

# Too Many Bases, Not Enough Air Force

**T**HE Defense Department's Infrastructure Capacity report to Congress, released in April, got right to the point. The Pentagon "must stop wasting money on unnecessary infrastructure," the introduction read, so DOD can "devote these savings to readiness, modernization, and other more pressing national security requirements."

The first comprehensive assessment of its sort in 12 years determined DOD is currently supporting at least 22 percent more infrastructure than needed for its missions. The Air Force has it even worse, the study determined, as USAF is presently carrying at least 32 percent excess infrastructure.

In other words, nearly one-third of the Air Force's facilities are unnecessary, given the service's planned missions and force structure. This is not a good thing, as it requires USAF to spread an already-strained force among too many bases, creating inefficiency and wasting billions of dollars over time.

Unfortunately, the Pentagon is nearly powerless to do anything about this unless it receives explicit permission from Congress to conduct a base-closing process commonly known as BRAC.

You might think that most lawmakers would be in favor of DOD closing facilities the military does not need, to free up money for the training, equipment, and modernization the armed forces do need.

You would be wrong.

Lawmakers are loathe to close bases. Wasting money on unneeded infrastructure is a national-level problem, but politics is local. Lawmakers with bases in or near their districts represent constituents who benefit from the jobs and spending those bases bring. Closing a military base is tumultuous in the short term, to be sure, and could cost a lawmaker votes.

But parochialism comes with a real cost. "Extra capacity is a big problem for us because it is wasteful spending, period," said Deputy Defense Secretary Robert O. Work in 2014. "It is the worst type of bloat."

"When I worked for the Air Force, our walking around, rough order estimate was it took 800 to 900 airmen to open a base," Jamie M. Morin, director of DOD's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation office, added in March. This was "before you had any operational folks there."

The last realignment and closure round took place in 2005. That year's BRAC commission suggested a new round be conducted every eight to 12 years, as military missions are constantly evolving. The very soonest a new BRAC round will be conducted—assuming Congress approves one this year—is 2019, 14 years since the last go-round.

"If history serves as any guide, it will take several years of studies, analysis, and pleading before Congress acquiesces to this latest BRAC request," we noted on this page more than four years ago (See: "Editorial: Bringing Closure," March 2012, p. 4). Although Congress as a whole seems to be ever-so-slowly coming to an acceptance that a BRAC round is necessary, approval

is still a long shot this year. In fact, lawmakers have rejected a DOD closure proposal in each of the last five years.

The Pentagon basing estimate compares 2019 load levels to 1989, thereby assuming DOD had its infrastructure correctly sized near the end of the Cold War. This may or may not be accurate, as previous BRAC rounds were held in 1988, 1991, 1993, 1995, and 2005.

The department estimates that these actions, combined with the 2015 European Infrastructure Consolidation, now save the nation \$14.1 billion 2016 dollars every year. Kathleen I. Ferguson, the Air Force's former installations chief, calls BRAC "the gift that keeps on giving," because once a surplus facility is shut down the department never has to pay for it again.

Inefficient basing exacerbates the Air Force's difficulties of having too few airmen operating too few aircraft that are too old. The service is forced to spread them like peanut butter

to cover all the bases, instead of placing them in more efficient units. Congressman Adam Smith (D-Wash.), ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee

and one of the more prominent supporters of a new BRAC process, describes the current arrangement as "death of a thousand cuts."

Congressman Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), HASC chairman, holds the opposite opinion. He said of DOD's report, "In envisioning a military far smaller than anyone thinks is wise, it fails to comply with the law [requesting the study] as badly as it fails to justify a BRAC round."

But in reality, the study was performed using the 2019 force structure plans Congress approved last year, and the numbers were subsequently coordinated with the Joint Chiefs. BRAC rounds typically only close about five percent of DOD's infrastructure, and an independent commission will evaluate Pentagon recommendations before giving Congress the opportunity to approve or reject the entire package. Under a BRAC, bases offering the least military value can be targeted for closure, with the savings pumped back into starving personnel, readiness, and modernization accounts.

With 22 percent surplus capacity, short of major war with Russia or China forcing a massive increase in the size of the US armed forces, there is no realistic scenario in which BRAC will leave an inadequate network of bases. In that extraordinarily unlikely scenario, the nation would open new bases, as it has done many times in many places.

BRAC is overdue. USAF, quite remarkably, closed no Air Force bases in the 2005 round and had too much infrastructure even then. Since 2005, the Air Force has shrunk by another 500 aircraft and 42,000 airmen.

The Air Force is too old and too small. It needs more airmen to operate additional, newer equipment. But it needs a smaller footprint for a more economical and powerful force. It is time for Congress to approve a 2019 BRAC round. ♣

**USAF is spread among nearly a third more bases than it needs.**