

Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Roundtable

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The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) hosted a roundtable discussion on the prospects for rationalizing the Department of Defense's (DOD's) real property assets in a strategic context. Attendees consisted of current and former government officials and experts from CSIS and other think tanks. (See list in appendix.)

The Need for Change

Participants from across the political spectrum and with widely divergent views on national security nevertheless agreed that some process for base closure and realignment was needed. DOD has too many facilities and is not using those facilities efficiently. It needs to move resources to higher priority uses and to make its facilities more effective platforms for power projection. Participants recognized that any future base closure and realignment process needed to learn from the past, to be fair to the local communities, and to accommodate congressional concerns.

Current State of Play

Participants discussed the fading prospects that Congress would authorize a new BRAC round in the upcoming National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2018. Despite official DOD backing, a strong push by outside defense experts, and support from several key members of Congress, most participants believed there was little chance that BRAC would be authorized in this legislative cycle due to the inability to get 60 votes for an amendment in the Senate. Although one participant noted there was a slight possibility that BRAC could still emerge in Congress as part of a wider budget deal later in the year, most viewed such an outcome as highly unlikely.

Nevertheless, most participants believed that there had been an increase in support within the Congress this cycle compared to recent years. DOD had shown flexibility in restructuring the BRAC language to accommodate congressional concerns about the size of the round, the need to consider overseas basing, and future force expansion. Participants believed that DOD should begin pivoting toward laying the groundwork for future BRAC authorization by placing facilities utilization in a

strategic narrative supporting BRAC as a way of increasing the deployability, readiness, capability, and lethality of the force, as well as cost savings. This strategic rationale needs to be in the upcoming National Defense Strategy because of that document's central place in describing the administration's priorities.

Several participants noted the significant challenges faced in getting BRAC authorized next year due to the political calendar. Historically, BRAC rounds were authorized in the first year after a presidential election with realignments and closures to take effect in the year following the next presidential election—dulling their immediate political impact for the White House and Congress.

McCain-Reed Amendment

Participants generally welcomed the recent efforts by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and Senator Jack Reed (D-RI) to introduce an amendment for base closure in the Senate's debate over the NDAA. It showed a willingness to take action and to be creative in crafting a solution.

Most participants, however, expressed misgivings about the ability of DOD to successfully close or realign bases using the process laid out in McCain-Reed. The amendment stripped out key tenets of BRAC that they believed were vital for a successful process, for example, the appointment of an apolitical commission, the use of an up or down vote, Economic Development Agency grants to local redevelopment authorities, and an abbreviated environmental (National Environmental Policy Act) review to speed transition. DOD would spend two years of intense work and submit its recommendations directly to the Congress—with no mechanism to force Congress to take action. Congress might sit on DOD's recommendations indefinitely given the politically fraught nature of forcing a vote on specific base closings.

The group understood that the McCain-Reed amendment was written to secure the necessary 60 votes in the Senate by addressing congressional concerns with the length of the process and the role of Congress in approving the final list. Some believed that DOD's public support for the amendment was based on the hope that changes could have been negotiated in conference. There were questions whether the McCain-Reed amendment was simply a last chance measure, or whether it should be viewed as a starting point for building future congressional support.

Many participants saw a need to a return to the traditional BRAC process to minimize political interference after authorization, noting that the process was controversial, not because it was flawed, but because it actually worked and closed excess bases.

The question arose whether DOD could use other authorities, such as the 2687 authority, to close or realign bases without a new congressional process. In the early 1990s, then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney had used the threat of section 2687 to get the Congress to move. The threat was successful, and the Congress authorized three BRAC rounds. The consensus was that this was not an appropriate action at this time.

A related point was that enhanced use leasing and similar authorities were a kind of alternative to base closure. These authorities allow bases to better utilize underused facilities and, additionally, allow the private sector to provide the recapitalization funding.

Engaging Senior Leadership on BRAC

Participants agreed that securing a BRAC authorization in future legislative cycles could only be successful if it had stronger support from the White House, the secretary, and the Joint Chiefs. In this cycle, this high-level support has been formal but not deep. Participants discussed the contours for senior leadership engagement on BRAC and drew heavily from their personal experiences getting previous administrations and Congresses to authorize BRAC rounds. There were divergent perspectives on the importance of senior leadership engagement beyond DOD. Some participants felt that past rounds of BRAC were never high defense priorities for past White Houses, in part because the cost-savings generated would not be felt until after they had left office. Other participants noted that past BRAC rounds had entailed personal engagement by senior leaders in the White House, DOD, and Office of Management and Budget (OMB) with members of Congress to whip support.

Participants suggested that gaining senior leader buy-in on BRAC might be achieved by incorporating it within larger defense reforms and strategies, for example, in a management efficiencies package. The president, because of his background in real estate, might be receptive to the argument that DOD needed to use its facilities more productively. There was a strong consensus that it was critically important for favorable language on BRAC to be included in the Trump administration's National Defense Strategy in order to justify future BRAC legislative efforts.

Acknowledging and Reframing Community Impacts

All participants acknowledged that base closures can lead to hardships for communities that rely on nearby military installations for their economy. Consequently, several participants argued that there was a need to reframe the community impacts of BRAC for Congress. For instance, simply keeping underutilized military bases open was not helping communities in the long term. Further, the specter of BRAC hangs over communities with underutilized military installations and stagnated local economic development regardless of whether a new round of realignments and closures was authorized or not. This specter reduces private-sector investment around these installations.

Some participants pointed out that many BRAC experiences had been highly positive for communities because closure ultimately transitioned underused public facilities to private-sector employment, future growth, and tax base expansion. Political support for BRAC might be increased if local communities expressed greater support for closures of underutilized installations. Several participants advocated giving these communities a voice in discussions about BRAC authorization and highlighting success stories, noting that this could change the common perceptions of the local economic impacts of BRAC. This was generally agreed, but one participant noted that harnessing community support for BRAC required a careful balance. There are natural friction points between military installations and communities over issues like aircraft noise. Certain communities might be

overly eager to close bases that are irreplaceable or that could harm national security. While community support was an important component of BRAC, it must be balanced against considerations regarding force posture and readiness.

Another point of discussion was that BRAC should be viewed within a broader civil-military relations context. One participant noted that past BRAC rounds had led to a concentration of major military bases in certain regions of the country while drawing down the military's presence from major population and economic corridors in other regions. This participant feared that regional concentration of military installations was creating greater alienation between the American people and their military.

Crafting Future BRAC Narratives

There was extensive discussion about how to best frame the case for future base realignment and closure to the Congress and senior administration leaders. Recent BRAC proposals have been framed as cost-savings measures and improving DOD's management of its excess real estate. Several participants argued that this was no longer a politically effective argument to make to the Congress or even to the Services. They pointed out that a future BRAC was likely to generate real but relatively small cost savings (estimated at \$2–3 billion per year) in the context of a \$600 billion defense budget. There was a consensus, therefore, that future rounds would be more successful if they were tied to increases in productivity, readiness, and war-fighting performance.

Caution was noted, however, because such framing might make future rounds look like the 2005 round, which has been greatly criticized for cost overruns and lack of savings caused by a focus on realignment rather than closure. Any implication that a future round would be like 2005 would make authorization very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.

Conclusions

While there was little hope that Congress would authorize a BRAC round this legislative cycle, participants nevertheless believed that the case for base realignment and closure was strong. DOD has too many underutilized facilities and is not managing them well. In order to build greater political support for BRAC, participants stressed the need to keep exploring alternative constructs with the Congress, the value of outside advocacy in support of BRAC, and the role of senior administration officials in DOD and the White House. A strategic narrative is needed that moves beyond justifying facilities reduction as just a cost savings effort and emphasizes how BRAC would improve force readiness, as well as create gains in productivity and workforce efficiency. Finally, the upcoming National Defense Strategy is the single best vehicle for making a strategic case for BRAC. Without such support, the push would be stalled for many years.

Appendix: Roundtable Participants

Mark Cancian, Senior Adviser, CSIS

Raymond DuBois, Senior Adviser, CSIS

Lucian Niemeyer, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations and Environment

Other senior government officials

Frederico Bartels, Heritage Foundation

Susanna Blume, Center for a New American Security

Matt Boron, Association of Defense Communities

John Conger, Consultant and former Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations and Environment

Kurt Couchman, Defense Priorities

Alan Estevez, Deloitte and former Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics

Wendy Jordan, Taxpayers for Common Sense

Mike McCord, Institute for Defense Analyses and former Undersecretary of Defense (Comptroller)

Chris Preble, Cato Institute

Loren Schulman, Center for a New American Security

Mandy Smithberger, Project on Government Oversight

LTG Thomas Spoehr (USA Ret), Heritage Foundation

Randall Yim, Consultant, former Managing Director, Government Accountability Office

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