The Costs of the U.S. Military Presence Overseas

In February 2010, President Obama (D) unveiled a $3.8 trillion budget proposal for fiscal 2011. The proposal included a $744 billion allocation for the Department of Defense (DOD), which triggered criticism that the U.S. government could not afford such massive spending when the country was suffering from an ongoing recession and had incurred a record national deficit. Critics have accused the DOD of undisciplined spending, and some analysts have suggested that the military trim its budget by reducing the number of troops stationed abroad and closing some of the hundreds of bases overseas.

The DOD does not make public the costs of its overseas bases, but analysts at the Washington, D.C., think tank Foreign Policy in Focus (FPIF) have estimated that the military spends about $250 billion a year on troops, equipment and bases. David Vine, an assistant professor of anthropology at American University in Washington, D.C., and an analyst for FPIF, argues that closing at least some overseas bases would make federal funds available for badly needed programs in the U.S. Noting that just one section of Ramstein Air Base near Landstuhl, Germany, is worth approximately $3.3 billion, he writes, "Just think how local communities could use that kind of money to make investments in schools, hospitals, jobs, and infrastructure."

A military and foreign affairs blog called On Violence argues that closing bases in Europe and Japan is the easiest way to trim the military budget. According to the blog, troops deployed overseas "do not make America safer nor significantly advance our national security agenda; we should save the money and bring them home." Supporters of reducing the U.S. military presence abroad say that the U.S. government cannot afford to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on the many overseas bases that were established because of threats from the former Soviet Union, which no longer exists.

Proponents of overseas bases, however, have said that the U.S. faces continuing security threats from abroad, and its military presence overseas saves the country money in the long run by preventing conflicts with hostile powers. In 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and President George W. Bush (R, 2001–09) proposed bringing home about 70,000 military personnel by closing roughly one-third of U.S. military bases overseas. Rumsfeld predicted that closing 200 to 300 bases would save the DOD about $12 billion. But in a report on Rumsfeld's proposal, the Overseas Basing Commission warned that the U.S. still faced security threats throughout the world from "rivals who resent our international preeminence." According to the report,

> The global network of U.S. bases becomes the skeleton upon which the flesh and muscle of operational capability will be molded.... The bases we select now cannot be oriented to dealing with only current threats. They must have the capacity to deal with threats that will emerge in decades to come.

Although concerns over the cost of relocating bases along with escalating conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan prevented Rumsfeld's plans from being implemented, the debate has continued over whether the security benefits of maintaining hundreds of bases are worth the costs. Since the nation fell into a recession in December 2007, advocates of reducing the U.S. military presence abroad have called for a reexamination of its attendant expenses. Vine writes, "In these difficult economic times, the Obama administration and Congress should initiate a major reassessment of our 1,000 overseas bases. Now is the time to ask if, as a nation and a world, we can really afford the 1,000 bases that are pushing the nation deeper into debt."

Citation Information