

A New Defense Strategy Requires a New Round of BRAC

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Abstract

When the United States releases a new National Defense Strategy (NDS), it outlines the capabilities that the country will need to face the existing and foreseeable threats to national defense. Left unsaid is that this force structure must be housed and trained in the current physical infrastructure owned by the Department of Defense (DOD), regardless of the adequacy of the infrastructure to the future force structure. This adequacy is only properly addressed through the studies performed in the initial stages of a round of base realignment and closure (BRAC). The connection between forces and infrastructure is highlighted in the 2005 BRAC Commission's report recommending a new round of BRAC whenever there is a defense review. The 2018 NDS also calls for a new round of BRAC. Congress should recognize the inherent importance of assessing the defense infrastructure when the force structure or strategy changes and link the authorization of a new round of BRAC to the release of a new defense strategy. The two efforts are complementary.

The last time the Department of Defense (DOD) conducted a round of base realignment and closure (BRAC), George W. Bush was starting his second term in office and Nokia still reigned supreme in the cell phone market. Since 2005 the military has experienced substantive changes in how it operates and defends the nation, from the ubiquity of smartphones to the use of remotely piloted aircraft. Amid these changes, the department has been unable to substantially reshape its infrastructure footprint. Despite former Secretary of Defense James Mattis calling BRAC “one of the most successful and significant”¹ of the DOD's efficiency measures, multiple internal studies showing excess capacity,² and repeated requests from the DOD, Congress has not authorized a new round of BRAC.³

The current National Defense Strategy (NDS) released in January 2018 marks a shift in focus for the military from counterterrorism to great

power competition.⁴ This change will necessarily precipitate a rethinking of force structure—with implications for how and where troops are located and the infrastructure needed. The BRAC process enables the Defense Department to holistically assess the adequacy of its current infrastructure for the planned force structure. By looking across state lines and military services, BRAC aims to enhance the military value of installations. The connection between a defense strategy and the department's infrastructure was explicitly made by the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission in 2005, when it recommended new rounds of BRAC whenever defense reviews are released.⁵ The connection is further reinforced by the 2018 NDS, calling explicitly for reductions in excess infrastructure through a new round of BRAC and promises that the DOD will present options to Congress on how to reduce excess infrastructure.⁶

Each new strategy seeks to build a comprehensive understanding of what the military should be capable of executing and outlines the force structure needed for the future, which are major components of the definition of “military value” used by a BRAC process. Each new strategy will have different priorities and thus value differently the myriad military capacities and infrastructure to support each capacity. Absent a BRAC round, this force structure must be housed in the infrastructure the military currently owns. If any new strategy is to mold the military's understanding of its capabilities, it will be incomplete without a chance to change how the military is dispersed and located. A new round of BRAC is the best instrument available to ensure alignment of the military infrastructure with the force structure required by the current and future strategy. Only a BRAC round would enable the Defense Department to ensure its installations are optimized for great power competition—the intent of the current NDS—while reducing unnecessary infrastructure and freeing resources for higher-priority investments. Great power competition requires a force shaped differently than one focused on fighting terrorism. It might require enhancing forward presence, leveraging our allies, or increasing the Pacific orientation of our force. These are issues the BRAC process is well-suited to explore.

Moreover, any NDS marginally changes the definition of military value—the driving concept of BRAC rounds—giving more weight to the recommendation of the 2005 BRAC Commission to tie these events together. Thus, infrastructure value assessments should be a part of the implementation process for every new NDS. Doing so would give Congress and the nation two imperatives for a new round of BRAC: (1) aligning the infrastructure's military value to the NDS's understanding of value in the

context of great power competition and (2) generating savings in fixed costs by reducing documented excess infrastructure.

This article highlights the unique value of the BRAC process and how its defining characteristics make it work within the political process. It also reviews how the experience of the 2005 BRAC Commission can and should shape future rounds of base closures. Finally, it suggests considerations for how to think about future rounds and recommends possible changes in how Congress determines base closures in the context of a BRAC round.

Unique Value and Defining Characteristics of BRAC

By law, if the secretary of defense wants to close an installation with more than 300 civilian positions or more than 1,000 uniformed personnel, the DOD must follow a lengthy process.⁷ It must notify both Armed Services Committees during the annual appropriations process. In the written notification, it must submit an evaluation of the criteria used to determine the closure and the impacts such closure will have. Then, the department must wait either 30 legislative or 60 calendar days from the time of the notice before taking any action. This process effectively provides enough opportunities for political forces to enact barriers, so the de facto result has been that the DOD does not even try anymore. Over time, BRAC has proved to be the only tool available to the DOD that stands any chance of making large-scale changes to its infrastructure. It empowers the DOD to have multiple actions in one package and changes the transaction costs for both the executive and legislative powers.

The process of base realignment and closure was designed to change the decision-making process and rationalize the closure and realignment of domestic military bases. With major reductions in the size of the armed forces in the latter twentieth century, the executive branch needed to reduce military infrastructure. It initially interpreted the ability to close bases as a presidential prerogative under his power as commander in chief, as explained by George Schlossberg, the general counsel to the Association of Defense Communities.⁸ Schlossberg further describes that “the massive dislocations caused by the McNamara closures, and rising congressional concerns that base closures were being used to reward friends and punish political enemies, especially during the Vietnam draw-down, led to increased congressional interest and legislative activity.”⁹ This congressional interest and activity led to severe reductions in the pace of any closures by imposing legal requirements on each of them, effectively halting the process.¹⁰ The end of the Cold War and further reductions in

the end strength of the armed forces increased the pressure for future base closures, and the foundations for the current BRAC process were laid out in the Defense Base Realignment and Closure Act of 1990.¹¹

The main innovation of BRAC is to allow lawmakers to express their parochial concerns in a way that still enables the Department of Defense to close and realign bases. To achieve this effect, the process removes the selection of bases to be closed or realigned from both the executive and legislative branches and vests an independent commission with authority based on criteria defined by Congress, chiefly among them military value.¹² For the 2005 round, military value criteria were defined mainly in terms of assuring current and future mission capabilities.¹³ The process ensures that lawmakers shape the selection but individually are unable to completely stop it. The objective criteria determined by Congress is an elegant solution for the legislature to maintain its influence while insulating it from the actual decision-making.

The ability to reduce the entry points for political interference coupled with trust deposited in the work of the commission gives the process robustness. In a further effort to build political buy-in, there are four off-ramps that can terminate a round of BRAC once it starts.¹⁴ The first off-ramp is if the DOD's assessment of its infrastructure and force structure analysis is not certified by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The second off-ramp is if Congress fails to nominate commissioners. The third off-ramp is that the work also terminates if the commission fails to transmit a list of recommendations in due time. Finally, at the end of the BRAC Commission's work, Congress can still disapprove the list of recommended closures and realignments. This creates yet another avenue to stop the process. These off-ramps undoubtedly raise the level of confidence that both the executive and the legislative branches will operate in good faith during the process. After all, if there is any mistrust, the round can be stopped by the above parties at various points. In previous rounds, these off-ramps have never been taken.

So far, the DOD has conducted five rounds of BRAC. A typical round takes between eight and ten years, including the time that the Department of Defense has to implement the congressionally approved actions, and reduces around 5 percent of the infrastructure.¹⁵ In the current law, the department has six years to act on the approved list. Most of the public attention in a BRAC round falls within a critical 18-to-24 month period when an independent commission is formed and reviews the recommendations provided by the Department of Defense.

Current law lists eight steps for conducting BRAC.¹⁶ However, Congress could change these steps when members write the authorization for a new round. It is also in the authorizing legislation where Congress outlines the selection criteria that the department will use to evaluate its infrastructure. The DOD publishes these criteria for public comment in the *Federal Register*. In the 2005 round, there were eight criteria—four of them based on military value followed by four based on other considerations (fig. 1). The selection criteria are among the main elements lawmakers can and should influence when authorizing a new round of BRAC.

MILITARY VALUE [LISTED IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE]

1. The current and future mission capabilities and the impact on operational readiness of the total force of the Department of Defense, including the impact on joint warfighting, training, and readiness.
2. The availability and condition of land, facilities, and associated airspace (including training areas suitable for maneuver by ground, naval, or air forces throughout a diversity of climate and terrain areas and staging areas for the use of the Armed Forces in homeland defense missions) at both existing and potential receiving locations.
3. The ability to accommodate contingency, mobilization, surge, and future total force requirements at both existing and potential receiving locations to support operations and training.
4. The cost of operations and the manpower implications.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

5. The extent and timing of potential costs and savings, including the number of years, beginning with the date of completion of the closure or realignment, for the savings to exceed the costs.
6. The economic impact on existing communities in the vicinity of military installations.
7. The ability of the infrastructure of both the existing and potential receiving communities to support forces, missions, and personnel.
8. The environmental impact, including the impact of costs related to potential environmental restoration, waste management, and environmental compliance.

Figure 1. Selection criteria for 2005 BRAC. (Reproduced from Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, *2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission Report* [Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 8 September 2005], "Executive Summary," v, <https://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps112577/www.brac.gov/docs/final/BRACReportcomplete.pdf>.)

When the criteria are finalized, the Department of Defense is responsible for developing a force structure plan and an associated infrastructure assessment. This plan is developed through a broad data call to all installations through all the services and departments. It requires an extraordinary level of detail and resources and thus occurs only when the department has both the authorization and funds to conduct a round of BRAC.

The force structure and infrastructure plan is then certified by the Secretary of Defense and evaluated for consistency by the GAO. Based on the

certified and evaluated plan, the department then proceeds to develop a recommended list of bases that could be closed or realigned. This list is evaluated by an independent commission, which has limited time to evaluate and change the list before submitting it for the presidential approval. The role of the commission is to act as a neutral arbiter to ensure that the department is following the proper criteria and the communities and lawmakers have a voice in the assessment without unnecessarily delaying the process.

Once the commissioners have reviewed the recommendations, they issue a report on their findings and recommendations to the president. The president has the option to reject the list and ask the commission to re-examine the issues that led to the rejection. Once the president approves the list, the commission transmits the list to Congress. From the moment of transmission, Congress has 45 days to disapprove the list as a whole or it becomes binding. The requirement of explicit disagreement with the entire list has been a key attribute for previous BRAC processes.¹⁷ Once the list is approved, the Department of Defense can begin implementation.

Through this process, the independent commission also removes the burden and responsibility for decision-making about individual installations from elected officials and better balances the goal of having a rational defense infrastructure with the political survival imperative faced by every lawmaker. Doing so is a necessity since base closures can get support in the abstract but not from the affected constituency. As soon as specific installations are named, local lawmakers will likely rise in opposition. The establishment of the independent commission weakens the localized opposition from lawmakers; they are required to vote on only the complete package of closures and realignments instead of individual installations.

Despite well-documented success stories of recent installation transitions, such as the transformation of Bergstrom Air Force Base, Texas, into the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, lawmakers with bases in their district are unlikely to support the case for a new round of BRAC.¹⁸ The impulse for lawmakers is still to preserve the status quo, but the context of a round of BRAC allows them to express that sentiment without completely derailing the process.

This type of expected opposition to specific plans of closures and realignment makes the independent commission an essential element of the success previously experienced by BRAC rounds. Therefore, proposals such as the one floated in the summer of 2017, to remove the commission from the process, should be rejected by both Congress and the executive branch.¹⁹ Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Jack Reed (D-RI), then,

respectively, chairman and ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, floated this proposal for a BRAC without an independent commission.²⁰ Their proposal would have designated the GAO as the arbiter that would validate the DOD's analysis before it goes to Congress. The late Senator McCain wanted to make Congress more responsible for the decisions on base realignments and closures.²¹ Nonetheless, removing the independent commission would largely replicate the conditions that led to the need for BRAC legislation in the first place. Experience and political science have shown the importance of maintaining the independent commission to overcoming the expected political hurdles of any BRAC round.

BRAC is a holistic process that looks at all bases—not just the ones estimated to have excess capacity—through factors defined by its authorizing legislation.²² To compile the required data to assess every installation fairly, based on set criteria, the DOD spends considerable time collecting information from the military departments on the usage of its installations and verifying that the data is uniform across components. It is a level of effort that does not occur on a regular basis and is reserved for BRAC rounds. Thus, each round is a uniquely valuable moment to assess the military infrastructure. The data-collection phase is extremely productive in and of itself since it is both extraordinary and expansive. Its comprehensive character makes it useful to develop a better understanding of how the infrastructure is being used and what type of occupancy exists.

Moreover, it is always important to stress that, as of now, Congress must authorize each new round of BRAC. In turn, Congress has the prerogative to determine many elements that shape and define a BRAC round. These might include setting goals for infrastructure reduction, determining the criteria that will be used to evaluate bases, or establishing the length of time that the department will have to implement changes.²³

BRAC and the National Defense Strategy

The last Commission on Base Realignment and Closure proposed legislative changes in its final report on 8 September 2005.²⁴ The commission evaluated the challenges it faced in executing a round of BRAC, some of which are discussed in the recommendations section of this article. Current law makes it so difficult to realign infrastructure that, in essence, it forces all actions to take place in the context of a future BRAC round, when the studies and notifications can be done en masse through a BRAC Commission report. Absent any changes in the law giving the Department of Defense further autonomy over base closures and realignment,

there will be a growing number of real estate actions that will accumulate until the next round of BRAC.

Reflecting the accumulation of real property actions and because of the lengthy 10-year gap between the 1995 and the 2005 BRAC, the 2005 commission suggested that BRAC rounds occur at periodic intervals. The 2005 BRAC Commission's recommendation to tie a new round of closures and realignments to a new strategy was based on the relevance of infrastructure changes in shaping the future of the force. The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) was released 6 February 2006, just five months after the BRAC report.²⁵ This timeline meant that the Department of Defense was working on both reports at the same time, indicating that one process should influence the other. However, according to Anthony Principi, commissioner of the 2005 BRAC, some force basing decisions made through the QDR that adversely affected BRAC recommendations became apparent only after the BRAC recommendations list was done. One example is units that were moved because of the QDR were to be moved through the BRAC as well.²⁶

In the commissioner's own words, "In fact, initiating a new BRAC round should be considered by the Secretary of Defense in eight-year intervals following every alternate QDR."²⁷ The Quadrennial Defense Review has since been replaced with the National Defense Strategy, but the argument persists: a new strategy or review of the DOD's mission and forces should be accompanied by a review of its infrastructure—a BRAC round.²⁸

Documents like the QDR and now the NDS set the general direction of the military and seek to describe a force structure adequate to face the challenges outlined by the document and alters the understanding of military value. The current National Defense Strategy presents a reorientation to great power competition, with substantial implications for the future force structure—from the size of each service to the location of bases. If lawmakers follow the suggestion of the 2005 commissioners and marry each new strategy with a new round of BRAC, they would enable the department to evaluate its infrastructure in light of the changing strategic direction. It is a step analogous to reassessing your housing needs when you have a child. It is unlikely you will change your residency every time your family grows, but there will be a time when that growth is only possible if you change your house as well. Making this change impossible benefits no one. Especially for the Department of Defense, preventing a new round of BRAC when there is a new strategy forces it to operate within the constraints of its current infrastructure—optimized for a concept of military value attached to an outdated defense strategy.

Tucked near the end of the unclassified version of the 2018 NDS is a promise to work with Congress to reduce excess property and infrastructure through BRACs. It states, “The Department will also work to reduce excess property and infrastructure, providing Congress with options for a Base Realignment and Closure.”²⁹ Curiously, since the release of the NDS, the department has not requested authorization for a new round of BRAC—a feature of every budget request in the previous six years. Nonetheless, a change in strategy should precipitate an assessment of adequacy of the infrastructure for the new objectives. A new round of BRAC now would enable the DOD to simultaneously generate savings and align the current infrastructure to the capabilities necessary to execute the National Defense Strategy.

The location of the forces has enormous effects on how they operate, such as how far service members would need to travel for training to the types of people willing to live where the base is situated. It is not far-fetched to imagine that the types of people drawn to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, differ substantially from those drawn to Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri. This same rationale prompted the Army to locate its Futures Command in Austin, Texas, and the DOD to locate the Defense Innovation Unit offices in Silicon Valley, Boston, and Austin. Additionally, the BRAC process allows the DOD to view its military bases in the context of the joint force versus just the service branch controlling a particular base. In this regard, if an Air Force mission would be better suited to be co-located on an Army base, this transition would be immensely easier to execute during a round of BRAC. The location of the organization fundamentally influences its ability to accomplish the mission, and generating new capabilities necessary to engage in great power competition will be made easier with the ability to co-locate missions and units.

As part of the assessment informed by the NDS, the Defense Department must have the ability to rebalance its infrastructure, emphasize and de-emphasize the missions housed in each base, move missions to locations better suited for the mission, co-locate services, and verify if the current physical laydown of units optimally supports the strategy. This type of assessment is normally performed in the early stages of a round of BRAC when the department is collecting base usage data from all the services.

The current NDS is a comprehensive document that should mold and influence the whole department, including its infrastructure. The DOD infrastructure plays a key role in getting the forces ready for great power competition, as outlined by the current strategy. Additionally, there is a clear link between a new round of BRAC and reforming how the Department

of Defense conducts its business—the third line of effort in the strategy: “reforming the Department’s business practices for greater performance and affordability.”³⁰ This call for efficiency and business reform in the defense strategy can also be interpreted as an implicit endorsement of BRAC.

Failing to look at the DOD’s infrastructure would be an enormous missed opportunity in finding potential efficiencies, an additional benefit of matching infrastructure to strategy. The DOD infrastructure encompasses an area roughly equivalent to the Commonwealth of Virginia and is one of the major fixed costs incurred by the department.³¹ Furthermore, the NDS states that it is the goal of the DOD to “deliver performance at the speed of relevance” and in that quest intends to “shed outdated management practices and structures while integrating insights from business innovation.”³² This mentality must be applied to Pentagon-controlled real estate as well, especially when there is literally excess structure that is unneeded. BRAC is the best tool available to the Department of Defense to shape and evaluate its infrastructure enterprise to achieve greater performance and affordability.

A BRAC round serves as an invaluable opportunity for the department to return to the drawing board and examine how all its infrastructure is being used and how it will be used in the future by an envisioned force structure for the purposes outlined by the NDS. It allows military planners to leverage specific criteria to evaluate the adequacy of their current infrastructure plans. The DOD does not currently conduct this type of comprehensive assessment on a regular basis. Thus, the mere preparation for a BRAC round forces the military departments to establish better lines of communication and data both internally and externally, contributing to the breakdown of stovepipes.³³ The BRAC process is not just an exercise in locating and creating efficiencies. It also forces an evaluation that goes back to the basic principles and reasons as to why a military installation exists—to create military value to the nation.

BRAC Infrastructure Assessments

The DOD’s 2004 infrastructure capacity report submitted for the 2005 BRAC round shows an excess capacity of 24 percent.³⁴ The Department of Defense released an infrastructure capacity study in March 2016 that assessed the adequacy of the infrastructure to host the 2019 force structure. The study estimated that the department has 22 percent excess capacity using the 1989 baseline of force distribution. Congress was dissatisfied with the study and, anticipating force growth, asked the DOD to use a substantially larger force structure than previously used.³⁵ The result was an updated

study released in October 2017, still finding that the department had substantial excess infrastructure.³⁶ This time the excess capacity was 19 percent, slightly lower, but still significant. Both of these studies are analogous to the force structure and infrastructure assessment developed during a round of BRAC, albeit substantially less detailed.

The size of the force structure used to determine infrastructure adequacy is the main difference between the March 2016 and October 2017 infrastructure capacity studies.³⁷ The 3 percent variance between the two studies is attributed to the different force structure baselines. The main concern prompting a second study was that the first used the projected force structure for 2019 proposed by the president's budget request for fiscal year 2016, which many critics considered too small.³⁸ The October 2017 infrastructure capacity study used the considerably larger 2012 force structure as the baseline for its assessment.

Despite the existence of multiple studies, Congress mandated yet another one in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).³⁹ The new study is to accompany the president's budget request for FY 2021 in early February 2020. Like the previous two studies, it will assess the adequacy of the infrastructure for the force structure. As with the 2016 and 2017 studies, the major difference will be the force structure size used for analysis. This new study is required to consider the force structure authorized in the NDAA for FY 2018, a departure from previous infrastructure capacity studies.

The other major departure requested in the 2019 NDAA language is the level of detail in its infrastructure assessment. Both previous studies stopped their analysis at the level of the military department, assessing the levels of excess capacity at the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force and at the Defense Logistics Agency. The new requirement calls for the Department of Defense to identify any deficit or surplus capacity "for locations within the continental United States and territories."⁴⁰ This level of detail is absent in both previous assessments for one simple reason: it would amount to a BRAC-like list outside the confines of a BRAC round in which installations can be evaluated holistically, not just for occupancy rates. The main question of the new study will be, How will the Department of Defense provide location-level data? The department is unlikely to provide detail on that level, especially given the possible disruptions for the communities that host those installations, such as depressing real estate markets in expectation of reductions in the base or unwillingness of the communities to invest in a base that carries excess capacity.

In the end, the requested assessment is essentially a way Congress found to postpone any decisions on a new round of BRAC while also forcing the

DOD's hand by pushing it to name specific locations potentially affected by a new round of BRAC.⁴¹ Congress effectively delayed any discussion of a new round of BRAC until the 2021 budget cycle. All these studies are preliminary by design with inherent limitations. They do not carry the same level of precision developed by studies in the early stages of BRAC.⁴²

Regardless of the total level of excess capacity, a BRAC round has historically reduced only 5 percent of the total infrastructure of the department; it currently has an excess of at least 19 percent of the total capacity.⁴³ If historical averages are maintained, a new round of BRAC would reduce the infrastructure by just a portion of its current excess. It would still preserve enough excess capacity for force structure growths that the DOD might plan in legacy infrastructure. Thus, delaying the new round of BRAC simply because the force is projected to grow is a poor rationale.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, according to both studies, the reduction in excess infrastructure would generate an estimated annual recurring savings of \$2 billion. This estimate is within the historical range for previous rounds of BRAC. The annual recurring savings range from \$1 billion for the 1988 round to \$4 billion in the 2005 round (fig. 2).⁴⁵ These are valuable savings since they come from reductions of fixed costs.

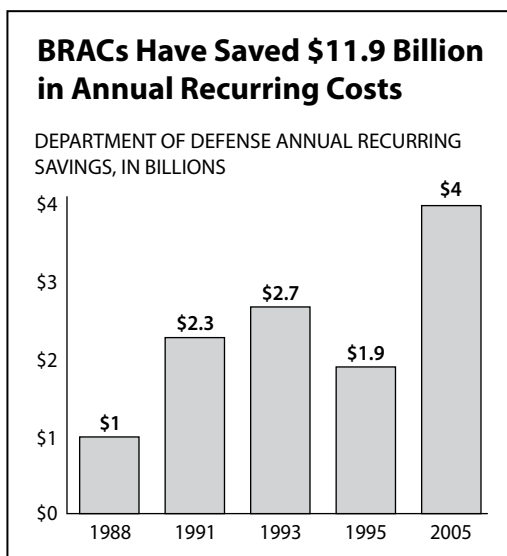


Figure 2. DOD Annual Recurring Savings, 1988–2005. (Adapted from Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Infrastructure Capacity* [Washington, DC: DOD, March 2016], 18, <https://defensecommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/2016-4-Interim-Capacity-Report-for-Printing.pdf>.)

It should be noted that these savings figures are quite challenging to produce and track. Most BRAC savings are cost avoidance; because this type of savings is in itself hard to track, most accounting systems do not monitor it. In the case of BRAC, there will be upfront costs before savings accrue, and any savings will become harder to quantify and track through time. The department has the task of aggregating this untracked cost avoidance savings throughout multiple services and divisions. This is why the GAO first highlighted the obstacles in tracking BRAC-related savings in 1996.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the DOD has challenges in tracking and quantifying savings achieved by efforts to improve efficiency. According to the GAO's assessment, the main obstacle is the lack of detailed documentation showing how estimated savings are realized in later years.⁴⁷ These challenges should be seen as opportunities to improve accounting practices rather than as a wholesale condemnation of the process. Although not perfect, the 2005 round has generated both increased military value and savings. It has also been studied from multiple perspectives and can be leveraged as a learning tool for subsequent rounds.⁴⁸

Recommendations for Future BRAC Rounds

Absent a BRAC round, the Department of Defense has relied on alternative mechanisms that allow it to shape its infrastructure. Alternatives such as partial conversion agreements with end users, enhanced leases, and demolition of surplus property are available and have been used. However, none of these reach the scope and comprehensiveness of a round of BRAC. Instead of forcing the DOD to resort to alternatives, Congress should work on improving the BRAC process. The structure of the process is solid, but the 2005 round identified some elements for improvement. Chief among them is recognizing the strategic value of infrastructure by pointing out that new rounds should accompany the release of new defense strategies. Other lessons for process reform that can be drawn from the 2005 round include the following: (1) infrastructure capacity studies should be regular reporting requirements; (2) the DOD should maintain personnel dedicated to these studies and to supporting the independent commission during a round; and (3) Congress should set goals for each round.

Congress should follow the 2005 BRAC Commission recommendation and have an automatic trigger for a new round of BRAC whenever a new National Defense Strategy, or equivalent document, is published. Every strategy will change the priorities and the understanding of capabilities evaluated under military value. After all, the very definition of "military value" starts with "the current and future mission capabilities" of the joint force.⁴⁹

Thus, it would be fruitful for the department and nation to evaluate its defense infrastructure in light of those new understandings. If each new defense strategy document were to trigger the authorization of a new round of BRAC, the infrastructure assessment done in the initial stages of a round would serve as a launching point for implementing the new strategy.

A new defense strategy may require changes to the force structure that will be needed to execute it, which is central for the BRAC process and one of the main points of contention in the recent infrastructure studies.⁵⁰ Any changes the department makes to the force structure will have important effects on infrastructure that should be analyzed in a new BRAC round. The main goal for lawmakers concerned about the efficient and effective use of resources in military bases should be to transform BRAC from an episodic, sporadic process into a routine one. Associating a round with a defense strategy is a step in that direction.

In addition, Congress should transform the current infrastructure studies into a regular reporting requirement to be delivered with the budget request every four years. Because all of the services must contribute data for these studies, they compel an increased level of cooperation among the military departments. Imposing regularity also would lead to improvements in data collection since there would be a set expectation for data disclosures outside the context of a new round of BRAC. Absent an active round of BRAC, the military departments collect only data in conjunction with their day-to-day operations. An active round of BRAC galvanizes the military departments to gather, unify, and standardize their data to meet the requirements of the assessment. As it stands, the components have little incentive to share, or even to standardize, their data on real property usage.

Furthermore, because of the multiple exit ramps in each round, Congress could leverage the effort to start a BRAC round as an assessment tool to ensure that the infrastructure is adequate. On at least four separate occasions, inaction from one of the parties involved can stop a round of BRAC. But the first stage of a BRAC round by itself is, nonetheless, immensely valuable. In that stage, the Department of Defense collects in-depth data on the usage and occupancy levels of the bases throughout the system. This level of scrutiny reserved for BRAC rounds provides a higher level of confidence in the assessment of the infrastructure beyond those conducted by the recent infrastructure capacity studies.⁵¹ This higher degree of fidelity would be advantageous for the leadership in Congress and the executive branch. It would create an incentive for data to be collected on a day-to-day basis, something that currently does not happen.⁵²

The passage of the Defense Base Realignment and Closure Act of 1990 resulted in a flurry of activity that led to five rounds of BRAC in seven years.⁵³ These initial BRAC rounds happened within a tight timeframe and were able to leverage existing staff expertise and office infrastructure to start the work of the next independent commission. The 2005 commission did not enjoy the same benefits since it occurred 10 years after the preceding round. As such, the commissioners found that “since the 1995 BRAC Commission had been disbanded, there was no pre-existing support structure to manage the administrative start-up needs of the Commission such as recruiting and hiring, leasing space and equipment, and other administrative issues.”⁵⁴ These routine and seemingly trivial elements led to delays in getting the BRAC Commission working on substantive issues, threatening its viability.⁵⁵

In any bureaucracy, there is an unquantifiable value in knowing whom to consult for which issues, and any staff members new to that environment will have a steep learning curve that will hamper their initial productivity. Therefore, it would be beneficial to keep some core staff within the Department of Defense responsible for supporting BRAC rounds on a full-time basis, especially if the infrastructure capacity study becomes a reporting requirement.⁵⁶ This was a recommendation from the 2005 commission that remains highly relevant, given a context in which predictable rounds of BRAC follow defense strategy reviews. The staff would support the commissioners and handle administrative issues when the time came for another BRAC round. It would also be responsible for developing the infrastructure capacity studies and starting a new BRAC round following a new defense strategy.

One of the challenges faced by previous rounds of BRAC was the lack of targets met, both in terms of infrastructure reduction and of cost or savings. This is partially the reason why there were substantial differences in the outcomes of each.⁵⁷ Whenever Congress authorizes the next round of BRAC, it should determine goals for the Pentagon so as to establish a shared understanding of what would represent a successful BRAC. Congress would be wise to pick at least two data points, such as a percentage of reduction in plant replacement value and a cap on the implementation costs. A proposal floated by Senator McCain in summer 2017 imposed a cap on the implementation costs, which is a good way to set targets for the department.⁵⁸ After more than 14 years without a BRAC round, these types of targets would set a common baseline of expectations, serving as a confidence-building mechanism between the executive and legislative

branches. They would also be useful in determining the ambition of each round and could pave the way for smaller, more frequent BRAC rounds.

Additionally, one of the reasons why the BRAC process has worked in the past is because it avoided some of the political interference in the inherently political process of closing governmental real estate. Avoiding political entanglements should be kept at a premium when thinking about the future of BRAC. BRAC should always serve as a tool to create more military value for each of the nation's installations, not as a way to create jobs in or to punish lawmakers' districts. While politics will always be in the process, the independent commission has a proven track record of insulating the brunt of it.

These recommendations would help make BRAC a more routine process in shaping Department of Defense infrastructure, rather than one-off events that carry the heavy weight of decades of deferred infrastructure action. They would also serve well in the process of implementing the changes required by the current National Defense Strategy and future defense strategies.


Conclusion

In the 10th anniversary of the final report of the 2005 BRAC Commission, Chairman Anthony Principi wrote that "the BRAC process was accomplished five times from 1988 through 2005—but no new rounds have been undertaken in the past decade. In this time of great fiscal constraint, we cannot continue to deny DOD the opportunity to rationalize its vast excess infrastructure."⁵⁹ Currently, the country is still experiencing the fiscal constraints imposed by growing entitlement spending in the federal budget, and now there is also the mandate of the new National Defense Strategy.

Implementing a new strategy in the DOD would be incomplete if the department is denied an opportunity to rationalize, or even properly assess, its infrastructure portfolio through a round of BRAC. Until the 2018 budget, a new round of BRAC had consistently been part of the budget request, and Congress has routinely prohibited the use of funds for a new round.⁶⁰ In the past two budgets, the DOD has omitted its proposal for a new round of BRAC. This omission is likely due to the political hopelessness created by continued congressional rejection of BRAC, combined with the mandate from the 2019 NDAA to further study the department's infrastructure capacity. It is easy to envision a political debate in which lawmakers would point to the necessity of completing the pending assessment before discussing BRAC. This study is due with the 2021 budget

submission, which will likely be combined with a renewed request for authorization of a new round of base realignment and closure.⁶¹ However, by not even asking for the authorization in the past couple of years, the DOD has completely conceded the argument.

The shift towards great power competition outlined in the National Defense Strategy should serve to focus Congress on what needs to be done to prepare the country for long-term competition. The push to rationalize the defense infrastructure and concentrate those dollars where they best advance the nation's mission will mean moving away from bases that have lower military value, or even positioning more units outside the continental United States, a necessary cost of properly refocusing our armed forces. If the nation is to refocus on great power competition, we will need to concentrate our resources where they have the most value and move away from investments that detract from the main mission.

Overall, it is time for Congress to be an active enabler in the process of rationalizing the Department of Defense's infrastructure. In the 14 years since the last round of BRAC, Congress has been more concerned with parochialism than helping the country improve its defense infrastructure allocation. Congress must now commit to helping the DOD shape its infrastructure. Rounds of BRAC should be seen as an opportunity to check the adequacy of the defense infrastructure against the current strategy, not as seismic events that are less frequent than the census. 

Notes

1. James Mattis, "Written Statement for the Record," testimony before the Committee on Armed Services, US Senate, 13 June 2017, 11, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mattis_06-13-17.pdf.

2. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Infrastructure Capacity* (Washington, DC: DOD, March 2016), <https://defensecommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/2016-4-Interim-Capacity-Report-for-Printing.pdf>; and Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Infrastructure Capacity* (Washington, DC: DOD, October 2017), <https://fas.org/man/eprint/infrastructure.pdf>. Excess capacity does not necessarily translate to excess bases. A more precise way of envisioning this excess is as empty office space rather than empty buildings, which underscores the role that accurate data will have in any effort to address excess capacity.

3. Robert Moore, "The U.S. Needs a Dose of BRAC," *U.S. News & World Report*, 20 October 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/>.

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7. Base closures and realignments, 10 U.S. Code § 2687 (1977), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/993>; and Notification of permanent reduction of sizable numbers of members of the armed forces, 10 U.S. Code § 993 (2011), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/10/993>.

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9. Schlossberg, 2.

10. Base closures and realignments, 10 U.S. Code § 2687.

11. Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990 (Pub. L. 101-510), Title XXIX of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1991, 101st Cong., 2d sess. (5 November 1990), <https://legcounsel.house.gov/Comps/101-510.pdf>.

12. Government Accountability Office, *Military Bases: Analysis of DOD's 2005 Selection Process and Recommendations for Base Closures and Realignments*, GAO-05-785 (Washington, DC: GAO, July 2005), "GAO Highlights: What GAO Found," <https://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05785.pdf>.

13. For the criteria in the last BRAC round, see Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission, *2005 Defense Base Closure*, "Executive Summary," v.

14. Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990.

15. Frederico Bartels, "Guidelines for a Better—and Necessary—Round of BRAC," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3257, 19 October 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

16. The eight steps are "(1) DOD develops selection criteria, (2) DOD develops plan for force structure and inventory, (3) Secretary of DOD certifies plans and criteria, (4) DOD develops recommendations list, (5) BRAC commission reviews DOD recommendations, (6) President approves BRAC recommendations, (7) Congress allows recommendations to become binding, [and] (8) Congress sets timeline for actions." Bartels, 4.

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19. Frederico Bartels, "Senate Amendment Would Fix Most BRAC Problems," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4745, 28 July 2017, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

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