

SLATE

Why Are We in Guam?

The US wants to build a Marine Corps base on the tiny Pacific island.

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Andersen U.S. Air Force Base in Guam

Recent reports indicate that a vocal minority in Guam—or Guahan—oppose the construction of a U.S. Marine Corps base on the island. Apparently, concerned citizens doubt that this tiny Pacific landmass has sufficient resources to accommodate the predicted 45 percent increase in population.

What are we doing in Guam, anyway? Keeping an eye on Asia.

Thirty miles long and an average of 8 miles wide, Guam is the largest island in Micronesia and the only U.S. territory in the region large enough for a major airport or military base. Located roughly 1,500 miles from Japan and China, 2,500 miles from Vietnam, and 2,000 miles from North Korea and Russia, Guam is a crucial geopolitical nexus in East Asia.

The island attained strategic importance during the Japanese Imperial and Soviet eras and remains a convenient base of military operations because of the increasing prominence of China on the world stage and the perennial threat posed by Kim Jong-il's regime. (In fact, this unincorporated territory was supposed to be President Obama's first stop on his postponed trip to Asia.)

Another point in the island's favor: It's a territory of the United States with limited self-government, so—unlike our autonomous Asian allies who are getting tired of hosting American military bases—Guam can't kick us out.

The United States acquired Guam from Spain in 1898 after the Spanish-American War. While the island territory was a relatively sleepy coaling station for much of the early 20th century, the events of WWII—including the attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and Guam's occupation by Japanese forces—precipitated a substantial postwar military buildup that has continued to this day.

During much of the Cold War, the United States used the island as a communications and intelligence-gathering center and as a storage facility for B-52 bombers, nuclear missile submarines, and other garden-variety military weapons. Today, Guam also serves as a logistical link to the American base at Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean.