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## Bad Idea: Using a Growing Force as an Excuse Not to Conduct BRAC

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One of the often-used excuses given by Congress not to authorize a new round of Base Realignment and Closures (BRAC) is that the military is currently growing and could use the excess capacity to house that growth. Former Representative Randy Forbes (R-VA) [made the case](#) against BRAC stating that it locks in the current force structure:

"If you believe our force structure is where it should be right now, then you need to support a BRAC because you will lock it in for the rest of your lifetime and my lifetime. If you believe, as I believe, that these force structures are not right, that we are going to have to build these force structures up greater, then you'd better fight like the dickens to make sure you don't have a BRAC,"

The argument does highlight the connection between force structure and infrastructure. After all, the main reason for any infrastructure that the Department of Defense (DoD) might have is to man, train, and equip its force. Thus, the form and functions of the infrastructure should generally follow the needs of the force structure. However, that doesn't necessarily mean you should never close or realign any bases if force structure is increasing. Indeed, as the military itself changes, its infrastructure needs will change as well. For example, in prior conflicts, the military has had to rely on a network of government-owned industrial base facilities for its sustainment. Today, a great deal of that support now comes from commercial suppliers, changing DoD's needs.

One important factor to know about the Pentagon's real estate management is that it is [balkanized, and it is challenging](#) for the Office of the Secretary of Defense to maintain updated data on every services' usage and inventory. Each military service has an inherent incentive to preserve its autonomy and to manage its real property by itself. A round of BRAC temporarily changes that dynamic.

BRAC pushes the services and the installations to provide accurate and updated information on installation occupancy and usage. BRAC is currently the only process that the Pentagon has that provides a holistic assessment of its entire infrastructure. As such, the process has considerable data collection value, even if not one single base is closed or realigned.

This argument for postponing a round of BRAC because of force structure growth only makes sense if you are unfamiliar with the BRAC process. The scale of past BRAC rounds suggests that infrastructure reductions would cut less than 25 percent of the excess, preserving capacity for growth. Further, the distribution of excess capacity is uneven between the services and the force structure growth will not necessarily fit the excess capacity.

DoD estimates that it currently has between 19 and 22 percent excess capacity, depending on the force structure used as baseline. Historically, BRAC rounds have reduced the infrastructure of DoD by 5 percent. According to [Infrastructure Capacity Report from October 2017](#), “[i]n fact, the previous five BRAC rounds have each, on average, only reduced Plant Replacement Value by 5 percent; however, they did provide the department with significant annual recurring savings.”

Further, the last BRAC round, in 2005, reduced the plant replacement value by 3.4 percent, below the historical average. Even if DoD were to meet its historical average of a 5 percent reduction in its infrastructure, it would still be carrying between 14 and 17 percent of excess capacity. This would still leave plenty of room for force structure growth.

Additionally, one [recommendation](#) to Congress is to set a proper target for reduction in plant replacement value when writing the authorizing legislation for the new round of BRAC. This would allow the lawmakers to be comfortable with the level of reduction.

On the distribution of excess capacity, according to [DoD's latest study](#), the Army has 29 percent of excess capacity, the Navy 6 percent, the Air Force 28 percent, and the Defense Logistics Agency 13 percent – an average of 19 percent at the whole of DoD. The excess capacity is not evenly dispersed and therefore the

impacts of a new round of BRAC would also be unevenly dispersed. Because of its holistic assessment, the new BRAC round would enable the department to rebalance the infrastructure between the services.

A good way to understand the type of excess capacity that is largely available is thinking of excess cubicles in an office building. Those cubicles might be excess capacity for the department that is physically closer to them, but useful for the department that is on the floor above. The best solution might require moving both departments—a solution that only emerges when looking at the whole instead of just its parts.

In this regard, BRAC allows DoD to grow in the most efficient manner. A BRAC round can direct the force structure to the appropriate infrastructure that makes rational sense, not simply to the base that has the extra room. This would allow the services to better match the local resources at the base to the needs of the components that are growing in force structure.

BRAC is not just an instrument to reduce the excess capacity; it is also the main way to check the current infrastructure against the planned force structure. It is an opportunity that Congress creates for DoD to rationalize its infrastructure in a way that is simply too politically costly outside of a BRAC round. In this regard, executing a BRAC round while the force is scheduled to grow will allow DoD to think critically about where that growth should go, instead of simply sending it to where there is room. Ignoring the ancillary benefits of a BRAC round and expecting that an increasing force will automatically and rationally consume DoD's excess infrastructure is a bad idea in national security.

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