

While Trump promotes military buildup, some look at another round of base closings

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At the same time that President Donald Trump is pushing a plan to increase defense spending by 10 percent, Washington state Rep. Adam Smith says it's time to save money by closing some of the nation's military bases.

Smith, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, wants to reopen the controversial Base Realignment and Closure process, known as BRAC, last used in 2005.

While the 11th-term congressman has promoted base closings before with no luck, there are signs that the idea is getting increased attention this year on Capitol Hill.

"We ought to give it serious consideration," Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in an interview Tuesday.

And South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, another member of the panel, sounded receptive to the idea as well, saying: "I'll follow Senator McCain's lead on this."

Smith said that with McCain's backing, "it makes it more likely that a BRAC will happen, if not this year, then soon."

"It's gaining momentum," Smith said in an interview.

But he acknowledged that passing his bill on the matter — the Military Infrastructure Consolidation and Efficiency Act — won't be easy, with many members of Congress worried that their districts might get hit by a base closing. And he said it's unlikely that the Republican-led Congress would ever get behind the bill without a strong push from President Donald Trump.

"People are nervous about being a member of Congress when one of his or her bases (ends up) getting closed," Smith said. "It's a tough sell because that tends to be the focus, but look, given all of our national security needs, we need to save money wherever we can save money."

In a report last year, [the Pentagon said it has a 22 percent excess capacity rate](#) and that it could save an additional \$2 billion a year by closing or consolidating some of its facilities. The report said that prior base closures have saved the government more than \$12 billion a year.

Others predicted that the bill is unlikely to go anywhere with Congress facing an already packed agenda.

“The plate is overflowing. ... I would say you’d have to say the odds on something like that are pretty small,” said Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon.

McCain said he was uncertain how much backing a base-closing plan would have among Senate Republicans.

“I don’t know — we haven’t discussed it,” he said. But he added that Congress must also move quickly on other fronts: “We need to build up the military. It’s been decimated.”

Two other veteran Republican senators said they had no interest in going through another round of base closings.

“All I can say is that my experience with the BRAC rounds was not a good one,” said GOP Sen. Susan Collins of Maine. “I found the process extremely arbitrary and I think we have a real problem in this country that we no longer have active duty bases in the Northeast.”

Utah Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch said another round of BRAC closings “makes sense” but added: “We went through an awful situation last time. I’m not very enthused about it, I’ll put it that way.”

McCain first signaled his support for the idea in January, telling his colleagues he was “seriously considering” the idea.

And in February, both the vice chiefs of the Army and Air Force endorsed the plan at a House Armed Services Committee hearing. Gen. Stephen Wilson, vice chief of staff for the Air Force, said another round of base closings “would help us to do smart investment.”

And Gen. Daniel Allyn, the Army’s vice chief of staff, said that allowing more closings could allow the Pentagon to use the money it saves in other ways. “So it’s real money, that we really need to reinvest into the deferred maintenance in infrastructure backlog that we have,” he said.

Although Trump has not endorsed Smith’s bill, other backers of the plan say they would not be surprised if the president jumps on board, seizing an opportunity to cut wasteful infrastructure spending and shift the money to modernizing the military.

“I certainly hope so — because the president has spoken of efficiency in the Pentagon and getting more bang for our buck,” said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies for the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

Smith said that Trump’s proposal to increase defense spending by \$54 billion, financed with cuts in other programs, will be “very, very difficult to afford.” But he said it still makes sense for Congress to proceed with his plan.

“Even if we have a military buildup, there still is a need for base closure and realignment, as many of the missions have shifted,” Smith said.

Preble, who tracks the issue for Cato, said the U.S. maintains roughly 800 military bases after going through five rounds of base closings under the BRAC process. During the first four — in 1988, 1991, 1993 and 1995 — the Pentagon closed 97 major bases and conducted major

realignments at 55 other facilities, he said. And in the fifth and final round, 22 major closures were approved, along with another 33 major realignments.

As a result, Preble said, a total of 119 major bases were closed over the course of the first five rounds.

“I can envision a future BRAC round addressing 15 to 20 major bases, but that is just speculation,” he said.

Smith’s bill would require the Secretary of Defense to issue a report to Congress in 2018, including a complete inventory of its infrastructure and a restructuring plan. An independent commission appointed by Trump and confirmed by the Senate would review the plan, which calls for all consolidations and closings to be completed by Oct. 15, 2024. Congress would vote on it, as well.

“Congress is not allowed to amend it — that’s the whole point,” Smith said. “They make the recommendations and it’s a straight up-or-down vote and you either accept it or you don’t.”

Smith said the last round of closings had no negative effect in Washington state.

“The only effect that it had was that it certainly caused (Joint Base) Lewis-McChord to grow in size as they shifted assets around,” he said.

At the January hearing, McCain said he wanted to discuss the idea with Defense Secretary James Mattis, though he said he was unhappy with the outcome of the last round of base closings.

“It’s an act of cowardice,” McCain said. “We can’t make the decisions ourselves, so we leave it up to a commission. And frankly, the last commission made some very bad decisions, for example, closing Naval Air Station Cecil Field in Florida.”