

ISSUE BRIEF

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Hagel, Kerry, and Brennan Senate Confirmation Hearings: U.S. Strategic Forces

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In the coming weeks, the United States Senate will begin the confirmation process for three key Administration positions: Senator John Kerry (D–MA) for Secretary of State, former Senator Chuck Hagel (R–NE) for Secretary of Defense, and White House chief counterterrorism advisor John Brennan for director of the CIA. All three have been prominent backers of President Obama’s foreign and defense policy, including those elements related to U.S. nuclear disarmament and the slow dismantling of U.S. missile defense capabilities.

The Senate confirmation process allows the American public an opportunity to learn more about how these candidates propose to design the national security structure of the U.S. going forward. The American people deserve clear answers from

President Obama’s nominees and a clear-cut commitment from them that they will be advocates for a national security structure that meets the long-standing security commitments the federal government has made to the American people and America’s friends and allies around the world.

Maintaining the U.S. Nuclear Deterrent. For at least a decade following the dawn of the nuclear age, the U.S. enjoyed unquestioned nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union and all other potentially or actively hostile states. By the early 1970s, the Soviet Union had achieved a rough parity in nuclear forces with the U.S., and the U.S. accepted this parity in arms control treaties, but it also clearly stated that the U.S. would not accept nuclear inferiority with any state. Sadly, President Obama has used the arms control process, specifically through the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), to put the U.S. on the path to nuclear inferiority to Russia.

New START, at best, permits U.S.–Russian parity in long-range nuclear weapons. As a practical matter, the U.S. may not maintain parity with Russia in this area, because while Russia is modernizing its long-range nuclear force, the Obama

Administration is not permitting U.S. modernization under a policy it established in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review:

The United States will not develop new nuclear warheads. Life Extension Programs will use only nuclear components based on previously tested designs, and will not support new military missions or provide for new military capabilities.

The more immediate problem regarding Russia attaining nuclear superiority over the U.S., however, pertains to short-range nuclear forces. Russia already enjoys a huge advantage in this area, and New START does nothing to end this disparity in Russia’s favor.

The impending circumstance of U.S. nuclear inferiority may stem from an as-yet unannounced Obama Administration policy that calls for the employment and targeting of nuclear weapons based on threatening civilian and economic centers in enemy states and not holding at risk the means of strategic attack that these same enemies possess.

Senator Kerry was the chief advocate in the Senate for the approval of New START ratification.

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Similarly, Senator Hagel has become an advocate for a minimal deterrence nuclear posture for the U.S., even in advance of the Obama Administration's announcement of its nuclear employment and targeting policy.

Hagel has done so by endorsing the findings of the "Global Zero" report that calls for further reductions in the U.S. nuclear force, even on a unilateral basis. Brennan, by contrast, has said little about his views on how he would direct the intelligence community to meet its critical responsibility to verify compliance with arms control treaties.

Accordingly, Senators need to obtain pledges from Kerry and Hagel that they would be committed to preserving a nuclear weapons posture of second-to-none relative to Russia or any coalition of hostile strategic powers. They should also agree to put in place a nuclear deterrence posture that actually serves to protect and defend the American people and U.S. allies and reject a minimal deterrence posture.

Kerry, in particular, needs to provide a commitment to the Senate that he will honor the requirement in U.S. law not to pursue arms control through non-treaty agreements or arrangements that bypass the Senate's advice and consent role.

Efforts to Kill Missile Defense. The Obama Administration has defined missile defense as something that must be removed as an obstacle to its arms control goals. Paragraph nine of the preamble to New START makes this clear:

Recognizing the existence of the interrelationship between strategic offensive arms and strategic defensive arms, that this interrelationship will become more important as strategic nuclear

arms are reduced, and that current strategic defensive arms do not undermine the viability and effectiveness of the strategic offensive arms of the Parties.

Senator Kerry took the lead in the Senate during the debate over New START to preserve this language in the preamble that is obviously hostile to missile defense. This language makes it clear that the Obama Administration and the Russian government want to see U.S. missile defense capabilities come down as offensive strategic arms come down under New START and future arms control treaties. The Administration, for its part, has apparently found it tactically expedient to couch its effort to kill missile defense through arms control in terms of a missile defense cooperation agreement with Russia.

While the Administration denies that it has any secret deal with Russia to kill the U.S. missile defense program, the negotiations with Russia have not been transparent. By the definition provided in the New START preamble, such an agreement with Russia will not be about cooperation in fielding missile defense systems but about cooperating in curtailing and ultimately killing the U.S. missile defense program.

The Obama Administration's approach to pursuing the end of U.S. missile defense capabilities is best described by the curious evolution of its proposal for placing missile defense capabilities in Europe. This proposal is called the European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA).

First, it canceled existing agreements with the Czech Republic and Poland for fielding a missile defense radar and interceptors on the territories of the two countries. This was done to placate the Russians in

the pursuit of arms control. Then, it established agreements with Poland and Romania to place "Aegis Ashore" missile defense sites on the territories of these two allies.

The Administration then made it clear that the systems to be placed in Poland and Romania would not have the capability to contribute to the defense of U.S. territory against long-range missiles until the final step in a four-step EPAA development and fielding process. Then, the Administration advanced a NATO declaration on the achievement of an alliance-based initial missile defense capability.

Finally, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta told Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Lindsey Graham (R-SC) in a letter that automatic defense spending cuts stemming from the enactment of the Budget Control Act of 2011 could result in the outright cancellation of the entire EPAA project. All the while, the Obama Administration has imposed funding reductions on the missile defense program and set aside a number of promising technology options.

Pledges to Obtain. Given this history, Senators need to obtain a number of pledges from the three nominees:

- **From Senator Kerry,** they need to get two pledges. The first is to pledge that it is the purpose of the U.S. missile defense program to change the balance between the offensive and defensive strategic forces possessed by the U.S. and Russia in order to support both countries adopting strategic postures toward each other that are fundamentally defensive in nature. Regarding such a pledge, it would help to remind Senator Kerry that he agreed to the inclusion of Declaration (2) in the

resolution of ratification accompanying New START. This declaration was proposed by Senator Jim DeMint (R-SC) and establishes a policy for seeking mutually defensive strategic postures between the U.S. and Russia. The second pledge is that he will oppose any agreement with Russia that curtails the U.S. missile defense program in any way.

- **From Senator Hagel**, Senators need to obtain pledges that he will (1) seek robust funding for missile defense, (2) maintain a nuclear posture for the U.S. that is “second to none,” and (3) work to uphold the principle of holding at risk the means of strategic attack against the U.S. and its allies in terms of strategic—and particularly nuclear—employment and targeting guidance. He needs to ensure that the overall U.S. strategic posture

will provide protection to the American people and U.S. allies.

- **From John Brennan**, Senators need to confirm that it is his view that China and Russia are currently pursuing the modernization of their nuclear forces and that if arms control arrangements stay as they are, Russia could obtain nuclear superiority over the U.S. and China could obtain rough parity with the U.S. if it chooses. They also need to confirm that it is his view that recent flight tests and rocket launches by Iran and North Korea demonstrate that these two rogue states are increasing the sophistication of their ballistic missile arsenals and, therefore, the ability to threaten the U.S. and its allies.

The Obama Legacy. The forthcoming confirmation hearings are

an important opportunity for the Senate to pose key questions about the direction of American foreign policy under President Obama in his second term. After the first four years of the Obama presidency, the U.S. has grown weaker while the world has become even more dangerous. Investments into strategic capabilities such as nuclear weapons and missile defense will help to protect the country and its allies in the future.

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