Next stop the Pentagon?

Reports out today indicate that within the next few days, President Obama will appoint former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel to succeed Leon Panetta as Defense Secretary. Even though Hagel himself is a Republican, the GOP has already promised a fight, ostensibly on the entirely specious grounds that Hagel is anti-Israel.

Hagel…hmmm…where have environmentalists heard that name before? Oh yes: the Byrd-Hagel Resolution of 1997, which undercut the Kyoto Protocol negotiations by stating that the Senate would not ratify any climate treaty that capped US emissions but did not do the same for developing countries.

So should a Defense Secretary Hagel worry environmentalists? I don't think so, although his appointment should hardly cause them to jump for joy. Three primary reasons stand out:

1) Most importantly, climate diplomacy is not the province of the Pentagon. It belongs at State, USTR, Commerce, EPA, and other agencies. While it would be nice and helpful for the Defense Secretary to become an active voice on climate, which after all will be a major national security issue, for day-to-day or even long range planning, the Pentagon does not figure to take the lead.

2) Hagel currently serves as chair of the Atlantic Council, a sort of poor man's Council of Foreign Relations that focuses on US-European relations. If Hagel were a climate denier or even a skeptic, it would probably be reflected in the Council's agenda, but it is not. A quick glance at the Council's Energy and Environment Program reveals that it is mostly concerned with energy security, but it recognizes the climate issue and understands that it is a long-term security need. It hardly prioritizes climate; it is telling that an organization dedicated to US-European relations has nothing on the Program's website concerning the transatlantic dispute concerning mandatory airline emissions credits. The Council seems very interested in carbon capture and storage. In short, the Council seems to take the standard traditional Atlanticist line concerning what is a security issue and what is not. If Hagel's views are reflected in its positions, it seems fair to say that he will neither advance nor hinder the Obama Administration's climate policy.

3) Hagel sponsored the resolution in 1997, when he was a freshman Senator from

coal-dependent Nebraska. It was a pretty minimalist resolution, simply expressing a sense of the Senate on on Kyoto, not on climate policy in general. It passed 95-0; among those voting in favor it were John Kerry, Barbara Boxer, and Joe Lieberman, the Senate's three leading advocates of vigorous action on climate (and one of whom as Secretary of State, will be in the lead on it in the upcoming administration). Suffice it to say that it says little if anything about his position now.

Environmentalists should not be overjoyed at Hagel at DOD. The Pentagon's latest Quadrennial Defense Review declared climate change to be an important security issue that "will" cause resource scarcity and increased rates of disease. As mentioned above, it would be good if the Secretary really promoted it, and Hagel does not figure to do so. If the Obama Administration is going to make a big push on climate during the next four years, this appointment does not show it.

But this hardly means that he will stand in the way or undermine any administration initiatives. It just means that it does not figure to be on his radar screen. That's a pity, but the next Defense Secretary will have enough to worry about and there are plenty of other agencies who should and will focus on it. At the end of the day, administration policy will emanate from where it should: the White House. Everyone else will fall into line.