The Joint Base Dispute

You probably have never heard of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, but you will. It’s coming to New Jersey. Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, a name that casts underfoot decades of military heritage, will soon be in Hawaii.

What about Joint Base Charleston-Naval Weapons Station Charleston, a name that can be said to lack felicity? Expect it in South Carolina.

The 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) act ordered these and similar basing structures. The goal: greater efficiency.

The Defense Department is well along in merging 26 domestic Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps installations to form 12 joint mega-bases. Plans called for the submittal this fall of signed “integration plans for the first five joint bases. The entire process must be completed by 2011.

Negotiations have been tough. For the Air Force, the stakes are high. Joint bases, should they be improperly set up, may damage USAF’s combat power, morale, and retention.

Joint basing is the norm at war, and the push is not limited to domestic installations. In Iraq, Balad Air Base was recently renamed Joint Base Balad and merged with the Army’s Logistics Support Area Anaconda.

Gen. John P. Jumper, the then-Air Force Chief of Staff, observed in 2005 that “we will not only train as we fight, we will live as we fight.” Jumper fingered a key goal—joint basing must not lower standards or damage combat capability.

Of the 12 conglomerations, the Air Force will lead six. These will be the joint installations dominated by Andrews AFB, Md., Charleston AFB, S.C., Elmendorf AFB, Alaska, Lackland AFB, Tex., Langley AFB, Va., and McGuire AFB, N.J.

The Navy will lead four—most notably, those encompassing Hickam AFB, Hawaii, and Andersen AFB, Guam. The first will be absorbed by Pearl Harbor, the second will be placed under Navy administration of JB Naval Base Guam-Andersen.

The Army will lead two joint bases, including JB Lewis-McChord, which includes Washington’s McChord Air Force Base.

The plan is to find efficiency in bases that sometimes share a long fence line. Separate medical, child care, grounds maintenance, public affairs, safety, housing, dining, and finance departments don’t necessarily make sense.

In all, there are 49 support functions that the military services have identified as potential sources of efficiency.

The potential for trouble creeps in because bases have different missions, property standards, and cultures.

“I did not think giving Hickam to the Navy made sense. I don’t think giving Andersen to the Navy makes sense,” former Air Force Secretary Michael W. Wynne said in July. “The Air Force has a very different concept of operations ... in managing its bases.”

Airmen often go directly into combat from home stations, which are not “just some place we deploy from,” said Gen. T. Michael Moseley, Chief of Staff, in March. USAF must “ensure we can still conduct our missions.”

The Air Force does not use bases as garrisons, like the Army. Bases such as Charleston and Andersen are essentially combat platforms, where aircraft fly missions directly to the war zone.

The Air Force will continue to run the airfields at its joint bases, and keep training resources in place. For example, when McChord is absorbed into Ft. Lewis, the airfield will be run by the airlift wing commander “on behalf of” the joint base commander.

Also critical is preservation of USAF’s combat support capability. Security forces, RED HORSE construction units, fuels specialists, and other deploying units are integrated with installation support units at Air Force bases.

The health of the force is a concern. USAF has a mature, highly skilled, retention-driven force of airmen. The Army has a young, recruitment-based force of soldiers. The services can—and do—treat their troops differently. There is lingering concern that joint basing will create “lowest common denominator” facilities standards, driving out airmen with families, the kind USAF needs to retain.

Ownership has been contentious. Plans call for the lead service at a joint base to assume ownership of the land and the money used to support it. For example, Hickam’s real estate and installation funding would be handed over to the Navy.

Air Force officials last year called this a bad idea, but have since been somewhat mollified on this point.

Yet to be determined is whether the Navy and Army will meet USAF funding requirements when budgets get tight.

“Our operational commanders should define the requirements necessary to execute the mission and manage the funds to meet their needs,” William C. Anderson, Air Force installations chief, told Congress. Anderson resigned in August, after Wynne and Moseley were deposed, saying the leadership changes limited his ability to take care of airmen.

Perhaps beaten into submission, USAF in recent weeks has taken on a more conciliatory tone. “I wouldn’t characterize [final negotiations] as disagreements,” said one senior official. The Air Force is “confident joint basing will be very successful.”

Organizational structures, joint base MOAs, and agreements on how much money to transfer are being negotiated. The first five joint bases are supposed to go “live” in January. Then, we will begin to see the effect of the joint basing plan.