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BRAC finds some stable ground in 2017

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After 12 years and numerous requests from the Defense Department since the last round of military base closures, 2017 may finally offer a peek of sunlight for another base realignment and closure cycle.

Congressional resistance to BRAC is faltering, said Chris Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, and that may bring some fiscal savings to DoD.

Opposition to BRAC “is weakening for a couple reasons. One, the Pentagon is quite insistent that they do have excess capacity,” Preble told Federal News Radio. “Even if President Trump gets his wish of dramatically increasing military spending, it’s still not entirely clear where some of that money will come from, but he says some of the additional funding will come from waste. A key aspect of waste inside the Pentagon budget is excess overhead.”

Preble said BRAC would be part of a package of things that need to be done to squeeze more money out of DoD.

The Trump administration announced today it will attempt to add \$54 billion more to the defense budget by lowering the domestic budget the same amount.

A few members of Congress already stepped forward with their support for another BRAC round. House Armed Services Committee Ranking Member Adam Smith (D-Wash.) said he will introduce legislation this year to start BRAC.

Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz.) said Congress showed “cowardice” for its inability to work on BRAC, and the committee’s ranking member Sen. Jack Reed (D, R.I.) said he is considering BRAC as well.

Savings from BRAC could give DoD more bang for its buck, but wouldn’t solve Pentagon budget problems by any means.

A 2016 report from the Pentagon stated the military is operating 22 percent over capacity when it comes to bases.

The Army has 33 percent more stateside infrastructure than it needs, according to the report. Similarly, the Air Force has an excess of 32 percent. But the Navy and Marine Corps have just 7 percent extra, and facilities managed by the Defense Logistics Agency have 12 percent.

DoD estimates another BRAC round could save \$2 billion annually, on top of the savings already realized from previous rounds.

But one reason lawmakers are adverse to closing bases is the effect it has on their districts. The image stuck in everyone's mind regarding BRAC is a closed military base, overgrown with weeds and fenced off from the public.

Preble said that isn't always the case; in fact derelict, post-BRAC bases are the on the far end of the spectrum.

"More typical are cases like Dow Air Force Base, which was closed in 1968 in Bangor, Maine. Dow is now many things, including the main airport, Bangor International Airport, as well as a college campus, there's a business campus there, a number of businesses operate there, including General Electric. It's a very diverse use of a pretty major base and it's not the kind of case people would know on top of their head," Preble said. "There's no particular reason Bangor did as well as it did. It's a testament to a bit of planning and a certain amount of luck."

It does take some time to turn bases around, Preble said. The government holds onto the bases until environmental cleanup is performed. It is then handed over to a local reuse authority that is responsible for redevelopment.

"Some cleanups are very difficult given the nature of the work that was done," Preble said.

Still, in other instances the government never leaves completely. Some parts of bases are kept open for government use like plane refueling.

"The amount of continued federal involvement on the property requires at a minimum cooperation between the local resource authorities and the federal government," Preble said.