



# Helping the Arctic Council Find Its True North

Priorities for Secretary Kerry as He Prepares to Take on the Chairmanship of the Arctic Council

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# Introduction and summary

For millennia, the Arctic has lain beneath a blanket of ice and snow—an ocean locked out of all interaction with the rest of the world, save subsea currents and icebreaking marine mammals. Yet in recent decades, rapid declines in ice coverage due to global climate change have begun to unlock what may be the world’s last undisturbed vault of natural resources, potentially opening trade routes dreamt of by explorers since the late 15th century. The opening of the Arctic has already begun to stimulate economic development, and the changes at the top of the world present massive global challenges.

In the Arctic, which is warming two times faster than any other region on Earth, the effects of climate change are staggering.<sup>1</sup> Arctic sea-ice volume has shrunk by 75 percent since the 1980s, and we are very likely to see ice-free summers by mid-century.<sup>2</sup> These and other rapid changes directly affect the livelihoods, infrastructure, and health of the 4 million people who live in the region and have economic, environmental, geostrategic, and national security implications for the United States and the world.<sup>3</sup>

Despite growing interest in capitalizing on the region’s rich and increasingly accessible resources, the profound changes in the Arctic pose grave risks and high costs to America and the planet. For example, melting sea ice in the Greenland Arctic is speeding up global sea-level rise; increasing flood risks; and endangering infrastructure and communities in coastal cities such as Miami, New York, and many others.<sup>4</sup>

Just five nations border the Arctic Ocean—Canada, Norway, Russia, the United States, and Denmark, via its dominion over Greenland. In 1996, they established the Arctic Council, an international body designed to address emerging challenges in the region.<sup>5</sup> The chairmanship of the Arctic Council rotates among them, and in 2015, the United States will take its turn at the top when Secretary of State John Kerry assumes the role. By any metric, climate change is the key driver of growing commercial interests and serious environmental and economic risks in the region and around the globe. For this reason, Secretary Kerry should establish

climate change as the overarching theme of his Arctic Council chairmanship. As chairman, he should also seek to conserve invaluable Arctic marine and coastal ecosystems, ensure global security by minimizing potential conflicts in the region, and promote sustainable Arctic development that will allow Arctic communities to become more resilient and prosperous.

The federal government should also seize this opportunity to raise the domestic profile of Arctic issues and strengthen our presence in this emerging and vital region. This should include expansion of America's capabilities to manage Arctic oil spills and other disasters, including through our icebreaker fleet, navigation and communication satellites, ports, and other infrastructure needed to support emergency preparedness and response.<sup>6</sup>

The United States is taking steps to respond to the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing Arctic, but more action is needed. President Barack Obama's National Strategy for the Arctic Region, the White House's Arctic Strategy Implementation Plan, the Department of Defense 2013 Arctic Strategy, and the U.S. Navy Arctic Roadmap for 2014 to 2030 identify a suite of actions through which to advance national and international security, pursue responsible environmental stewardship, and strengthen international cooperation in the region.<sup>7</sup> Consistent with these priorities, as well as with the president's Climate Action Plan, Secretary Kerry should seize the opportunity to set an ambitious agenda to combat climate change. To implement it, he should work closely with Canada—the current Arctic Council chair—to secure black carbon emission reduction commitments at the 2015 Arctic Council ministerial-level meeting. Lastly, President Obama should convene a presidential Arctic summit for Arctic Council members and observers in 2016 to make rapid progress on the priority initiatives described below.

In this report, we recommend these actions and more. We propose policy initiatives that can be implemented domestically, as well as specific guidance to lead the Arctic Council to new and improved international policy standards. First, we provide a brief background on the rationale for urgent action in the Arctic region. We then provide specific guidance for both Arctic Council and U.S. domestic initiatives in the following three categories:

1. **Establish climate change as the overarching theme of Secretary Kerry's chairmanship term.** Reduce Arctic warming by centering the 2015–2017 Arctic Council agenda on the effects of global climate change and the efforts to combat it.

**2. Reduce climate change and build resilience in the Arctic region.** The following attainable goals focus on reducing Arctic warming and strengthening community resilience in the region. Meeting these goals should be a top priority for Secretary Kerry during his chairmanship.

- Reduce black carbon emissions in and beyond the Arctic region.
- Reduce methane emissions in and beyond the Arctic region.
- Expand Arctic communities' access to energy efficiency and renewable energy.
- Strengthen Arctic communities' resilience.
- Expand Arctic climate change research and information sharing.
- Ensure safe and clean Arctic transportation.
- Expand the commercial fishing moratorium to all Arctic Council nations and collaborate on fisheries research.
- Establish protected areas in the Arctic and conserve the region's unique and climate-sensitive wildlife.

**3. Take domestic actions to support Arctic leadership.** The following unilateral steps will both help the United States drive an ambitious Arctic Council agenda centered on climate change and prepare the United States to better manage Arctic challenges going forward.

- Freeze U.S. oil and gas drilling in the Arctic Ocean.
- Connect the U.S. public to the Arctic people and the value of a healthy climate and marine and coastal environments in the region.
- Ensure a peaceful, safe, and stable Arctic.
- Ratify the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea.

These recommended priorities were developed through collaboration between members of multiple policy teams at the Center for American Progress, including leaders on the Energy, Public Lands, Ocean, and National Security and International Policy teams.

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