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|  | |  | | --- | |  |   **Bipartisan Strategy Takes Shape To Close Overseas U.S. Bases**   By RAYMOND DuBOIS and DAVID VINE  At a time when bipartisanship on Capitol Hill has essentially disappeared, an intriguing example of cross-party consensus has emerged in a relatively obscure area of foreign policy: closing overseas military bases.  Since debt debates heated up last summer and with the Pentagon soon to release the details of budget reductions, a growing group of prominent politicians across a broad political spectrum has called for reducing U.S. military installations and forces overseas to produce significant savings. The unusual coalition includes Republican Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison and Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, Republican presidential candidate Rep. Ron Paul and outgoing House Democrat Barney Frank.  While last week the Pentagon announced it will request another Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) round, a large network of bases abroad remains. According to the Pentagon, the U.S. maintains nearly 700 military base sites outside the 50 states and Washington (and this number does not include our 400 bases in Afghanistan). Many are relics of the Cold War, with some in place for nearly seven decades. Today, the U.S. has almost 200 base sites in Germany, 108 in Japan and 82 in South Korea.  The supporters of the status quo will say that countries like Japan, South Korea and some NATO allies will often cover some of our bases’ expenses. While this is true, there are the additional costs of providing housing and transportation for U.S. troops and their families overseas, of providing schools for children, of shipping cars to service members abroad, of providing base security and of paying unofficial forms of “rent” to foreign governments.  While onetime closing costs must be accounted for, we need to consider the positive economic effects on U.S. host communities: Do we want U.S. troops paying rent to German landlords and spending their money at German bars and restaurants, or do we want significant portions of their taxpayer-funded paychecks going back into local economies around Fort Bragg, N.C., and Camp Pendleton, Calif.?  Conservative Sen. Tom Coburn and the liberal Center for American Progress agree that cutting deployments in Europe and Asia by a third would save $70 billion by 2021. The Institute for Policy Studies puts the savings from overseas base closures as high as $184 billion over 10 years.  And we could achieve these savings at a time when technological advances and prepositioned equipment allow us to deploy troops almost anywhere nearly as quickly and more reliably from Fort Bragg as from Ramstein Air Base in Germany, as a Bush administration study found.  But the costs extend beyond the economic. In some cases, our bases have increased bilateral tensions, weakened alliances and increased domestic political difficulties for our allies. Perhaps most damaging, our bases sometimes engender anti-Americanism, the most prominent case being decades of protests in Okinawa and the need to close the Futenma air base.  For too long, people have assumed that more bases abroad meant more national security. We must question this assumption. There are far more effective and economical ways than covering the globe with permanent bases to maintain strong, constructive ties with other nations, to forge relationships with future foreign military (and diplomatic) leaders, and to protect our citizens. Continual global rotational training deployments and military school exchanges will be key to accomplishing that end.  Last week the Pentagon rightly acknowledged, “we cannot afford to sustain infrastructure that is excess to our needs in this budget environment.” Another BRAC for domestic bases is a much-needed step to reduce such excess capacity, but we must first look overseas. Indeed, engaging in a review focused on closing unnecessary bases abroad (as the 2012 Defense Authorization Act requires) offers an opportunity to make the nation more secure fiscally, militarily and diplomatically.  We should begin in some obvious places: Closing Futenma and re-evaluating the entire Marine presence on Okinawa; scaling back the multibillion-dollar base buildup on Guam; returning another Army brigade from Europe and closing additional Cold War-era facilities in Western Europe; halting the construction of permanent and “enduring” infrastructure projects in Afghanistan given the planned 2014 withdrawal; and rethinking the scope and size of bases in Honduras and elsewhere in Latin America.  With the details of Pentagon cuts to be released in February, and with a broad spectrum of voices calling attention to the costs of overseas bases, there exists an all-too-rare opportunity to build an unusually bipartisan cost-cutting coalition. This is an ideal moment to re-evaluate our global posture, to begin closing unnecessary and wasteful bases, and to strengthen our national security in the process.  *Raymond DuBois is a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. He served as deputy undersecretary of Defense for installations and environment from 2001 to 2005. David Vine is an assistant professor of anthropology at American University. He is working on a book about U.S. military bases overseas.* |
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