

Congress again moves to prevent new round of military base closures

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Ignoring the recommendations of the Pentagon, and budget proposals by Presidents of both parties, the Congress is again poised to approve legislation this year that blocks any effort by the Department of Defense to get rid of excess military installations, blocking efforts that the Army, Navy and Air Force say would save them billions of dollars in the future.

Working on a major defense policy bill on Thursday, the House voted 248-175 to reject an effort to strip out language that blocks the Pentagon from even considering a new round of military base closures, known officially as “Base Realignment and Closure,” or BRAC.

“Quite honestly, we may not have enough capacity and infrastructure to meet our current needs and our needs going forward as we look at the threats from Russia, China, Iran,” and other nations, said Rep. Austin Scott (R-GA).

But those arguments are at odds with the assessment of the Pentagon, which has asked Congress repeatedly for the authority to consolidate its domestic base structure, arguing it has as much as twenty percent excess overhead.

The vote divided both parties – 95 Republicans joined with 80 Democrats to vote in favor of letting the Pentagon weed out unneeded bases, while 140 Republicans joined 108 Democrats in opposing that.

Issued in May, President Donald Trump’s budget plan had included a call for a new round of base closures in 2021 – four years from now – but like similar plans offered by President Barack Obama, the idea had no chance of getting past bipartisan opposition in both the House and Senate.

The last round of base closures in the U.S. came in 2005.

“We cannot afford for parochial interests to get in the way of what is in the best interests of our troops,” argued Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA). “We need a BRAC.”

“The Department of Defense (DOD) has approximately 20 percent excess infrastructure capacity across all Military Departments,” the President’s budget stated in May, arguing that the Pentagon could “generate \$2 billion or more in annual savings by 2027” with a new base closure round.

“These savings would be re-invested in higher priority DOD needs,” the White House argued in President Trump’s budget.

Outside groups say it’s wrong to avoid a base closure round.

“Congress should grant our military the authority to eliminate waste, and ensure that vital defense resources flow to where they are most needed,” the CATO Institute argued in an open letter published last month.

Earlier this year, top officials from the Air Force, Army and Navy all endorsed the idea of a BRAC round – but it has encountered skepticism from lawmakers in both parties, who worry that the Pentagon will take away installations in their home state or district, crippling local economies in the process.

The Senate is fully expected to accept the House language in the defense authorization bill to prevent another round of military base closures; opponents have also again included a similar provision in a funding bill for the Pentagon, which seems likely to be approved as well.