flooding, which can have catastrophic effects on human life and physical infrastructure. Additionally, akin to other Pacific Islands, coastal resources like coral reefs face threats from warming ocean temperatures, ocean acidification, and storm surges. Furthermore, extreme weather events such as typhoons are intensifying in severity and frequency due to climate change, compounding existing stressors on critical infrastructure. As climate change continues to impact Guam, the CNMI, and other island territories, adaptation processes must be approached in ways that prioritize community engagement and procedural justice.

**Impacts of New Construction**

The relocation of Marines to Guam, the construction of Camp Blaz, and the establishment of new training ranges on Tinian and Pagan will exert significant impacts on already vulnerable social-ecological systems. Firstly, the influx of military personnel, their families, and support staff required for processes like construction will profoundly affect both built infrastructure and natural resources. For instance, the relocation will escalate demand on Guam’s electrical grid, necessitating substantial financial investment and restructuring for effective operation. Furthermore, due to the associated population growth and the need to support military infrastructure, freshwater demand will surge beyond the already high extraction rates.

Native species will face additional challenges, and invasive species may proliferate due to the military relocation. The military’s actions have clashed with civilian

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67 Zena Grecni et al., *Climate Change in Guam: Indicators and Considerations for Key Sectors* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 9 November 2020), https://doi.org/.


71 Tilghman, *Guam*.

72 Gingerich et al., *Water Resources on Guam*. 

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government-led conservation programs in the Marianas, as seen with officials at AAFB denying access to conservation managers aiming to mitigate the spread of invasive species.73 Expanding military land beyond current levels would grant the DOD greater control over the areas where conservationists operate, potentially impeding coordinated environmental protection efforts. Camp Blaz, with a footprint of 4,000 acres (excluding satellite training ranges), poses a direct threat to several endangered species, including the last wild háyun lágų tree on Guam.74

A pending lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity and Prutehi Litekyan/Save Ritidian asserts that the US Department of the Navy has failed to uphold agreements to protect and conserve specific species at risk of extinction due to the construction and operation of Camp Blaz. This claim highlights not only environmental harm but also procedural injustices, akin to similar suits like Tinian Women Association v. U.S. Department of the Navy, decided in 2020. In that case, the community-based group Tinian Women Association argued that the construction of Camp Blaz and bombing ranges in the CNMI would cause significant harm to natural environments, diminish land and cultural value, expose communities to great risk, and alleged the Navy’s violation of the NEPA by not producing an adequate environmental impact statement. The District Court of the Northern Mariana Islands ruled in favor of the Navy but emphasized the need to evaluate the combined impacts of Camp Blaz on Guåhan and the training ranges on Tinian and Pagan, which had been previously segmented in assessments.75 Moreover, public pressure led the Navy to scale back its plans, focusing mainly on small arms training to minimize environmental and societal impact. Beyond these cases, researchers have demonstrated procedural issues hindering genuine community participation in the environmental impact assessment processes associated with the military relocation to the Marianas.76

The environmental consequences of the military relocation to the Marianas are expected to be substantial, although the full extent of the harm remains uncertain. Considering the historical patterns of chronic harm inflicted on social-ecological systems in the Marianas by prolonged military presence during both wartime and peacetime, it is crucial to focus on the careful assessment of environmental impacts. This includes attention to community consultation, empowering communities with

74 Center For Biological Diversity et al v. U.S. Department of the Navy et al.
76 Frain, “Make America Secure”; and Na'puti and Bevacqua, “Militarization and Resistance from Guåhan.”
greater decision-making authority, recognizing the value of non-human species, and addressing the reproduction of inequities through the siting and operationalization of new military installations.

**Veterans Seek Justice and Genuine Security**

This section aims to examine the environmental degradation and challenges faced by Indigenous communities within the Marianas and draws parallels to places such as Red Hill, Hawai‘i, and Camp LeJeune, North Carolina. Furthermore, it explores these impacts, shedding light on how military actions can result in adverse health conditions, including Gulf War Syndrome and the consequences of Agent Orange, among veterans. By doing so, this section seeks to provide a multidimensional perspective that transcends conventional discussions focused solely on geopolitics or military strategy. We delve into the complex interplay between military activities, disability, and environmental justice, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that considers both genuine security and procedural justice.

**The Health Cost of Deterrence: Unpacking the Impact of Military Strategies on Disabled Veterans**

Military deterrence strategies in the Indo-Pacific have been an essential component of geopolitical maneuvering for decades. While these tactics aim to maintain regional stability, their health implications for veterans and military-civilian workers—especially those with disabilities—are often sidelined in political discourse. Three particularly salient examples are exposure to Gulf War Syndrome, burn pits, and Agent Orange, each of which has led to debilitating conditions among exposed military and civilian personnel.

Gulf War Syndrome refers to a cluster of medically unexplained chronic symptoms including fatigue, headaches, joint pain, insomnia, respiratory disorders, and others that can affect veterans of the Gulf War.\(^77\) The condition has led to prolonged suffering for veterans, impacting their physical capabilities and mental well-being.

More recently, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and other operations, burn pits—open-air combustion sites used for waste disposal in military combat zones—have gained attention due to their detrimental health effects.\(^78\) Studies indicate an increase in respiratory issues, rare forms of cancer, and other unexplained illnesses among veterans who were stationed near these

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pits.\textsuperscript{79} Once again, those who were already disabled face the added burden of these newly acquired health complications, exacerbating their challenges.

Agent Orange, an herbicide deployed extensively during the Vietnam War, has been linked to a range of diseases, including different types of cancer, diabetes, and heart diseases.\textsuperscript{80} Although used with the intent of eliminating forest cover for enemy troops, its long-term consequences have been catastrophic for those exposed, many of whom are veterans and civilians now grappling with chronic health issues.

\textbf{Figure 3. Tarague (Talågi) Beach, restricted access by Andersen Air Force Base, is home to the endangered Marianas crow, Marianas Fruit Bat, and a nesting location for sea turtles.} The same location where the US Air Force burns and detonates munitions. (Photo by Sylvia C. Frain.)

In summary, while military deterrence strategies, like those employed in the South China Sea, may be crucial for geopolitical stability, it is imperative to consider their


collateral impact. Currently, the US Air Force submitted a permit renewal application for open burning and open detonation (OB/OD) on Guam—despite the exception and even after federal recognition of the detrimental health impacts.\(^8^1\)

Veterans, especially those with disabilities, grapple with a myriad of medical conditions directly tied to their service. This prompts ethical questions about the intersection of military practices with disability issues and calls for a more nuanced approach that considers genuine security and procedural justice.

**Agent Orange—Disavowed Responsibility and Indigenous Impact**

Agent Orange exemplifies the dual challenges faced by Indigenous communities engaged in US military operations. The impact of Agent Orange goes beyond US veterans, affecting Filipino and Chamorro workers exposed to the chemical while working on specific US bases like AAFB on Guam and the former Clark Air Base in the Philippines before, during, and after US military interventions.\(^8^2\)

While recent developments have allowed these communities to pursue compensation, the US government’s reluctance to fully acknowledge the harmful effects of Agent Orange constitutes a denial of procedural justice.\(^8^3\) This denial not only withholds financial compensation but also denies affected communities the recognition and dignity they deserve.

The reluctance to take responsibility for the use of Agent Orange has broader implications for environmental justice and human rights. The Chamorro and Filipino communities, traditionally stewards of their respective environments, not only face health complications but also witness the degradation of their lands and waters, complicating their historical and cultural connections to these spaces.

In cases like these, there is an urgent need for the application of the principle of genuine security—policies that prioritize and safeguard the lives, dignity, and environments of all affected communities, not just those politically expedient to acknowledge.\(^8^4\)

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From Military Bases to Sacred Spaces: Understanding Environmental Challenges in Camp LeJeune and Red Hill

The environmental repercussions of military deterrence extend beyond the impact on veterans. Indigenous communities, frequently marginalized in discussions about military actions, also endure significant consequences. Two illustrative instances are the US military bases at Camp LeJeune and Red Hill.

Camp LeJeune, a US Marine Corps base in North Carolina, gained notoriety for contaminated drinking water that caused severe health issues, including cancer and birth defects. Hazardous chemicals were dumped between 1953 and 1987, contaminating the water supply.\textsuperscript{85} Similarly, Red Hill in Hawai‘i, serving as an underground fuel storage facility, has experienced leaks, posing a high risk to local water supplies and causing detrimental impacts on Indigenous populations and their lands.

In the Indo-Pacific region, Indigenous communities often reside in areas strategically significant for military activities, resulting in environmental challenges reminiscent of cases like Camp LeJeune and Red Hill. For instance, the Indigenous people of Okinawa have long protested against the presence of US military bases, expressing concerns over pollution and the destruction of sacred lands.\textsuperscript{86}

The environmental harm, therefore, functions as a type of \textit{collateral damage}, impacting both the ecosystem and the health of Indigenous communities. These actions hinder genuine security and procedural justice, essentially disenfranchising those who have inhabited these lands for generations. By scrutinizing the environmental challenges posed by military bases and activities, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex web linking military deterrence, environmental justice, and the well-being of Indigenous communities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Converging Frontlines: The Intersectionality of Military Actions, Disability, and Environmental Justice

The discussion on military deterrence tends to prioritize geopolitical outcomes, often neglecting the human consequences that affect marginalized groups, such as disabled veterans and Indigenous communities.\textsuperscript{87}


For disabled veterans, the physical and psychological sacrifices made in the service of national security result in chronic health conditions from military actions, such as exposure to Agent Orange or the impact of burn pits.\(^{88}\) This ironic twist sees those who fought for their nation grappling with lifelong disabilities and illnesses, often with inadequate medical support.\(^{89}\)

Simultaneously, Indigenous communities find their ancestral lands targeted for strategic military deployments or subjected to environmental degradation.\(^{90}\) While they may not engage in military service, their way of life is fundamentally altered, if not threatened, by geopolitical agendas.\(^{91}\)

This complex scenario calls for a re-examination of procedural justice and genuine security. Procedural justice demands inclusive decision making, wherein all stakeholders, including veterans and Indigenous communities, have a voice.\(^{92}\) Genuine security expands the traditional notion of national security to encompass human security, recognizing that the well-being of marginalized communities is integral to national and global stability.\(^{93}\)

Incorporating an intersectional lens allows for a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted impacts of military deterrence.\(^{94}\) A paradigm shift that includes the voices and experiences of marginalized communities is not just ethical but necessary for redefining what security means in contemporary society.

**Case Study: Guam—A Microcosm of Geopolitical Strains and Environmental Risks**

Our fieldwork in Guam represents a significant intersection of military deterrence, environmental justice, and Indigenous sovereignty. The island’s strategic location has made it a focal point for US military presence, aligning with broader Indo-Pacific geopolitics.\(^{95}\) The most pressing issue at hand is the proposed military range over or near Guam’s largest freshwater aquifer.

This proposal has faced intense scrutiny, particularly in the wake of similar incidents of military-induced environmental degradation. The recent 2022 and 2023

\(^{88}\) Institute of Medicine, *Veterans and Agent Orange*; and Smith et al., “New onset and persistent symptoms.”


\(^{90}\) Mitchell, *Poisoning the Pacific*.

\(^{91}\) Maslia, et al.

\(^{92}\) Young.


\(^{94}\) Crenshaw.

\(^{95}\) Storey, Ian. 2011. “The United States and ASEAN-China Relations: All Quiet on the Southeast Asian Front?”
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Our fieldwork affirms that Indigenous Chamorro communities in Guam vehemently oppose the plan, fearing the dilution or contamination of their primary water source—a concern supported by previous incidents at Camp LeJeune and Red Hill. This Guam case is not an outlier but reflects a larger pattern where the imperatives of military strategy compromise environmental sustainability and Indigenous well-being across the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, there are only rough estimates of the number of veterans on Guam by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). According to Michael Flores, who led a two-day workshop in visual storytelling for veterans at the University of Guam, the “official numbers of veterans on the island does not match up with what local veterans know there is—the VA thinks there are 3,000 veterans, while local veteran groups estimate there are about 24,000.” He shared insights into what the veteran group GY671 is doing by organizing “battle buddy” talks, providing a

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98 Mitchell, Poisoning the Pacific.
potential model for how other veteran groups can support themselves when the VA overlooks them.

The workshop was hosted by the Veteran Independent Research Organization, “a group of military veterans who entered fields in academia, medicine, and journalism following their military service.” Their mission is to “highlight the problems with Veterans Affairs and study how veterans can thrive with or without the VA’s assistance.”

Navigating Security and Justice—An Imperative for Immediate and Inclusive Action

The Indo-Pacific region, with its intricate geopolitical tensions, transcends the conventional boundaries of national security to profoundly impact the health and lives of disabled veterans and Indigenous communities. Through the perspective presented in this article, it has been illustrated that the imperatives of military strategy are inherently linked to broader issues of social justice and environmental stewardship.

Reflecting on his experience as a retired sergeant first class in the US Army, co-author Nathan A. Tilton was always taught to “leave things better than we found them.” This philosophy, emphasized in every range safety briefing that urged service members not to “mess with the wildlife,” starkly contrasts with the collective failure of military initiatives to improve, or even preserve, the environmental and social landscapes they touch. Guam, the CNMI, and the communities that live in these island territories are dealing with these issues due to the rapid militarization of the Indo-Pacific and the complex histories that continue to influence the region. The case study central to this article demonstrates how genuine security, environmental justice, and democratic deficiencies are informing self-determination in non-self-governing territories. Importantly, these issues are impacting other islands across the region. Independent nations like the Philippines, provinces like Okinawa, and freely associated states like Palau are all sites of tension and diplomacy between local communities and the United States as militarization proceeds.

Local communities are interfacing with the United States military in myriad ways, such as those organizing for demilitarization and relocation of bases in Okinawa after years of controversy stemming from US Marines stationed on the island. In contrast, some nationally elected officials, who have greater agency than...

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their counterparts in territories like Guam, are interested in building closer military partnerships with the United States including the President of Palau who is in favor of a proposed radar facility and missile defense installation in his country. However, Palau’s Senate President disagrees with this position and argues that establishing permanent US military weaponry in the island nation goes against the countries’ interests and their exercise of sovereignty. In these nations, much like any other, there is not complete consensus over what their relationship with the United States should be in the context of regional militarization, but better democratization of decision-making and attainment of sovereignty rather than having a non-self-governing political status lays the foundation for procedural justice and genuine security.

Large-scale changes to political status and international relationships concerning militarization must be considered for Guam, the CNMI, and other islands, particularly for non-self-governing territories. To further the production of environmental justice and genuine security in the Marianas and throughout the Indo-Pacific we present four recommendations in the final section of this article.

Recommendations

1. Immediate Inclusive and Sincere Dialogue. It is crucial for governments and policy makers to engage directly with disabled veterans and Indigenous communities, actively listening to their voices expressed through protests and other means. Governments must prioritize real-time decision-making processes, acknowledging the immediacy of the concerns raised by these communities.

2. Proactive Environmental Audits. Prior to any military initiative, there should be comprehensive and transparent environmental assessments. This proactive approach, disclosing the environmental impact assessments beforehand, sets a new standard for responsible engagement. The data delivery and process should be consistent, concise, and easily accessible to the public.

3. Accountability and Transparency. Establish robust mechanisms for real-time monitoring and public reporting of environmental and social metrics in military-engaged zones. Anything less than complete openness and responsibility is incompatible with the principles that should characterize national security efforts. Avoid framing information as “pre-decisional”

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without informing the community, recognizing the challenges faced as a non-self-governing territory.

4. Future Research with Present Concerns. Scholarly work should focus on the interlinked realities of military deterrence, disability, and Indigenous rights. This research should prioritize the lived experiences of those most affected, providing insights into the multifaceted impacts of these issues.

The first recommendation emphasizes immediate and inclusive dialogue, urging governments to actively listen to disabled veterans and Indigenous communities. Ignoring these voices now can lead to unjust repercussions later. Participation in events like the Commission on Decolonization Fanhita conference is crucial for understanding community concerns and fostering a genuine partnership.

The second recommendation suggests proactive environmental audits, advocating for transparency from the inception of military projects. The distinction between consultation and consent should be recognized, ensuring that comments are not just “duly noted” but directly contribute to decision making.

The third recommendation underscores the importance of accountability and transparency, advocating for real-time monitoring and public reporting of environmental and social metrics. This level of openness is vital for responsible national security efforts.

In terms of future research, there is a call to focus on the nexus of military engagement, disability, and Indigenous rights, prioritizing the experiences of those most impacted. This prioritization will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected realities at play.

The urgency for a paradigm shift in approaches to security and justice is emphasized. The military must align with principles of improvement and stewardship, moving away from practices that contradict these ideals. The recommendation extends to reevaluating the heavy militarization of locations like Guam, proposing alternative uses that prioritize diplomacy and local contributions for regional peace and prosperity. This approach acknowledges the real impacts on the local community, fostering a more successful military presence in the Indo-Pacific.

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