I don't understand the Base Realignment and Closure Commission process as it applies to the Naval Submarine Base at Groton.

But first, here are three things about BRAC that I do understand.

The military, like any large corporation, must always be looking for ways to do its job better. Tradition may endure, but knives must give way to spears, muskets to rifles and surface ships to intercontinental missiles. Historic military bases like Forts Griswold and Trumbull on opposite sides of the Thames River were built for protection against enemies that no longer exist and for weapons no longer strategic. These facilities were closed in an earlier era of base realignment.

The state of Connecticut, like any other state, must always be looking for ways to maintain a steady cash flow from the federal treasury. Though the Navy's presence has been an important part of the local cultural identity and a source of family income for centuries, it has always been a cash cow, first for the colony, then the state. It's no surprise to me that nearly every state politician and the agency heads who work for them are standing up to be counted in the chorus of closure complaints. Earlier this summer, I heard a similar political chorus from Alaska regarding closure of Eielson Air Force Base outside Fairbanks, and from Maine regarding its Brunswick air station.

Industrial complexes in general, and military industrial complexes in particular, are often sites of some of the worst environmental contamination. Radioactive wastes, toxic chemicals, unexploded ordinance and spilled fuel contaminate many facilities.

A few that I have examined include Cape Cod's Otis Air Force Base, whose long plume of toxic groundwater is a textbook classic for groundwater hydrology; the Nevada Test Site, where an area the size of an Eastern state is contaminated by fallout from atomic bomb testing; and Rocky Mountain Arsenal, where lost nerve gas bombs have been found within the soil. Safeguarding the environment seems less important when more visible enemy threats are seen or imagined.

Federal cost-cutting, state posturing and the tragic environmental record of the military are playing out all over the country this year. In Groton, it's a three-act play, only the first two of which I understand.

Act 1: The feds put Groton on its closure list because they believe it's no longer necessary and because they hope to save money.

Act 2: State politicians rise up in opposition to keep the funds flowing in.

Act 3: The state argues that the Pentagon has underestimated the cost of environmental cleanup by $129 million. If the base is closed for military reasons, fine. But the federal government can no longer argue that it will save money on the shutdown.

It's clear that the state shouldn't be forced to pay for pollution created by a federal facility. But it's just as clear to me that the federal government didn't put Groton on its BRAC closure list to speed up the pace of environmental remediation.

This worries me because it raises the possibility of even slower cleanup in the future, regardless of whether the base remains open or not. It's hard to imagine an industrial site with a greater variety of waste, which includes heavy metals, toxic organic compounds, biomedical waste, fuel from surface
spills and leaking underground tanks, and radioactive waste -- all in one block of land. Parts of the base were designated as Superfund sites years ago, yet they remain, either killing the Thames River softly, one drop at a time, or biding their time as underground bombs waiting to be detonated by site disturbance. Redevelopment of this otherwise ideal piece of coastal real estate simply cannot proceed until this problem is solved.

So, using the Groton sub base as a case study, I have a three-step suggestion for the BRAC process.

Step 1: Use military strategy as the sole criterion for closing bases.

Step 2: Perform a thorough environmental assessment for each base on the closure list following the example set by the state of Connecticut, whose findings were more complete than the more optimistic federal assessment.

Step 3: Use the federal money saved from closing those bases with the least environmental contamination to clean up those with the most.

This is a win-win-win game. The military becomes more cost-effective, ultimately to the benefit of the states; additional tax dollars are not needed; and, most important, the environment wins.