



## Heinrich rips plan to amend BRAC process

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The top Republican and Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee are floating a proposal for a new round of military base closures and reorganization that could eliminate an independent commission and give the Department of Defense authority to make final decisions.

Sen. John McCain, an Arizona Republican who is chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the top Democrat on the panel, have circulated a draft proposal this summer that would essentially launch another Base Realignment and Closure Commission – or BRAC – but without the nine-member commission.

In the previous five BRAC rounds, including the last one in 2005, the Pentagon compiled a list of bases for closure or reorganization and submitted it to an independent commission that reviewed it for adherence to established military value criteria and then submitted the list to Congress for a final vote.

Under the McCain-Reed proposal obtained by the Journal, the list of potential base closures and realignments would be compiled by the Department of Defense by the fall of 2019, then submitted for review by the General Accounting Office. A 60-day public comment period would follow and then an up or down vote by Congress.

Sen. Martin Heinrich, a New Mexico Democrat who sits on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he is skeptical of the McCain-Reed approach to closing military bases. Members of Congress looking to protect their bases – and their support among voters – have historically resisted BRAC rounds. Heinrich has voted four times against initiating the base closure process.

He told the Journal that the McCain-Reed approach would invite more lobbying of the Pentagon by Congress, a development he says would not be productive.

“I understand that the Pentagon wants to divest of assets that aren’t materially contributing to our national security, but I’m not sure what problems are addressed by a new version of BRAC that involves more lobbying,” Heinrich said.

Sherman McCorkle, an Albuquerque businessman and founder of the Kirtland Partnership Committee, is a veteran of two BRAC rounds in New Mexico – in 1995 and 2005. He told the Journal he thinks it would be bad news for New Mexico’s bases, even though they are generally viewed as having high military value, if the independent commission were scrapped.

“If we look at the former BRACs in New Mexico, the commission has been a critical part of the process,” McCorkle said, describing how the Kirtland Partnership would fly to Washington to make an in-person presentation to the commission about the value of New Mexico’s bases. “We were able to appeal and present evidence.”

McCorkle said the 60-day public comment period outlined in the McCain-Reed draft “could well be nothing more than an email.”

A spokesman for Gov. Susana Martinez offered no opinion on the McCain-Reed proposal but said “the governor is committed to demonstrating the importance of protecting our labs and military bases, no matter the process.”

### **Surplus capacity**

The Pentagon has been calling for a new BRAC round for several years. The military – especially the Army and Air Force – is carrying a massive surplus of base capacity that costs billions of dollars in maintenance.

The Army estimates it has 21 percent more base infrastructure than it needs, even if it adds 25,000 troops.

Excess capacity is an even bigger problem for the Air Force, which reports having 25 percent additional base infrastructure than it needs.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies estimates that the upkeep costs the Pentagon \$2 billion annually. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has said the savings could be used to upgrade deteriorating military hardware.

“Of all the efficiency measures the department has undertaken over the years, BRAC is one of the most successful and significant,” Mattis told the House Armed Services Committee while calling for a new BRAC round in June.

It is not yet clear that the McCain-Reed amendment has the votes to pass, and it could be altered before the Armed Services Committee acts on it. A spokesman for Reed deferred the Journal’s questions to McCain, and McCain’s staff on the Armed Services Committee did not respond to requests for comment. McCain underwent chemotherapy and radiation treatments for brain cancer in August but is expected to return to the Senate this week.

The U.S. House did not include a new BRAC round in its defense authorization bill approved in July, and the current version of the Senate Armed Services Committee’s bill also does not include it. But McCain, the panel’s chairman, has filed a placeholder amendment to the Senate bill that would “require force and infrastructure review and recommendations.”

### **‘Compelling’ need**

Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington, has been researching BRAC history and policy for the past five years. He said that typically staunch opposition to BRAC in Congress, which denied former President Barack Obama’s requests for closures and realignments four times, appears to be softening on Capitol Hill.

“I think what we’re seeing is pressure is building over time and opposition to it is weakening because the need is so compelling,” Preble said. “No one is disputing that the military has more capacity than it needs.”

Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson, a Republican who represented Albuquerque for 10 years in Congress, told her former colleagues this summer that she backs a new BRAC round.

“The Air Force supports the Department of Defense request for authorization to conduct a Base Realignment and Closure round in 2021,” Wilson told a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on June 6. “Completing the more detailed analysis once a BRAC is authorized will have value, and may highlight opportunities for some savings. Enduring savings from BRAC recommendations will leave more DOD resources available for future force structure or readiness requirements. BRAC also allows us, if the analysis supports it, to reposition forces or station new forces in locations that optimize their military value.”

Heinrich and other members of the New Mexico congressional delegation have said the state’s four military bases – Kirtland, Holloman and Cannon Air Force bases and the Army’s White Sands Missile Range – are well-positioned to remain viable assets in the years ahead even with a new round of closures looming.

In the 2005 BRAC round, Cannon Air Force Base, near Clovis, came under intense scrutiny, eyed for significant force reductions or even closure. Thanks in part to some aggressive lobbying by then-Gov. Bill Richardson and the state’s congressional delegation, the BRAC commission decided to leave the base alone. It has since become a hub for special forces training, widely viewed as a critical need in modern warfare.

Kirtland Air Force Base was on the chopping block in 1995, but an intense campaign persuaded defense officials to retain it. Kirtland has since added new missions.

The state’s congressional delegation is also optimistic about the Air Force’s consideration of permanently moving two additional F-16 squadrons from Hill Air Force Base in Utah to Holloman Air Force Base, near Alamogordo.

In June, the Army announced that it would accelerate plans for \$34 million in infrastructure improvements at White Sands Missile Range, moving the timetable up from 2023 to 2019.

“As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I know that our best investment is to ensure our missions represent the future of our defense infrastructure – just look at the new Patriot missile detachment at White Sands, RPA mission and F-16s at Holloman, combat rescue helicopters at Kirtland, or special operations training infrastructure at Cannon we’ve successfully secured,” Heinrich said.

Retired Brig. Gen. Hanson Scott, a longtime member of the Kirtland Partnership Committee, said he would prefer to see communities maintain the ability to make their case to a commission instead of allowing the Pentagon to make the decisions about final recommendations.

“My gut feeling is the communities have a better voice with the commission process,” Scott said.