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Hagel, Kerry, and Brennan Senate Confirmation Hearings: U.S. Policy on Arctic Security

Luke Coffey

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.

There is currently a very low threat of armed conflict in the Arctic, and it is in everyone’s interest to keep it that way. Nevertheless, the potential challenges in the region remain great. More actors than ever before will be operating in the region, and this will present both challenges and opportunities for the U.S. Consequently, the U.S. should organize its Arctic security capabilities appropriately. The decisions and

investments made now will greatly impact how the U.S. handles future Arctic security challenges.

In terms of foreign, intelligence, and defense policy, there are three main issues that should underpin U.S. policy in the Arctic.

1. Ensuring U.S. Sovereignty in the Arctic. The U.S. is one of only five littoral Arctic powers and one of only eight countries that have a presence in the Arctic. In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security and stability. Respecting the national sovereignty of others in the Arctic while maintaining the ability to enforce one’s own sovereignty will ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low. This concern and respect for sovereignty should be the cornerstone of U.S. Arctic policy.

The question of sovereignty is also important in terms of defining actors in the Arctic. Only national or sub-national bodies (indigenous people, for example) or purely intergovernmental organizations (such as the Arctic Council or NATO) should have a role in Arctic matters. Nevertheless, due to the possibility of shipping lanes opening, some non-Arctic countries may also have a stake, however small, in the region. (For example, the Chinese have applied

for Permanent Observer status in the Arctic Council.) However, supranational bodies such as the European Commission should be excluded from having a formal role in Arctic matters.

2. A Role for NATO. America’s security interests in the Arctic extend beyond Alaska. Since four of the five Arctic littoral countries—in addition to Iceland—are also members of NATO, the alliance cannot afford to ignore the Arctic. Although NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept was praised for acknowledging new security challenges for the alliance such as cyber and energy security, Arctic security was not included. In fact, the word *Arctic* cannot be found in either the 2010 Strategic Concept or the 2012 Chicago NATO summit declaration.

As an Arctic power, the U.S. should be promoting Arctic awareness in the alliance. The U.S. also needs to work closely with Canada, which questions the role NATO should play in the Arctic. The U.S. should explain to its close partner why NATO could have a positive role in the region. Since NATO is an intergovernmental alliance of sovereign nation-states built on the consensus of all of its members, it has a role to play in Arctic security if it so chooses.

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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3. A Role for the Department of Defense. While the Coast Guard has primary responsibility for the Arctic waters of the U.S., the U.S. Navy shows its presence there as well. Submarines routinely perform operations under the ice of the Arctic, for example.

Department of Defense (DOD) assets in Alaska play a vital role ensuring regional security for America and its allies. Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson fields a number of aviation assets, such as F-22 fighter squadrons and airlift squadrons, that allow the U.S. to enforce sovereignty in the Arctic region. In light of DOD budget uncertainty, it is unclear if the Air Force will be able to maintain these forces.

U.S. Alaska Command also operates one of America's key missile defense programs. This system can engage and destroy limited intermediate- and long-range ballistic missile threats in midcourse and is vital to the security of the U.S. The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) plays an important defensive role for the U.S. and Canada. NORAD can continue to provide detection, validation, and warning capabilities for hostile aircraft and cruise missile threats in the Arctic and northern regions.

Clarity and Guarantees on the Important Issues. The Senate should use the confirmation process as an opportunity to question each nominee on the important issues facing Arctic security policy.

The Senate should seek clear guarantees from Senator Kerry that he will:

- **Make national sovereignty the cornerstone of U.S. Arctic relations.** In the Arctic, sovereignty equals security. Respecting national sovereignty in the Arctic would ensure that the chances of armed conflict in the region remain low.
- **Lead a cross-governmental process to develop an Arctic strategy.** Since the U.S. is the only littoral Arctic country not to have an Arctic strategy, the White House should lead on the development of a cross-governmental strategy. However, a strategy is meaningless without the resources to back it up.
- **Veto the European Union's attempt to join the Arctic Council.** The question of sovereignty is also important in terms of defining actors in the Arctic. Only national or sub-national bodies or purely intergovernmental organizations should have a role in Arctic matters. Supranational bodies should be excluded from having a formal role in Arctic matters.

The Senate should seek clear guarantees from Senator Hagel that he will:

- **Maintain sufficient defense capability in the Arctic.** The threat of armed conflict is low in the Arctic. However, the U.S. Armed Forces have an important role to play in the region by supporting civilian agencies such as the U.S. Coast Guard. The DOD should continue to plan for and operate in the Arctic region.
- **Ensure that NATO develops a role in Arctic security.** NATO cannot afford to ignore the Arctic. As an Arctic power, the U.S. should be promoting Arctic awareness in the alliance.

Obama Cannot Ignore the Arctic. America's security interests in the Arctic region will only increase in the years to come. The forthcoming confirmation hearings are an important opportunity for the Senate to pose key questions about the direction of American Arctic security policy under President Obama in his second term. As other nations devote resources and assets in the region to secure their national interests, America cannot afford to fall behind.

—*Luke Coffey is the Margaret Thatcher Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*