

AirForceTimes

Closing USAFE, PACAF installations reviewed

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Thousands of airmen would lose their jobs if Congress closed military installations overseas to cut defense spending.

Lawmakers as well as the Pentagon itself are reviewing how shuttering some bases in Europe and Japan would affect both national security and the defense budget. The Air Force has 16 installations in Europe and six in Asia.

A task force appointed by Congress has already weighed in positively; a Pentagon advisory board is studying the potential cost savings and impact on the U.S. and its allies.

"We are looking at [if we can afford overseas bases]," said a board member who agreed to talk with Air Force Times on background.

Three months ago, Defense Secretary Robert Gates ordered the Pentagon's military and civilian leaders to find \$102 billion in savings over the next five years — roughly 3.4 percent of the Pentagon's requested appropriations — and shift the money to the war-fighting effort.

Gates' predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld, wanted to close more than a third of the bases overseas and move 170,000 service members and their families back to the U.S.

Air Force Special Operations Command considered moving its 352nd Special Operations Group at RAF Mildenhall, England, and 353rd Special Operations Group at Kadena Air Base, Japan, to Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., said Lt. Gen. Mike Wooley, former AFSOC commander.

Today, support is building in Congress to close installations in Europe and Asia.

A bipartisan group of four congressmen sponsored the task force, which found the U.S. could save \$80 billion if it reduced its military presence in Europe and Asia by a third.

Members of the Sustainable Defense Task Force, mostly Washington defense analysts, testified at a July 20 hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on their findings, compiled in a report titled "Debt, Deficits, and Defense: A Way Forward."

"We continue to try to get a clear picture from the department of the actual number of overseas military bases we have, as well the strategic rationale for each location," said Rep. John Tierney, D-Mass, the subcommittee chairman. "Time after time, we see opportunities for increased efficiency, less waste and better use of taxpayer money."

Under the task force's proposal, about 50,000 service members would go.

The Air Force would cut one fighter wing and 10,000 airmen, according to the report. The task force also recommended eliminating one Army Brigade Combat Team from Europe and pulling back 7,000 Marines and 9,000 sailors stationed overseas.

"Our allies can afford to defend themselves. The Cold War is over," said Benjamin Friedman, who served on the task force. "Time has come for all our allies to carry the burden of their defense."

The former commander of U.S. Air Forces Africa, which has its headquarters at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, has noticed overseas major commands moving their headquarters to the U.S.

"Southern Command is in the United States. Central Command and Pacific Command are all on U.S. soil. So to me, if we just followed that logic, AFRICOM would move back to the United States," Maj. Gen. Ronald Ladnier told Air Force Times in a June interview. "Doesn't that just make sense?"

Service officials got a view of life without some key USAFE bases in April, when ash from an Icelandic volcano brought air traffic in Europe to a standstill.

Air Force transports hauling everything from cargo to wounded soldiers in and out of the war zones remained grounded for six days. Planes scheduled to stop at Ramstein to drop off wounded soldiers at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center had to fly nonstop back to the U.S.

The biggest costs associated with overseas bases are moving, housing and cost of living expenses.

A single technical sergeant at Kadena Air Base, Japan, gets \$33,200 more a year to live than his counterpart at Langley Air Force Base, Va., said Col. Ottis L. Hutchinson, PACAF director of financial management and comptroller. A single senior airman at Misawa Air Base, Japan, makes \$25,574.28 more a year than his counterpart at Langley.

Mackenzie Eaglen, a defense analyst at the Heritage Foundation and a former Senate aide, doesn't think the Pentagon will save much money by reducing its overseas presence. Military construction is expensive whether it's in the U.S. or

abroad.

"It's expensive to keep them forward deployed, but in a lot of ways it's a sunk cost," she said. "The money has already been spent," Eaglen said.

The member of the advisory board agreed. It would be unfair to assume out of hand that it costs more to run a base in Italy or Japan than one in New Mexico or Maryland. Many countries such as Japan pay the U.S. for bases inside their countries, the official said.

The overseas basing debate is not simply a dollars-and-cents one, though. U.S. military strategic goals demand base units throughout the world, said Brig. Gen. Mark Schissler, USAFE's director for plans, programs and analyses.

Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz listed building partnership capacity on top of his priority list. PACAF and USAFE bases are essential to meeting that goal, Schissler said.

"For me it's all about distance," Schissler said. "We're in a place that we can get to [many of our NATO allies] in a day's travel."

Schissler counters the cost-saving argument with a missed-opportunities one. Moving units back to the U.S. would cause airmen to lose out on training and partnership building, he said.

"Those forces could go to the United States and rotate over here, but they don't have the types of relationships we enjoy by being over here," he said. "If the [C-130s at Ramstein] go to a country to build relationships [and] get training ... they'll also have a chance to expose our procedures and our habits and ... our professional NCO corps."

Besides, Schissler added, the U.S. has a responsibility to its NATO partners to maintain bases in Europe.

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, points to North Korea's sinking of a South Korean naval vessel and Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 as proof that overseas bases don't always deter U.S. enemies.

"We should assure our allies and deter our enemies with strong military capabilities and sound policy, not merely by keeping our troops stationed overseas," Hutchison said in a July 16 statement posted on her website. "Instead of breaking ground on military projects abroad and advancing DoD's new goal of building 'partnership capacity,' we should be building American infrastructure."