SECNAV Nominee Commits to Advancing Navy's Arctic Presence

Kenneth J. Braithwaite, U.S. ambassador to Norway and the nominee to become the next Navy secretary, in 2018. During his Senate Armed Services Committee confirmation hearing on May 7, Braithwaite spoke of the importance of the U.S. foothold in the Arctic to counter "Great Power Competitors" China and Russia. U.S Navy/Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Theron J. Godbold

WASHINGTON – The nominee to become the next Navy secretary spoke at his confirmation hearing on May 7 of the Arctic's importance to national defense and international commerce and of rising Chinese efforts to influence the region. He also committed his advocacy to increasing U.S. Navy presence in the region to counter both "Great Power Competitors" China and Russia.

"The Chinese and the Russians are everywhere, especially the Chinese," Kenneth J. Braithwaite, the current U.S. ambassador to Norway and nominee to become the 77th Navy secretary, said during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

See: Braithwaite Cites Theodore Roosevelt Crisis in Call for Reform of Navy Culture

"You would be alarmed at the amount of Chinese activity off the coast of Norway in the high north. We need to be vigilant to that to understand why."

As a former Navy P-3 patrol plane commander who operated from the Aleutian Islands and as ambassador to Norway, NATO's

gatekeeper to the North Atlantic, Braithwaite is no novice to the region and its growing importance.

“Russia’s hope is to be relevant again on the world stage, where we all come to understand that China wants to be dominant on that same world stage,” Braithwaite said. “They have really pressed hard on Norway to be part of that calculus.”

He pointed out that the cost of commerce from China to European markets would be cut by half if goods were transported by the Northern Sea Route across the top of Russia to Kirkenes, the northernmost Norwegian port.

“China has launched a charm campaign to try to win Norway over,” Braithwaite said. “After in 2010 trying to force them to withdraw the Nobel Peace Prize to a Chinese dissident, Liu Xiaobo, the Norwegians stood up to the Chinese and [the Norwegians] suffered for that economically. But China now recognizes the importance of Kirkenes [and] securing a terminus on the Northern Sea Route, and they are up there trying to win over the people of northern Norway.”

Braithwaite said the U.S. Navy is at the vanguard countering Chinese hegemony in the Arctic, saying the Navy “provides some of the only capabilities to be able to do power projection in that part of the world.”

He noted the current presence of three Navy destroyers operating the Barents Sea along with ships of the U.K. Royal Navy and the Royal Norwegian Navy.

Braithwaite also told Sen. Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) that he would be a strong advocate for a strategic Arctic port large enough to handle destroyers and icebreakers. The nearest such port is Anchorage, Alaska, which is 1,500 miles from the

Arctic Circle, Sullivan added.

“The great news is the United States Navy has been up there for many, many years,” Braithwaite said. “You may not see them, but they’re up there. As it begins to become more navigable on the surface, we also need to make sure that our presence is noted.”

“We continue to need to be vigilant,” he added. “We continue to need to be present. That requires an adequate-size Navy to be there.”

“It will be a priority of mine.”