



Notes on Overseas Military Bases as Charter City Sites

Jeffrey Mason – January 2020

Purpose: To explore the possibility of using either decommissioned or soon to be decommissioned military bases to turn into charter cities. Military bases share three important characteristics of charter cities, 1) clear and unified land ownership, 2) basic infrastructure, and 3) a separate jurisdiction. If possible, turning decommissioned U.S. military bases into charter cities could significantly accelerate the process of charter city development.

- **US Overseas base count**

- As of FY2018, there are [officially 514](#) Department of Defense (DoD) sites overseas. Non-government sources suggest there are [at least 800](#) overseas bases. However, "bases" or "sites" do not necessarily mean what might be conceived of as a "military base"— in some cases these are just buildings, sections of an airport, or other small sites, not a sprawling installment like (the soon to be renamed) Fort Bragg, that is big enough to develop a proper city on.
- Official base count:
 - Army – 202
 - Navy – 123
 - Air Force – 166
 - Marine Corps – 23

DoD-reported overseas bases in low- and middle-income countries

Country	DoD Site	Site Acreage
Costa Rica	Diego Garcia	7,000
Cuba	Guantanamo Bay	28,817
Oman	Masirah Island Mpt Site 1	3,000
Oman	NSA Bahrain - Masirah Island	3,000
Oman	Thumrait MAP	3,000
Turkey	Incirlik AB	3,336

*Sites under 3000 acres and/or sites in high-income countries are omitted.

- All of the sites listed above are on land that is leased from government of the country, not owned by the United States. Outside of a handful of sites not meeting the criteria to be on this list (Japan, South Korea), the US owns almost none of its overseas base acreage.
- There are many bases not officially reported. For example, in February 2020 a secret [Africa Command map of 29 bases](#) was leaked. However, any US base that can be kept reasonably secret is obviously not large enough for charter city development and may be attached to a host country installation. There is also the obvious complication of the US government not necessarily being forthright about the details of these bases.
- Oman really should not be included on the above list given its high-income classification, but several Gulf Arab states have shown an interest in new cities and special jurisdictions. Perhaps a tie in with displaced people from the conflict in Yemen is possible.
- Although classified as upper-middle income, both Turkey and Costa Rica are doing relatively well, in a global sense, in terms of development and so their inclusion on this list is also debatable. A Costa Rican charter city might present an alternative to the United States for migration from the Northern Triangle countries, as well as Venezuela. Turkey could potentially play a similar role with refugees from the conflict in Syria.
- **Base closure process and authority**
 - Unlike domestic bases, which must go through the [Base Realignment and Closure](#) (BRAC) process to be closed, overseas bases may be closed at the discretion of the President.
 - Approximately [800 bases](#) in Europe and Asia were closed by George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush without Congressional involvement.
 - There is no formal program or schedule of overseas bases to be closed.
 - Since many sites are parts of airports or are component sections of host country bases, US withdrawal does not necessarily mean that the site becomes available for redevelopment.
 - If anything, bases in target areas may expand. US Africa Command doesn't even operate out of a base in Africa, instead it works out of Germany and Italy. The leaked Africa Command documents mentioned above note that it is seeking an expanded presence.
- **Navigating the base closure process**
 - Given that base closures are at the discretion of the President, a charter city project would have to come into discussions at a very high level within the relevant service branch, unified combatant command (CENTCOM, USAFRICOM, etc), DoD, and so on, as well as relevant agencies/ministries/departments of the host country. Depending on the

project, relations with the host country military might also be needed if the base is a shared space.

- The [Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition](#) is the main organization outside of the US government related to base closures. Its level of impact and ability to achieve meaningful action on base closures is unclear. It is headed by a professor at American University and is associated with various people from academia, the think tank/nonprofit sector, and former military/military bureaucracy.

- **Summary**

- Given all of the above, there are serious doubts about the feasibility of using to-be-closed overseas military bases as sites for charter cities.
- There are not very many site locations that would suit charter city development. Only a handful of bases even come close to minimum acreage needed. Any redevelopment of these sites would be more of a real estate project. Something [Panama Pacifico](#)-sized is probably the best-case scenario. But most bases simply are not in countries where a charter city makes sense.
- There is no set schedule or program in place for base closures that could give an idea of what closures are coming. This means that unless some specific inside information about intentions to close a certain base can be obtained, there's nothing to build a concurrent proposal around.
- Africa Command has expressed its intent to expand its footprint in Africa, not withdraw. Indo-Pacific Command would probably like to do so as well, given China's aggressive foreign policy. Perhaps priorities would shift away from Southern Command given that aside from uncertainty in Venezuela and continual crime/drug war issues, Latin America poses diminished military and conflict risk.