

NOMINATION

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2023

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:31 a.m., in Room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Robert Menendez presiding.

Present: Senators Menendez [presiding], Cardin, Shaheen, Coons, Kaine, Schatz, Van Hollen, Duckworth, Risch, Hagerty, and Ricketts.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ, U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY

The CHAIRMAN. This hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will come to order.

Today, we are considering one of the most critical positions of the Department of State.

Ambassador Verma, welcome. Thank you. You have served with great distinction. We appreciate your willingness to return to public service.

I understand that Senator Cardin wants the privilege of introducing you to the committee and so we will recognize him for that purpose.

STATEMENT OF HON. BENJAMIN L. CARDIN, U.S. SENATOR FROM MARYLAND

Senator CARDIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to introduce Ambassador Verma to our committee. I welcome you and thank you for your willingness to continue in public service.

You have a very distinguished career in serving, and I also want to thank your family because we recognize you cannot do this without an understanding family. It is really a family commitment. So thank you for your willingness to serve our country.

Ambassador Verma spent 30 years working in law, foreign policy, and national security. He is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force. He worked here in the Senate for many years as Senator Harry Reid's national security adviser.

He is a former Assistant Secretary of State, a distinguished U.S. Ambassador to India, and now he is general counsel of one of America's most well known and reputable companies, MasterCard.

I cannot think of a more qualified nominee to take over the Deputy Secretary position for Management and Resources.

And by the way, Mr. Chairman, he is also a Marylander.

[Laughter.]

Senator CARDIN. Ambassador Verma's father, Professor Verma, who joins us today, provides us a classic American immigrant success story. He arrived in the United States in 1963 with \$14 and a bus ticket and nothing else. No family, no support system.

Yet, he went on to become a professor at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown where he taught for 43 years as a scholar in English and South Asian literature.

Another connection—I am also a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh. So good choices.

Both of Ambassador Verma's parents became educators. His mom worked many years as a special needs teacher. They would raise five children, Rich being the youngest. Ambassador Verma launched his career with the help of the U.S. Air Force, securing a full Air Force ROTC scholarship to Lehigh University.

At this early age he knew he wanted to serve his country and that has not changed. We are so grateful for his service back then and here again today.

Ambassador Verma's spouse Pinky's family also overcame so much to be here today, her grandparents surviving the great atrocities in the last century committed against the Armenian people. They settled in New York in the early 1920s.

Like Ambassador Verma, Pinky's father was also a veteran and he also worked right here as chief counsel for the Senate Judiciary Committee. Another impressive family member of service.

So both Ambassador Verma and his wife have raised three wonderful children. The State Department is a great institution but it has a lot of needs. It needs bold, forward-thinking leaders who have a wide range of experiences to help us modernize and have even a greater impact globally.

This committee moved forward and the Congress did as well with several pieces of legislation that Senator Hagerty and I sponsored in the previous Congress that came out of our subcommittee on the State Department.

I look forward to working with Ambassador Verma in his new position to implement those provisions in law. Ambassador Verma is the kind of leader the department and the country needs at this time.

In addition to all the things I have already mentioned, he serves on several important boards, including the President's Intelligence Advisory Board, the Ford Foundation, Lehigh University, the National Endowment for Democracy, and a Maryland company, T. Rowe Price.

Ambassador Verma is the right person at the right time to take on this position and I am proud to introduce him to our committee.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Cardin, for that glowing introduction. He normally gives Marylanders a pretty significant introduction but this is beyond the pale, I just want you to know.

[Laughter.]

The CHAIRMAN. The Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources is key to a functioning department and effective U.S. diplomacy worldwide, and there are no shortage of challenges.

In recent years, State personnel have encountered a series of mounting and complex challenges, from rebuilding morale after years of decimation over the last four years to navigating COVID at home and abroad, to responding to urgent crises around the world.

And yet, day in and day out our diplomatic corps works tirelessly, often around the clock, to protect Americans overseas, to advance U.S. interests, and meet the challenges of the 21st century.

We owe them the support, the resources, and the leadership they need to succeed because when our diplomacy succeeds the United States succeeds. That is why for the last two years this committee has worked diligently to reestablish the once common practice of enacting State Department authorization bills.

I am proud that this has been a robust bipartisan effort, and I appreciate the partnership and contributions of the ranking member. It speaks volumes about the value that this committee places on the department, its personnel, and the importance of U.S. diplomacy. I hope that message is heard loud and clear.

I look forward to working with Senator Risch and members of this committee to keep up that progress by passing State authorizations again this year and regularly, going forward.

Ambassador Verma, if confirmed, I look forward for you to partner with us in that effort because we need to make good on the promise of modernizing our premier American foreign policy institution.

That means recruiting from across America, from the cities and coasts of New Jersey to the foothills in Idaho. It means cultivating and retaining a diverse and expert workforce to harness our nation's technological advances and keep pace with other countries.

It means making a career where you move your family from country to country; it means work for spouses, partners, and children.

It means making sure our overseas footprint reflects the reality of the global challenges facing us today and in the years to come, not 50 years ago, and it means focusing on how we promote and retain personnel so we do not lose talented individuals after years of investment.

Ambassador Verma is a former Ambassador, Assistant Secretary of State, Senate staffer. You, certainly, have the experience to be successful in this position. I know that you are up to the task. We need you to be.

More than a year ago Secretary Blinken laid out his vision for what needs to happen to make sure that the State Department is equipped and agile enough to address the global challenges facing us, and while there has been progress I have yet to see the bold action that is needed—the hard decisions, the reorienting of resources to make sure that we are competing with China, the efforts needed to push back on malign actors in backyards around the world, the strategic focus on diplomacy to strengthen relationships where we need them most for the next 10, 20, and 50 years.

I look forward to hearing your plans for how we meet this moment, how to make good on the promise of truly modernizing the department, and support our personnel from D.C. to South Carolina to Abuja to Beijing.

Given the challenges we are facing from climate change to China to the war in Ukraine to food insecurity and global migration, we need to get this right. The future of our foreign policy and national security depends on it.

With that, let me turn to my friend, the ranking member, for his remarks.

Senator Risch?

**STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO**

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Verma, we see a lot of people here with impressive resumes but this one, as the Chairman has said, is stunning, really. How they pulled you out of the private sector to do this is beyond me. But thank you for doing that.

The Chairman and I share an abiding conviction in our oversight role to see that the State Department does what it is supposed to do and does it in a way that moves us forward as a country, and that we do not step on our toes as we are trying to move forward.

And this position is absolutely critical, as the Chairman indicated, in that regard, and as Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources you have an important task ensuring the department is organized and resourced to address the multitude of foreign policy issues facing the United States.

Strategic competition remains the overriding challenge demonstrated by China flying spy balloons over the middle of America and Russia continuing to pursue its unlawful war of aggression in Ukraine.

In order to properly respond, the American people need a State Department firing on all cylinders and effectively and efficiently using its budget. For years the department's cautious security approach made it difficult for American diplomats to get outside Embassies and Consulates to meet with locals.

Thankfully, my Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act and the Diplomatic Support and Security Act were signed into law last year.

If confirmed, you will be responsible for implementing these efforts to move the department away from past policies of absolute total risk avoidance and instead get our diplomats back to advancing American interests abroad.

I expect the department to use these authorities in this law and I know you will help pursue that. This is particularly important in Ukraine where we need to rapidly increase staffing at the Embassy and allow our diplomats to get outside the capital city to conduct oversight on the billions of dollars in assistance rightfully flowing to Ukraine.

More personnel are also needed to conduct oversight over the economic, military, and humanitarian assistance that are critical to helping the Ukraine people defend themselves and retake territory from the Putin regime.

The White House also needs to stop micromanaging Ambassador Brink's authority as Chief of Mission to get the job done. In June, I visited the Embassy in Kyiv and I was really impressed with the facility there. Unfortunately, there were only a half a dozen people

that were there, for obvious reasons. The war was heated up at that time.

Ambassador Brink had just been appointed at that time. She was here when I was over there. We met before I left and I was impressed with the things she wanted to do there and I know you will continue that forward.

Along these lines, reopening an Embassy in the Solomon Islands is an important step in elevating historic ties and building stronger partnerships with Pacific allies. China's corrupting political influence and its increased presence in critical maritime areas and its construction of certain undersea cables pose severe challenges to us and our partners.

I strongly support a rapid and fully resourced approach to standing up new diplomatic posts in the Pacific Islands, the Maldives, and other critical locations. Opening these diplomatic facilities is vital. We are moving too slow and not thinking creatively to get that done.

If confirmed, you will be charged with coordinating the implementation of this legislation. The department must be organized and resourced to lead health diplomacy including the execution of a coherent pandemic security strategy overseas.

On the personnel front, I continue to be deeply concerned by the appalling treatment endured by U.S. diplomats in China in the name of complying with Chinese COVID protocols.

No U.S. diplomats should have ever been detained in fever camps separated from their children, subjected to invasive medical testing and monitoring procedures, or silenced when they tried to raise concerns.

But what is worse is that the department legally permitted this treatment by partially waiving diplomatic immunity not once but twice, most recently in April of 2022.

We are determined to ensure accountability for U.S. personnel responsible for enabling this unacceptable treatment. I want to work together to accomplish this.

One thing the Administration could do immediately would be to commit to not nominate or renominate anyone significantly involved in developing or enabling those policies.

This committee must also do our part to make sure we do not reward poor judgment, incompetence, and undue deference to foreign government demands with promotions and prestigious appointments.

Thank you for your willingness to serve. With that, I yield back. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Risch.

Ambassador Verma, we will turn the floor to you. Your full statement will be included in the record without objection.

Please—if you wish, please introduce your family members. We understand this as a family affair. Everybody sacrifices along the way so we appreciate their willingness to have you serve as well.

And with that, the floor is yours.

**STATEMENT OF THE HON. RICHARD R. VERMA, OF MARYLAND,
NOMINATED TO BE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF STATE FOR
MANAGEMENT AND RESOURCES**

Ambassador. VERMA. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch, thank you very much to members of the committee.

Senator Cardin, thank you for a really gracious introduction, and I am honored to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources.

I want to express my appreciation to President Biden and Secretary Blinken for their trust in nominating me for this position and the opportunity to serve our country again.

This is my third time appearing before this committee and this has been made possible through the support, patience, and understanding of my loving family, who are with me today.

My wife, Pinky, my children, Zoey, Lucy, and Dylan, my dad, my sisters, my sister-in-law, my brothers-in-law, and all of my family who are here today and who have always been by my side.

The CHAIRMAN. You could run for office in Maryland.

[Laughter.]

Ambassador. VERMA. I know I sit here today because of the sacrifice of those who came before me. As Senator Cardin mentioned, Pinky's grandparents escaped the carnage of the Armenian genocide and her father served this country in World War II.

My parents fought for Indian independence, helped build a post-colonial India, and bravely set out for the United States 60 years ago seeking a better life for their children and arriving here with virtually nothing.

Their story is the story of the American dream and my appearance before you today is a testament to the profound promise and power of that dream.

I am here because of their hard work and courage in addition to those of my teachers, coaches, neighbors, friends, mentors like Congressman Murtha, Senator Reid, Secretary Clinton, who stood by me. To all of them I say thank you.

Across a career spanning three decades I have been privileged to serve here in this esteemed institution as well as in the State Department, the military, and the private sector and, if confirmed, I will seek to bring this constellation of experiences to this role.

I have a strong appreciation for this committee's important work from my time as a Senate staffer and as Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs. In fact, when I served in the Leader's office working for Senator Reid, the staff director of this committee was one Tony Blinken.

If confirmed, I look forward to working closely and collaboratively again to advance shared bipartisan priorities. I know the Secretary is fiercely committed to this as well.

I was honored to have served as the U.S. Ambassador to India from 2014 to 2017 where we advanced critical priorities in the bilateral relationship.

In India, I was able to work closely with extraordinary career professionals from across the State Department and every agency of the U.S. Government to create a lasting impact.

If confirmed in this role I commit to serve the department's workforce here in Washington and around the world. Our people are our greatest asset.

We must train and invest in their professional development and support and retain this talent over time, dismantling any structural barriers that keep too many people from joining or advancing in the department's ranks.

I will support our entire workforce from our locally employed staff, our contractors, our eligible family members, civil and foreign services and to our interns.

Secretary Blinken has also made clear that advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility is everyone's responsibility and I look forward to championing this effort.

I will be steadfast in the management and oversight of taxpayer dollars. I will advance a strategic vision that aligns our resources with our national security priorities and that will be delivered operationally through our workforce, through updated information technology and modern facilities as well as through impactful foreign assistance programs at the department and USAID.

And I will prioritize and advance Secretary Blinken's agenda to modernize American diplomacy. I am encouraged by the efforts already underway to enhance the department's capacity and expertise to address critical missions, to modernize training and professional development, to institutionalize an agile and hybrid workforce, to attract and retain talent, to modernize technology and the use of data and to shift toward decisive leadership, innovation, and agility.

Today's world suffers from no shortage of challenges, from the war in Ukraine to renewed great power competition to evolving transnational threats. One could easily become discouraged.

But there is reason for hope and I am truly optimistic about America's ability to lead on the global stage and to meet this critical moment in time. The America that welcomed my family here six decades ago did so on the promise of opportunity, of freedom and democracy, values we see threatened around the world today.

The U.S. State Department is more important than ever to advance these values and, if confirmed, it will be an honor to return to the department and support Secretary Blinken in his mission to equip and empower the department and its workforce to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Verma follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD R. VERMA

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources.

I want to also express my gratitude to President Biden and Secretary Blinken for their trust in nominating me for this position and for the opportunity to serve our country again.

This is my third time appearing before this committee. This has been made possible through the support, patience and understanding of my loving family, who are with me today. My wife Pinky, and my children, Zoe, Lucy, and Dylan. And to my dad, sisters, and all my family who are here today as well, you have always been by my side.

I know I sit here today because of the sacrifice of those who have come before me. Pinky's grandparents escaped the carnage of the Armenian genocide, and her father served in World War II. My parents fought for Indian independence, helped build a post-Colonial India, and bravely set out for the United States 60 years ago, seeking a better life for their children, arriving here with virtually nothing. Their story is the story of the American dream—and my appearance before you today is a testament to the profound promise and power of that dream.

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Across a career spanning three decades, I have been privileged to serve in this esteemed institution, as well as in the Department of State, the military, and the private sector. If confirmed, I will seek to bring this constellation of experiences to this role.

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Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Ambassador, for your statement.

Let me first start off with a series of questions that we ask of all of the nominees on behalf of the committee as a whole. They go to the responsiveness of nominees to the committee and to Congress.

First, I would like to ask you just simply provide a yes or no answer. Do you agree to appear before this committee and make officials from your office available to the committee and designated staff when invited?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. Do you commit to keeping the committee fully and currently informed about the activities under your purview?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. Do you commit to engaging in meaningful consultation while policies are being developed, not just providing notification after the fact?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. And do you commit to promptly responding to requests for briefings and information requested by the committee and its designated staff?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. The nominee having answered yes to all those questions on behalf of the committee so we will start a series of five-minute rounds.

What do you see, and understanding you are not there now but you have been there and have also been able to see the department from the various vantage points of your career, as the most pressing and difficult questions facing the department and how would you go about trying to tackle them?

Ambassador. VERMA. Senator, thank you. I have thought a lot about this question and, obviously, having the experience of three years in India and seeing the department at work I am just extraordinarily proud of the department.

But as this committee has pointed out, the world is changing rapidly—the challenges that are emerging from technology to renewed great power competition to climate change to transnational threats—and I think at the core of it we have to have a department that is ready to meet the challenges of today and not yesterday.

And so that is what the Secretary's modernization agenda is about. That is what is working with all of you to make sure we have the budget and resources we have to meet that need, make sure we get our risk tolerance right so we are actually out engaging with people around the world.

But, fundamentally, to answer your question, it is making sure we have the tools, the resources, and the training to meet the quintessential and current strategic challenges—the war in Ukraine, the competition with China. I could go on. But that is how I see this job, and that is how I see the challenge.

The CHAIRMAN. In that regard the Secretary has created what he calls China House. We all, I think, on a bipartisan basis, agree that China is the biggest geostrategic challenge for the United States now and in the future.

How do we equip and resource to compete with China? We just put out a report—the majority report—that shows our challenges in the Indo-Pacific as part of that—meeting that challenge.

How do you plan to approach reorienting State Department personnel and resources to better set U.S. diplomacy up for strategic competition with China and as well—this is a multi-dimensional challenge—to address inroads China has made, for example, in Africa and Latin America?

Ambassador. VERMA. Right. Senator, again, having spent three years in the region kind of watch the competition play out in front of me and there is no more important challenge facing the country, and the President and Secretary have laid out, I think, a very com-

prehensive strategy—invest here at home, align with our partners, and compete and compete vigorously and responsibly to prevail.

So what does that mean from the department’s perspective? That means, again, being present. Opening embassies in the Pacific Islands, for example, is a great step and this committee has been a leader in pushing the department in that regard.

But it is not just in the Asia Pacific. It is also in Africa. It is in Latin America. It is showing up. It is having the resources, again. It is also competing against ideas that are challenging the post-war rules-based order and I think we have to be out there getting our message out, U.S. values out, and I do think the department is well positioned.

When I look at our tradecraft it is still the best in the world. We just have a competitor that is now trying to compete with us not just in Asia Pacific but around the world, and I really believe if we invest in our people adequately and as the committee has done, we will compete again responsibly and we will win this competition. It is essential for the—for this century’s peace and stability.

The CHAIRMAN. Towards that goal, as I mentioned earlier, for two years in a row the committee has successfully passed the State Department authorization bill. Last year’s bill advances recruitment/retention efforts, updates Embassy security processes, codifies the new Cyber Bureau, among other provisions.

Will you commit to the committee to ensuring that the department is fully implementing these laws?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. Do you commit to ensuring that the department will be ready to fully implement the amendments to the CASE Act as soon as they take effect in September of this year?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. As you know, I have been a longstanding champion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in international affairs, calling for a government wide DEI strategic plan in legislation in 2020, holding the committee’s first ever DEI hearing last year, ensuring our State authorization bills advance the department’s efforts. If you could just give me a yes or no to these questions.

If confirmed, do you commit to ensuring DEI and equity efforts are a properly staffed resource, that there is transparency and accountability around implementing those plans?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. Do you commit to continuing diverse recruitment pipelines Congress has supported including paid internships, the Charles Rangel-Thomas Pickering Fellowship programs, the Colin Powell Leadership Foreign Affairs IT (Information Technology), and William D. Clarke Diplomatic Security fellowships?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes.

The CHAIRMAN. And do you commit to advancing partnerships nationwide with the Hispanic Association of Colleges and University, historically Black colleges, and other institutions that draw diverse talent and innovative approaches to the department from different groups and geographic regions?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIRMAN. Okay. Let me turn to Senator Risch for his questions.

Senator RISCH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I wonder, understanding you are new to this, are you familiar with the situation we had regarding the waivers of diplomatic immunity during the COVID situation?

Ambassador. VERMA. I have been briefed on it, Senator, and I know your concern about what took place. But I was not personally involved on this.

Senator RISCH. No, I get that. I understand that. Do you have some thoughts you could share with us on this? This was stunning. When we get—

Mr. VERMA. Sure.

Senator RISCH. I mean, our diplomats have certain immunities that they absolutely have to have and when they get waived it makes you sit up and take notice.

Ambassador. VERMA. Sure.

Senator RISCH. Have you got thoughts on this?

Ambassador. VERMA. Sure. I mean, let me also just credit Ambassador Burns for the fact that upon his first day in country he made it clear to the PRC that U.S. diplomatic personnel would not be appearing in their fever hospitals or in any of their quarantine situations, and I appreciate what the department did to actually set up medevac for the personnel.

As I go back, and I know you are interested in how it happened, but to suggest COVID was unprecedented it was truly unprecedented—

Senator RISCH. Fair point.

Mr. VERMA [continuing]. And China was not the only place, Senator, where we had to comply with local laws in order for our personnel to be there, and as I understand it, the difficult decision that is made is do you show up for the job in a difficult location or do you not, and I think this is what was presented to us, not only in China but in dozens of jurisdictions around the world.

And I know that is not probably an adequate answer but those are the real-time, tough decisions; and I think the calculation, and I am happy to go back and look at this, was that it was better to be present than not be present.

Senator RISCH. That is a realistic answer and, certainly, it requires a balancing answering the question you just proposed, and that is do you comply or do you leave? That is really what it comes down to.

I think in the case of what happened in China the things they were asking were just—I guess I would have come down the other way on it if I had to make that decision because to put one of our diplomats through what some of them went through under those circumstances was more than I would want to expect from our diplomats.

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes, Senator, I agree. The hardship that was experienced by a number of personnel and their families was intolerable, and we want to see that that sort of thing does not happen again.

Senator RISCH. Speaking of the pandemic, my Global Health Pandemic Prevention, Preparedness, and Response Act, which was passed with the help and the collaboration of the chairman, is something that we have in—we put in place to try to answer when

this happens again, and I do not think you can find anybody that would think that this is not going to happen again.

We are going to face this kind of a challenge again. Maybe not as bad, maybe worse. We do not know. But in any event, we were very much unprepared for this. You can argue fault if you want. But, again, it was unprecedented and it is understandable that people responded in a way they did in some instances.

What we tried to do is put together a response that that states U.S. policy in this regard and thus the bill, and that, of course, includes the department—a new global health bureau to advance these issues. Have you had a chance to review that yet, and what are your thoughts on that if you have?

Ambassador. VERMA. I have not had a chance to look at the legislation specifically. But I know that the global health is one of the top issues for the department; and the new bureau will be essential, working with you and your staff on these sets of issues because I concur with you, Senator.

We are going to face these kinds of transnational threats again in the future, and we have to be ready; and so, the new bureau, along with the authorities that have come from this committee are going to be critically important.

Senator RISCH. I appreciate that, and I think once—the pandemic is kind of behind us now and we are focused on other things, which we have to be, of course.

But in the meantime, I think we really need to keep this on our minds because it comes out of nowhere. I mean, it is like other tragedies that happens in life. They just show up and, hopefully, this legislation that we have passed is going to put us in a better position next time, as we go forward.

We know how small the globe has become and these things happen quickly in another place and all of a sudden they are right here on our shore and what we have done, what you have done, the department has done, certainly, will make a difference in the future for better or for worse and, hopefully, this legislation will get us to where we want to be.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Schatz?

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for being here. Thank you to your family. I want to ask you about climate.

U.S. diplomatic posts and activities are not immune from severe weather risks, flooding, interfering with the safety and accessibility of our facilities—severe storms, droughts, wildfires—and increasing demand for U.S. disaster relief resources.

How are you thinking about more frequent and more severe weather events in the context of foreign policy?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes, Senator. It is an incredibly important issue. We see the impacts of climate change across the world. We see climate migration taking place. You see instability, civil unrest, can bring down governments in unstable parts of the world.

And so this is one of the President's top priorities and it is one of the department's top priorities, and it is so, obviously, recognizing the threat but also then how is the department going to re-

spond to it and will we actually have members of the team trained up to be able to go out and work on climate-related issues.

And, again, I appreciate your leadership on this issue. I think we are moving aggressively in that direction.

Senator SCHATZ. Yeah. I just think it is important to break up the lines of effort as it relates to climate.

Obviously, we are trying to encourage other countries to take climate action. But it seems to me where the rubber hits the road in terms of our Embassies and our presence abroad is actually helping our friends and allies to adjust to severe weather, to prepare for it, to respond to it, and to recover from it.

And so I am just—I want to encourage you to flesh out what they are doing at the Embassy level and the consular level, and also to make sure that—everyone says whole-of-government but there are datasets from NOAA and the National Weather Service and others, even the Department of Defense, that can inform our foreign policy thinking in a particular country and I want to make sure that it is not just that we list as one of our bullets we hope you comply with your nationally declared climate goals. That is great. That is important.

But also I think to the extent that we are projecting power abroad we want people to know we are here to help you with this new problem.

Ambassador. VERMA. Right. Senator, I should mention that for the first time ever we have a designated discipline—a climate officer. The first cohort of climate officers are going through the Foreign Service Institute right now.

Second, the Foreign Service Institute has incorporated the entire set of climate issues into its training. That includes management officers who have to run the large facilities that we have around the world and understand our carbon footprint, what we can do better, how we work with host governments, but also our political officers and our economic officers who are in country doing negotiations, interacting with their colleagues on this set of issues.

Senator SCHATZ. Thank you.

In April of last year, Secretary Blinken established the Bureau of Cyberspace and Digital Policy, which includes a unit on digital freedom. How are you going to ensure that CDP thrives, given the importance of cyberspace and digital policy and human rights issues?

Again, it is the same question I asked on climate. I understand we are going to prioritize digital freedom. How are we going to do that?

Ambassador. VERMA. Well, this new bureau is actually very cutting edge and going to be super important because how we use technology and talk about technology around the world requires U.S. leadership.

But your point about internet freedom and digital freedom is even more important because as there is more people around the world, over 5 billion on the internet, it is both a tool for development and liberation and information and it can also be a tool for oppression and censorship and misinformation.

And so, part of our Democracy Bureau, part of the new bureau, part of a new senior official responsible for digital freedom and

internet freedom, working with all of them will continue to be even more important and we see this play out in front of us in real time all over the world.

Senator SCHATZ. Ambassador, in the interest of time I will leave you with a question for the record. You mentioned increasing our diplomatic presence everywhere but in particular that there were some pretty encouraging announcements in the Pacific.

I am a little worried, having met with Pacific Island leaders multiple times. First of all, I think this is a good step. It is better than what we were doing, which was, essentially, ignoring them and taking them for granted and looking at a relationship that with them as sort of a place to park our military assets. So I think we made a bunch of progress.

What worries me the most is this sense that they have that now we have made an announcement, we have checked the box called we are doing the Pacific now, and we will move on from that and go back to whatever it is that we always worry about institutionally.

I would just like for you to do some thinking and get back to the committee on what is the next tranche of executive actions that can be taken in the Asia Pacific region to strengthen our relationships with our friends, allies, and partners.

Thank you.

Ambassador. VERMA. Will definitely do that. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Ricketts?

Senator RICKETTS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Ambassador Verma, for your service to our country and for your interest in continuing to serve our great nation, and I also want to thank your family because I know they serve and sacrifice alongside you when you do that.

So you are going to be the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, and some of your responsibilities will include overseeing the department's personnel, facilities, managing foreign contracts, grants, foreign aid, and the acquisition and upkeep of technology.

Roughly, do you have an idea of how many people you would be responsible for?

Ambassador. VERMA. Well, it is a great question. The department has well over 70,000 people if you include locally employed staff and contractors. So it is a big, big group of folks. But we also have a pretty extensive and highly qualified team. So, thankfully, I am not the only person responsible for that.

Senator RICKETTS. Right. So talk to me a little bit about some of your past experience in managing large teams like that and also maybe touch upon some of your past experience with some of the things we have talked about like with grants, facilities, technology, that sort of thing.

Ambassador. VERMA. Sure. I mean, obviously, I have never managed 77,000 people before but, again, that is why we have the Secretary, the head of management. In India we probably had a team of 4,100 people, which was a large, complicated organization. We had every agency of the U.S. Government. We had four consulates. We had a budget of a half a billion dollars.

Senator, I cannot say that that is exactly what this job will entail. But it gave me a flavor for how the department operates and how we can have impact, and I think we did a pretty decent job of it.

With regard to grants and the administration of grants, I also worked at the National Democratic Institute as a grantee. I was a field representative in Eastern Europe. I have sat on the board of NDI. I am on the board of the National Endowment for Democracy. I am on the board of the Ford Foundation.

I have a pretty good feel for the grant process and how to have an impact and what I think we owe to the American people when we put money out the door.

Senator RICKETTS. All right. Very good.

Talk to me a little bit about when Secretary Blinken was talking about his modernization agenda what does that say to you? What are you thinking about when you hear that?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yeah. So I hear first and foremost that we have to have the capability set for the challenges of today. So a new Cyber Bureau, a new Health Bureau, ready on climate change, for example.

Secondly, have an agile hybrid mission-focused workforce.

Third, having the kinds of technology that is required to meet the challenges of today and the proper cybersecurity protocols, having a diverse and inclusive workforce, having the proper resources to do the mission. Those are some of the things that I think about when it comes to modernization.

Senator RICKETTS. Have you had any experience working with any sort of process improvement methodologies? And the reason I ask this question is as Governor one of the things I brought to the State of Nebraska was Lean Six Sigma and that is one of the methodologies, but there is a number of them out there that really works with your frontline people and teams to be able to figure out how we can do a better job providing services and also lets you keep control of your costs as well.

Do you have any experience with any of those kind of methodologies? I know you were in the private sector at MasterCard, but did your job involve that at all?

Ambassador. VERMA. I do not know if it is credible to say I have an industrial engineering degree as well from about 35, 40 years ago.

But no, I think, look, this is why we have teams of experts to go out and make sure that when we procure services we are doing them with the—having the greatest impact and the greatest efficiency, that we use data to make decision making.

And, again, Senator I would not presume to know what our teams of people know. It is even more complicated for the department because we are in places that are not often permissive, that do not often want us there, and so the security situation becomes quite difficult. So there is a lot of factors that go in to State Department procurement that are incredibly complicated.

I would also say it has been a department that was under resourced for far too long. Now, that has started to change but I think we are in a far better place than where we were. But I take

the thrust of your question, which is make sure you are doing it right when you are spending the money.

Senator RICKETTS. Yeah, absolutely. It is about leveraging better technology and better processes, reducing the number of steps, for example, to do the kind of average things that you do on an operational basis.

In the state of Nebraska we created a center of operational excellence to train all of our teammates on how to do that and it is one of the things that I did not see in Secretary Blinken's talk about the modernization agenda is about being able to be effective and efficient in controlling costs.

I would ask you to really think about that as you are—presuming you get confirmed here about how you can help drive that, especially with your background, to be able to make sure that the dollars that we are responsible for are being employed in the most effective and efficient way.

Thank you.

Ambassador. VERMA. It is a great point. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Coons?

Senator COONS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and, Mr. Chairman, thank you for your focus on driving a State authorization bill every year.

I think you and the ranking member and the members of this committee have a real opportunity here and, in particular, in close consultation with Ambassador Verma, should he be confirmed—and I look forward to supporting your nomination—to focus on some of the operational issues that Senator Ricketts was just raising, issues around workforce, recruitment, retention, diversity, whether or not the embassies we have around the world are striking the right balance between security and engagement, whether or not we are finding the right people for the right roles and whether given some of the very demanding environments in which our diplomats operate whether or not we are making it an attractive work environment and a successful and productive career environment.

If I could, from the modernization initiative, Mr. Ambassador, modernizing training and professional development and shifting the State Department's culture toward decisive leadership and agility.

I, as a county executive, had a responsibility over the arc of 10 years in county government for a workforce that was very bureaucratic, very heavily controlled by a series of civil service protections.

Hiring was very difficult. Knowledge transfer was difficult. There was not a lot of, I would say, decisive agility, and the training and professional development and the ability to deliver customer services well was something I also focused a lot on.

We did end up with some greenbelts from Six Sigma training in partnership with DuPont. I think I succeeded mostly in confusing the county employees who I encouraged to participate in this. I came out of a manufacturing background.

There are disciplines and there are experts in how to motivate and engage and mobilize and sustain global workforces from diverse backgrounds. I would be interested in where you think we

might make the greatest contributions to sustaining a high-quality and effective workforce but making progress in these two areas, in training and professional development and in shifting culture towards leadership and agility. Both of these interest me a great deal.

Ambassador. VERMA. Senator, on the second one, on shifting the culture on more decisive leadership and leading in the face of risk and not being risk averse, again, I will tell you from my experience in New Delhi I saw a very engaged and active State Department that wanted to be everywhere.

In fact, we went to every Indian state, the first time a Mission had done that. We landed on three aircraft carriers. We flew over the Himalayas. We were on the border—contested border with China.

Now, that was what the department wanted to do and I think that is the culture of the department. They do not want to be behind big walls. They do not want to be away from city centers, and over time the pendulum swung back to risk aversion as opposed to leading in the face of risk, and I think the department's heart and gut is really about being out and being engaged.

I am actually quite confident on that if we do it right and, again, taking the safety and security of our families and the workforce top of mind, there is a way to do this, and I think it fits well with the culture.

On the training and professional development, I think good progress has been made, actually. There is now for the first time ever 1,100 members of the Foreign Service in a training float for four to six months where they will actually get professional training.

We have new mid-level training for folks, and this is actually important not only to give people the skills, it also is a retention factor as well. So I could not agree with you more. There is a lot we can do in this area.

I continue to believe this is the best diplomatic corps in the world. But they want and deserve these kinds of up-to-date training modules, which I think we can deliver.

Senator COONS. Thank you. As the Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee that funds the State Department I look forward to working more closely with you.

I think there has been a lot of discussion about risk tolerance in some of the more challenging posts in Chad, in Mali, in other countries I visited in recent years.

We had built, in some cases, around the continent of Africa, new fortresses well removed from the downtown, better protected against potential attack. But I met with career professionals who were deeply frustrated at the inability to go out and engage and have an impact, and we face a strategic competitor in China that is flooding the zone with agile and engaged diplomats and development professionals and we need to meet that challenge in a way that strikes the right risk tolerance.

I think the department may have over learned some lessons from recent years and I think we have a role to play in providing resources, staffing, and direction on how to strike that risk tolerance balance.

Ambassador VERMA. Senator, I agree with you and I do think it is changing. I understand last year alone 95 percent of all requests made to diplomatic security to move around were approved. So that is a good indicator.

Senator COONS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you.

Senator Hagerty?

Senator HAGERTY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador Verma, welcome. It is good to see you again.

Ambassador VERMA. Good to see you.

Senator HAGERTY. If confirmed, Ambassador Verma, like so many other members of this committee I am looking forward to working with you on the modernization of the State Department.

But before we get into that topic, I just want to make certain that we are on the same page on an issue that I discussed with the former holder of this office back in October of 2021 and that issue is a controversial plan by the Biden administration to reopen a U.S. consulate for the Palestinians in Jerusalem.

And I would like to say this, that such a move is strongly opposed by the Israeli Government. It would basically establish a second competing U.S. mission in the capital city—Israel's eternal capital city.

I would like to go back to the question that I asked then Deputy Secretary of State Brian McKeon and repeat what I asked him.

Is it your understanding that under U.S. and international law the Government of Israel would have to provide its affirmative consent before the United States could reopen the U.S. consulate to the Palestinians in Jerusalem? Or does the Biden administration believe they can move forward to establish a second U.S. mission in the Israel capital city of Jerusalem without the consent of the Government of Israel?

At the time, Deputy Secretary McKeon answered, and I quote, "Yes, that is my understanding, that we need the consent of the host Government to open a diplomatic facility." That is the end of the quote.

Ambassador Verma, I just simply want to ask you whether you agree with then Deputy Secretary McKeon's answer.

Ambassador VERMA. That is my understanding as well, Senator.

Senator HAGERTY. Okay. Good. I just wanted to make certain that we had that understanding.

To make certain that the Biden administration does not subvert the law I am going to plan to reintroduce my Upholding the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Law Act this Congress and ensure that there is only one U.S. mission—U.S. Embassy to Israel—that is resident in Israel's eternal and indivisible capital.

To turn to State Department modernization, Ambassador, Senator Cardin and I worked very hard in this committee to include the Commission on Reform and Modernization of the Department of State in last year's State reauthorization law, and I want to thank Chairman Menendez and Ranking Member Risch for their support.

The commission is authorized to conduct a comprehensive review and offer legislative proposals to modernize the State Department. For the commission to be successful it is going to require close co-

operation from the State Department, and I appreciate your and Secretary Tony Blinken's commitment to prioritizing modernization of American diplomacy in your opening statement.

Now, Ambassador Verma, I just want to make certain that you support the objectives of this commission and to get your commitment to working with the commission and all the matters that are related to the law that created it.

Ambassador. VERMA. Absolutely, Senator—

Senator HAGERTY. Excellent.

Mr. VERMA [continuing]. And will work closely with the commission and look forward to that.

Senator HAGERTY. Certainly. And one other related question to that. If you are confirmed will you support the inclusion of the commission in the President's fiscal year 2024 budget?

Ambassador. VERMA. I would presume—yes. In order for the commission to do its work I assume it needs to be funded. But I will also say I am not close enough to what was actually in the budget this year in terms of what was requested.

Senator HAGERTY. I understand. I think your presumption, though, is a very logical one. It absolutely needs to be included if it is going to be operative and I think that shows me your instincts are like mine. You want to see something get done and have the resources to do it.

I would say that—Senator Cardin, I believe, joins me in this—we are very enthusiastic about the potential here. We look forward to working with a great team of people like you. I believe that our State Department and our diplomats are the best in the world and we want to see them properly resourced as agile, as Senator Coons said, and effective as they possibly can be. I am looking forward to working with you and spending a lot more time in the details on this.

Thank you very much. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Ambassador. VERMA. Appreciate it.

Senator COONS [presiding]. Thank you, sir.

Senator Duckworth? Yes.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I know you and the Chairman have talked about the importance of resourcing our Missions in the Indo-Pacific, and I think that was a very important conversation.

I just want to emphasize the importance of that particularly with regards to the ASEAN mission itself. I hope your commitment there also extends to Southeast Asia. I believe strongly in the importance of the role that ASEAN plays in regional stability and believe we should be strengthening our partnerships with ASEAN.

That is why I am going to be traveling to Jakarta this coming week, and it is also why, when I am there, I am going to be specifically visiting the Mission—the ASEAN Mission itself—and to also meet with ASEAN member country leadership.

I will be discussing supply chain transparency, economic cooperation, trade facilitation, labor practices, and defense of maritime security. I look forward to bringing these discussions back to inform my work on this issue.

I just want to emphasize the importance of ASEAN.

Ambassador. VERMA. Senator, I could not agree more with you, and I think it is an incredibly important part of the world, getting even more important. ASEAN and our ASEAN friends and partners are—again, are critically important and I look forward to hearing about your trip and some of the learnings when you come back.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you.

I am going to shift gears a little bit, and it is unfortunate that Senator Hagerty has left because I was going to give him some kudos.

One issue that has come up repeatedly in my discussion with our various missions around the world is the problem of accessibility at overseas missions and residences. While the State Department has made considerable efforts to incorporate accessibility features into new design and construction, it has devoted far fewer resources to upgrading existing facilities.

I remember on a trip to Japan when Ambassador Hagerty was there—where my colleague was the Ambassador to Japan and one of the staff members there, when I said there are no accessible bathrooms that I can get to, the response was, oh, we are in Japan. This is not the ADA. It does not apply to Japan. And I said this is American soil. This is the U.S. Embassy.

And under then Ambassador Hagerty's leadership they actually went through and fixed everything. So it was quite wonderful.

But I just found out again since his tenure there the bathroom in the Ambassador's residence is still not accessible. They have put grab bars and all the stuff in there but the door is still not within ADA—is not in compliance with the ADA.

The lack of accessibility at so many of our facilities is a serious obstacle to the full participation of people with disabilities who want to serve their nation and advance U.S. policy overseas.

It also makes it extremely difficult for nondisabled individuals with family members who are disabled to be able to serve our government overseas. Because it is difficult to find accessible facilities in homes abroad our nation's diplomats often have to make very tough choices and we must make sure that the best, most qualified people are posted to each of our missions. But they cannot do that and they cannot go to the countries where we need them to if such barriers are getting in their way.

If confirmed, what steps will you take to make sure that our overseas missions and residences are fully accessible in compliance with the ADA—it has been 32 years since ADA passed—to all U.S. governmental employees and their families, and will you commit to working with me to make concrete progress towards achieving full accessibility?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes, Senator, absolutely; it is an incredibly important issue.

As you probably know, our facilities are not as up-to-date as they should be, and this is from a variety of perspectives, and so we need to make sure that our people are not limited in any way by the facilities where they serve.

I look forward to working with you closely on it and I will say even more than that. I think accessibility, as you have pointed out many times, is only part of the answer. There is also making sure

that we are promoting and retaining and recognizing and advancing people with disabilities throughout the State Department. I look forward to working with you on that as well.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you.

I would also like to ask you about accessibility and the prioritization of disability rights within the State Department here at home.

As you know, it is one of the things to be in compliance with the law but it is another to encourage and cultivate a culture that welcomes values and empowers people with disabilities.

What actions will you take, if confirmed, to foster such a culture at the State Department here at home?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yeah. Again, I will just restate this is important to me personally, and I will make sure that this is a priority on my team, and I already know it is a priority for Secretary Blinken.

I have seen the DEIA strategic plan. I have seen the detailed benchmarks that they are putting in place, some 200 measurable performance measurements on this scale. So accessibility but, again, the whole suite of kind of issues that go with it are going to be very, very important, if confirmed.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. I yield back, Chairman.

Senator COONS. Thank you, Senator Duckworth.

I will tell you I met with a U.S. Ambassador yesterday who raised this exact issue about making reasonable investments to ensure that there is accessibility in our facilities.

Senator Shaheen?

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Congratulations, Mr. Verma. Thank you.

Ambassador Verma, and thank you for your willingness to continue to serve this country.

I would actually like to begin with an issue that we discussed when we met last week. I know it is not directly within your portfolio but as the former Ambassador to India can you talk about why this Senate needs to act to confirm an Ambassador to the country of India, the largest democracy in the world?

Ambassador. VERMA. I will just say, Senator, I continue to believe this is the defining partnership for this century. The relationship is so consequential in so many ways and having a senior official on the ground that represents the President makes a big difference.

And so I think everyone, hopefully, appreciates the urgency with the need to put someone there as soon as possible. It is also, I would say, a morale issue for the team but, more importantly, just delivering on the President's priorities.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Hopefully, we will see some action soon.

Another area where, sadly, the Senate has been lacking in its responsibility is in confirming an Ambassador to head the Office of Global Women's Issues. That office has been without an Ambassador for five of the last six years.

Without that Ambassador, it is—the office is inhibited in its ability to ensure that a gender lens policy is done throughout our Department of State and in terms of our foreign policy, and I wonder

if you could comment first on why having that gender lens on our foreign policy is important and, secondly, how you would see working with Secretary Blinken and a future Ambassador of global women's issues to engage in having that gender lens on all aspects of our foreign policy.

Ambassador. VERMA. Senator, it is so important, and from the President early on through his leadership and the Secretary has made gender equality and fighting gender discrimination around the world a foreign policy priority, and when women and girls cannot reach their full potential those countries are not as successful. They are not as impactful. They are generally not as democratic, and so it is a key component of our foreign policy.

The position that that you mentioned, the Global Coordinator for Women's Issues, is so essential to make sure that we continue to have it at the forefront.

I know it is a super high priority for the Secretary. It will be for me. It was when I was in India and we were carrying out the agenda there. And so this has been a high commitment for me and it will continue to be.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you very much and, hopefully, we can see some movement on that appointment as well.

We have had a law around women, peace, and security since 2017, recognizing that having women at the table as we are looking at conflict areas and looking at how we address peace and stability throughout the world it is very important to have women as part of that.

I understand that a number of your questions have been around diversity and equity and inclusion at the State Department. How do you see the Women, Peace, and Security Initiative being integrated into those efforts to address diversity and equity?

Ambassador. VERMA. It is absolutely essential and it goes along with the—again, the national strategy on gender equality. It goes along with our own department's strategy on women and girls, as I said.

But, again, having women at the table on the key issues of the day in senior leadership positions, I think the Secretary has demonstrated that with his appointments, frankly, within the department and that will continue.

But we also have work to do to make sure in the senior and mid-level components of the department that there is greater parity—gender parity—and, again, still a journey. We are not where we need to be and we have to do a better job.

I just want to thank you for everything you have done to call out this issue and all I can say is I look forward to working with you as we give the department even more of a focus on this.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you very much.

I am almost out of time but I just want to raise another issue that we discussed when we met and that is around the Afghan SIV process.

Since the U.S. left Afghanistan in August of 2021 there have been 200 to 300 reports of credible Taliban murdering Afghans who worked with the United States Government and our allies in Afghanistan.

This comes when, according to State's reporting, only 2,646 SIV applications were issued in fiscal year 2022 and that compares to 3,626 visas in 2016 and 4,120 in 2017.

We are not doing what we need to do in this area. We talked about that when we met. I know you understand that. But we have got to do better.

It is just not acceptable that we are doing worse now in terms of those SIV applications, given all of the attention that has happened on Afghanistan in the last few years.

So I would just say to you I hope you will take that as a directive from Congress to address that.

Ambassador. VERMA. I absolutely will, Senator. I know how important this is and I know how many people are now charged with making sure we are living up to that commitment to our Afghan partners and friends and there is a lot of resources being put at this. There is a new unit in Doha, as you know. There are thousands of people in the process.

I know it is difficult. There is also a security element to this that we cannot underlook as well. But I take your directive quite seriously.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Senator KAINE [presiding]. Senator Van Hollen?

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ambassador Verma, it is great to see you. Great to have a fellow Marylander at least now here. Thanks for your service on the Hill and your previous service as Ambassador to India, among other posts.

And I do want to second what Senator Shaheen and maybe others have said about the importance of us confirming an Ambassador right away to represent the United States in New Delhi, as you did so ably.

I want to raise a couple issues with you in my time. One has to do with the passage of the Foreign Service Families Act. I co-chair along with Senator Sullivan the bipartisan Foreign Service Caucus and we are very focused on trying to make sure we have strong morale in the Foreign Service and the State Department overall.

We passed something called the Foreign Service Families Act as part of the last State Department authorization bill that was included in the NDAA and I look forward to working with you and your team to implement it.

My staff has asked for a report on the implementation and so I just look forward to working with your team on that process. The idea is to extend some of the same benefits to Foreign Service families that military families enjoy. That is one aspect of it.

I just look for your commitment to make sure that we fully implement that act.

Ambassador. VERMA. Hundred percent. Absolutely.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Appreciate that.

Let me turn now to consular services. Look, we went through a COVID pandemic. I understand that there were delays on both issuing U.S. citizens passports and also issuing foreigners, including a lot of family members with loved ones who are U.S. citizens.

I understand the delays, but the delays have been continuing and this is no hit on the people who are working every day very hard to try to process the passports and nonimmigrant and immigrant visas.

They are just under resourced and it really ends up, I think, hurting the United States when people are able to travel to other countries—they want to come to the United States but they are able to get to other countries but just cannot get a nonimmigrant visa. And then, of course, there are people who would like to come, for example, from India to see their relatives in Maryland for a wedding or for a funeral.

Do you have any idea what the current wait time is for a non-immigrant visa in New Delhi?

Ambassador. VERMA. It is too long, Senator.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. It is 612 days. I mean, I do not know how many people plan weddings, you know, two weeks ahead. Certainly, people do not plan their funerals.

It is just really—it is really hurting us, in my view. It is, certainly, hurting constituents here in Maryland and around the country, and on U.S. passports the delay is now 12 to 18 weeks still.

I mean, that is—it is unacceptably long and, again, the people doing this work they are doing it well. They just need to be better resourced.

Do I have your commitment to work on this issue?

Ambassador. VERMA. Yes, but maybe I could just add a couple observations here because I have stood in the visa line myself out in our consulates. I know how important this is to folks.

I will say our biggest challenge is not in every category. It is in the tourist visa—the first time applicants for tourist visas—and it is not globally. It is in a few select countries and, in fact, we have exceeded our wait times and made good progress in the other categories.

But you are right. In these high population countries with the surge in travel—India, Mexico, and some others—we have to get those numbers down. I think there is a plan to get those numbers down. I will also say on passport services, as I understand it, we are back to kind of the standard routine processing time of six to nine weeks.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I know you are working to that. I have 12 to 18. Let us compare notes afterwards. But it has improved, obviously, since the pandemic period but I do think we have a long way to go.

I do want to follow up with you after this on two things. One are security clearances, where there have been significant improvements. Ninety percent of State Department security clearances now come in below the government standard. There is still 10 percent that are agonizingly long and, again, hurt the State Department's ability to do its work, mostly in other federal agencies. So I want to work with you on that.

Ambassador. VERMA. Agree.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Visa waiver program—the visa waiver program obviously provides great convenience and is also designed to provide security with that convenience. It is a good program where it works.

But, as you know, I think the key part of the visa waiver program includes reciprocity, equal treatment of American citizens of all faiths and backgrounds traveling overseas. You know that, right?

Ambassador. VERMA. Absolutely.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. We do not have any measure of that right now in our current visa waiver program. We have no way to measure whether or not Americans of one faith or another, one ethnicity or another, are being treated differently than other Americans when they are traveling abroad under the visa waiver program.

Will you work with me to make sure that we have a standard to measure that?

Ambassador. VERMA. Absolutely.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. I look forward to that because blue is blue and we want to make sure all Americans are treated equally when they are traveling under the visa waiver program. Anywhere we want that but the visa waiver program is something we set up. It is within our control. So I look forward to working with you on that.

Ambassador. VERMA. It is a great point.

Senator VAN HOLLEN. Thank you.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Senator Van Hollen, and Ambassador Verma, great to see you again.

There is a vote ongoing. I will ask questions and then I do not believe Senator Risch has any follow-up so we will likely then conclude unless another member comes in.

I want to ask you about Havana syndrome. We had a hearing in May around State Department reauthorization and the then Deputy Secretary Brian McKeon testified a bit about this.

He reported that the DNI-commissioned reporting showed a number of cases and that they were explained by environmental health factors but many still did not have an explanation and the U.S. Government was still unable to attribute incidents to a particular actor.

If confirmed, do you commit to ensuring that the department fully supports the provision of all appropriate health care and reasonable accommodations to State Department employees who are suffering from Havana syndrome symptoms incurred while serving the country?

Ambassador. VERMA. Absolutely. Yes, sir.

Senator KAINE. Great. Thank you, Ambassador Verma.

I want to ask you a question about the workforce. A sizeable percentage of the State Department workforce live in Virginia. They are constituents of mine.

The GA—I am sorry, the OPM does an annual employment survey. It is the FEVS—Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey—and for many, many years the State Department, of the 17 large agencies that tend to be surveyed, again and again ranked near the top in terms of job satisfaction. But in recent years—and the most recent FEVS we have is from 2021—the job satisfaction in the department has dramatically declined.

What would you do in your role, if confirmed, to try to really work on these internal morale issues and return the State Department to the place that it has traditionally been?

Ambassador. VERMA. It is really important, Senator, and I think trying to get at the root—what is driving that attitude, what is happening that people feel that way—and there has been a number of surveys. There has been some early feedback and the Secretary, I think, has set out really in a focused way.

I mean, the modernization agenda is really about taking care of the workforce and making sure they have what they need. So do they also have—are benefits competitive? Do we have the right childcare subsidy? Do we have the right kind of agility in our workforce compared to other federal agencies?

These are all things that we are looking at. I still think the mission of the department attracts the best people from around the country but we got to make sure we are actually living up to our commitment to them to make sure they are getting the best of what they need.

I really—again, my experience overseas helped me see what people need and how they live and how it works in practice day to day and I think we do an exceptionally good job of taking care of people around the world.

But we have got to do better. We want to be at the top part of that survey and not lagging behind.

Senator KAINE. Just to share an insight with you, when I travel abroad I usually try to have a meeting with first or second tour FSO State Department folks at embassies without the Ambassador there, without any supervisor there, and I ask them this question.

You obtained a very difficult job. To get—I mean, to get to be a Foreign Service officer incredibly difficult to get there. What will be the determinant about whether you make this a career or make this a shorter term job, and I hardly have to say another word and then I just listen for about 90 minutes, and I will say a lot of the discussion tends to revolve around we are not given enough latitude to make decisions.

Somebody once said to me, I had to pass a security vetting that was super intense but if I want to requisition five pencils they treat me like I am going to steal one of them and I have got to account for all five and what I am going to do with them.

You have been there. You have been an Ambassador but you have also worked your way up. You understand the sacrifices and the frustrations. I think you would be uniquely situated to deal with this.

But I would just encourage you to and, kind of additionally, the surveys tend to show that you are doing—the State Department's efforts around recruiting are okay but maybe you are falling short on the retention side.

Ambassador. VERMA. Right.

Senator KAINE. So I would urge you to focus on that.

Last thing. I know—as far as I know, Congress has not yet been provided the 2022 FEVS results. Do you have any idea about when we might see those?

Ambassador. VERMA. I do not but I will definitely find out and come back to you as quickly as possible.

Senator KAINE. If you could that would be great.

Ambassador. VERMA. Senator, your point on retention is really important and there is a retention working group that is focused

on this coming out with a number of recommendations and already taken some steps.

But training is a big part of it, making sure people have a pathway to promotion. There is a lot that will go into retention. But it is not just recruiting great people. It is making sure they stay.

Senator KAINE. I think you are uniquely qualified to help us get better at this.

Ambassador. VERMA. Thank you.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am going to go vote.

The CHAIRMAN [presiding]. Okay.

Ambassador, for a position of this consequence this type of hearing is unremarkable so that is a good thing, testament to you.

This record will remain open—let me see until when—will remain open until the close of business tomorrow. There may be questions for the record. I would urge you to answer them expeditiously and as fully as you can so that we can consider your nomination at a business markup.

With the thanks of the committee for your appearance here today, his hearing is adjourned.

Additional Material Submitted for the Record

RESPONSES TO ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED
TO HON. RICHARD R. VERMA BY SENATOR ROBERT MENENDEZ

Question. Congress enacted the Lateral Entry into the Foreign Service Pilot Program in December 2016. Fast forward six years later, and the program has yet to take off the ground. One of the purposes of the pilot program was to provide State additional avenues for targeting and recruiting “mid-career individuals from the civil service and private sector who have skills and experience that would be extremely valuable to the Foreign Service.” Individuals with skillsets in the areas of critical and emerging technologies such as information and communications technology, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence have been and will continue to be extremely valuable for the Foreign Service given the Department’s new international cyber and digital policy mission. This is particularly true with the recent establishment of the Bureau for Cyber and Digital Policy and the Office of the Special Envoy for Critical and Emerging Technologies. Will the Department commit to utilizing the Foreign Service lateral entry pilot program provided by Congress beginning in FY 2023?

Answer. Despite delays due to lack of funding, hiring freezes and, most recently, COVID, the Department is committed to and actively developing the lateral entry pilot program. The program will target critical skills gaps and allow the Department to fill positions to support the Secretary’s modernization agenda, including in emerging technologies and critical missions. If confirmed, I commit to prioritize and implement this program in 2023.

Question. How does the Department intend to use the flexible-hiring mechanism provided by the pilot program?

Answer. The 3-year lateral entry pilot program will enable the Department to hire qualified mid-career professionals from the Civil Service and private sector into the Foreign Service to fill identified gaps in talent needed to support the Secretary’s modernization agenda in the following six critical areas: cyberspace and emerging technologies; climate, environment, and energy; global health security and diplomacy; strategic competition with the People’s Republic of China (PRC); economic statecraft; and multilateral diplomacy. If confirmed, I am committed to implementing this pilot program.

Question. In October 2021, the Department released its first ever Enterprise Data Strategy, which seeks to promote data-informed diplomacy by bolstering the Department’s data analytics and management and building a “data-savvy” workforce. As your predecessor once said, “the Department of State must leverage data as a crit-

ical instrument of diplomacy.” How do you intend to continue the Department’s efforts to data-informed diplomacy?

Answer. Data-Informed Diplomacy is a core element of the Secretary’s agenda for modernizing American diplomacy. If confirmed, I will continue my predecessor’s approach of implementing the Enterprise Data Strategy through campaigns that surge data and analytics resources on priority issues such as Strategic Competition; Multilateralism; and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA). I also intend to accelerate the use of the Department’s enterprise analytics platform, Data-State, and champion data science hiring and training initiatives that strengthen data skills within our workforce.

Question. Which areas of the modernization agenda could use further congressional support?

Answer. If confirmed, I am committed to advancing the Secretary’s Modernization Agenda to ensure the Department is ready to meet the tests of the 21st century. I look forward to working with Congress to ensure the Department has the necessary resources and authorities to meet these challenges. This includes flexible hiring authorities tailored to the Department’s national security mission to ensure our workforce is positioned to address mission critical areas, including China, climate, global health security, cyberspace, economic statecraft, and multilateral diplomacy.

RESPONSES TO ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED
TO HON. RICHARD R. VERMA BY SENATOR JAMES E. RISCH

Question. During his confirmation process, this committee asked Secretary Blinken: “Under your leadership as Secretary of State, what actions will you pursue to ensure that hard-to-fill posts in Sub-Saharan Africa are sufficiently and consistently staffed?” On January 19, he replied in writing: “If confirmed, I will work with the White House and relevant State Department bureaus and offices to ensure that all posts in Sub-Saharan Africa are sufficiently and consistently staffed with the appropriate personnel.” During his confirmation process, I similarly asked your predecessor, if confirmed, as Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources, Brian McKeon, what he “viewed as the most pressing management and staffing challenges facing the Department’s Bureau of African Affairs,” to which he replied, in part, “The Bureau of African Affairs has been chronically understaffed both domestically and overseas, impeding the Department’s ability to achieve the Administration’s goals, as well as to seize opportunities when they appear. If confirmed I will explore enhancing incentives to serve at hardship posts, including those in Africa, and will look for other ways to ensure that our vacancies are filled.” What is your understanding of actions taken to date by the State Department under the Biden Administration to address acute challenges to fully staffing the Africa Bureau?

Answer. I understand the Department continues to use increased incentives for service in historically difficult to staff posts around the world, including service needs differential as an incentive for extended service, along with hardship differentials, and early handshakes, among others. Additionally, several initiatives are underway to address these gaps, including development of regional support models and use of a new assignments process based on medical resident matching. If confirmed, I commit to overseeing a holistic look at recruitment incentives to fill hard-to-fill posts around the world, especially in Africa.

Question. When was the last time an Africa Bureau-specific culture survey was conducted?

Answer. I understand from the Department that an Africa Bureau Domestic Workplace Climate Survey was conducted in August and September of 2022.

Question. What was the response rate in the last Africa Bureau-specific culture survey?

Answer. I understand from the Department that 51 percent of domestic employees in the Bureau of African Affairs responded to the Workplace Climate Survey.

Question. What were the findings of the last Africa Bureau-specific culture survey?

Answer. I understand that staff indicated in the AF climate survey that they truly enjoy their work, appreciating U.S. foreign policy interests. They expressed strong frustration with low staffing levels and

feeling overworked, however, underscoring the importance of domestic hybrid workplace flexibilities, expressing concern these arrangements might change in the future. Civil Service staff communicated a strong desire for more opportunities to do long-term TDYs and to spend time in the field.

Question. When were the results of the last Africa Bureau-specific culture survey shared with the Africa Bureau workforce and by whom?

Answer. I understand that, on behalf of the Africa Bureau's Diversity and Inclusion Council and Assistant Secretary Phee, Deputy Assistant Secretary Lord shared the results of the Africa Bureau workplace climate survey with domestic staff on November 29, 2022.

Question. Do you feel that sufficient and timely action is being taken to address the acute and disproportionate staffing challenges that are faced by the Africa Bureau?

Answer. The challenge of filling positions in historically difficult to staff posts, of which those in Africa comprise more than half, is one that the Department is deeply committed to resolving. Insufficient infrastructure, inadequate schools, health care challenges, and the remote nature of many postings in Africa are inherent impediments to getting those posts to full staffing. I believe the Department is working to address these challenges, and if confirmed, I commit to maintaining a focus on finding solutions.

Question. Please provide a breakdown of Africa Bureau civil service staffing by office, including GS level? Please provide comparative information for other regional bureaus.

Answer. With 46 embassies supporting bilateral relations with 49 countries and the African Union, I understand from the Department that the Africa Bureau employs 120 Civil Service employees across ten domestic offices, of which 11 are GS-15, 23 are GS-14, 44 are GS-13, 15 are GS-12, 14 are GS-11, 8 are GS-9 and 5 are GS-8. In comparison, the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs employs 70, the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs employs 142, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs employs 158, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs employs 62, and the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs employs 100.

Question. How many civil servants have left the Africa Bureau since the start of the Biden Administration? Please detail vacated positions, and the length of time to fill the vacated position (from date of announcement to date of onboarding).

Answer. I understand from the Department that 22 civil service employees left their positions in the Bureau of African Affairs since the beginning of the Biden Administration. As rank is in position, not person, for the civil service, promotions necessitate leaving a position. On average, it takes 90 calendar days to fill a position from date of announcement to date of onboarding.

Question. What will you do to address the length of time it takes to hire civil servants for the Africa Bureau?

Answer. The Africa Bureau has a similar timeline for hiring civil service (CS) employees as compared to other bureaus. I understand from the Department that the GTM's Shared Services center hires about 50 percent of the Department's civil service, including AF, and has worked with Diplomatic Security to reduce the time it takes for security clearances by 120 days, installed new technologies such as a case management system, and implemented an onboarding system to streamline CS hiring.

Question. What specific actions will you prioritize in your role to ensure that the Africa Bureau's staffing efforts focus on building regional expertise, diversity, and preparedness so the Department can sufficiently and consistently staff hard-to-fill posts in Africa?

Answer. With more than half of all historically difficult to staff posts located in Africa, this is an important issue. If confirmed, I commit to overseeing a holistic look at recruitment incentives to fill hard-to-fill posts around the world, including in Africa.

Question. Similarly, 27 of the last 43 career Foreign Service nominees for Ambassadorial posts in the Africa Bureau were to serve as first time Ambassadors. While every Ambassador has a first post somewhere, first time Ambassadors have been nominated for positions in highly complex political and conflict environments that are stated national security priorities for the United States in Africa, including Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. If confirmed, will you commit to work with Secretary Blinken to ensure that first-time career Ambassadors

sadorial nominees will not be the first choice when identifying nominees for high-profile and strategic U.S. missions in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Answer. The Department has a robust process for choosing Chiefs of Mission candidates to recommend to the President for nomination. If confirmed, I am committed to working with the Secretary and Department leadership to ensure the Department continues to identify officers with demonstrated relevant experience and a track record of successful leadership in challenging posts. As evidenced by the outcome of the above selection process, sometimes the best qualified officer has not yet been an Ambassador.

Question. What specific challenges does the Africa Bureau face in recruiting experienced Ambassadors to posts in the region?

Answer. The same challenges the Africa Bureau faces in recruiting staff to fill all positions impact the Department's ability to recruit Ambassadors to serve in the region. Inadequate infrastructure, health challenges, lack of adequate schools, and remoteness are just some of the factors that influence an employee's assignment process.

Question. What steps will you take, if confirmed, to encourage experienced Ambassadors to bid on priority Ambassadorial posts in the Africa Bureau?

Answer. The Department has a robust process for choosing Chiefs of Mission candidates to recommend to the President for nomination. If confirmed, I am committed to working with the Secretary and Department leadership to ensure that the Department continues to identify officers with a demonstrated relevant experience and a track record of successful leadership in challenging posts.

Question. What Chief of Mission positions in the Africa Bureau does the Administration believe will soon require nominations for their replacements?

Answer. I understand from the Department that roughly one-third of the 46 Chief of Mission positions in sub-Saharan Africa rotate in any given year. There currently are eight Chief of Mission nominations pending confirmation in the Senate: U.S. Mission to the African Union, Cabo Verde, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe.

Question. Section 5105 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2022 conditions the appointment of any Special Envoy (or similar position) exercising "significant authority" at the Department on obtaining the advice and consent of the Senate. This section also states that, in order for the President to appoint a Special Envoy not exercising significant authority pursuant to the laws of the United States, the President or Secretary must submit a timely notification to Congress which includes the following: "(A) A certification that the position does not require the exercise of significant authority pursuant to the laws of the United States. (B) A description of the duties and purpose of the position. (C) The rationale for giving the specific title and function to the position." Section 5105 of the FY 22 NDAA took legal effect on January 3, 2023. If confirmed, do you commit to upholding the requirements of this statute in a timely manner and to making your staff available to routinely brief SFRC on implementation of the law?

Answer. Yes.

Question. If confirmed, do you commit to immediately reviewing the waivers of diplomatic immunity for our mission personnel in China, and revoke them?

Answer. If confirmed, I will review all aspects of the status of our mission personnel in China in consultation with Department experts and take appropriate action to ensure protection of our mission personnel.

Because I have been outside the Department since before the COVID-19 pandemic began, I was not part of the deliberations on limited waivers of personal inviolability. My understanding from news reporting is that the lifting of the PRC's Zero-COVID policies has significantly eased the strain on all living in China, including U.S. diplomats.

I also understand that upon arriving at post, Ambassador Burns committed to the Embassy community and subsequently communicated to the PRC that he would not permit any American Mission personnel to be forced into a fever clinic or COVID hospital.

Question. If confirmed, do you commit to review similar waivers the U.S. agreed to in more than 50 other countries?

Answer. My hope is that the declining emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic in most of the world has made such waivers no longer relevant. If confirmed, I would

review all such waivers in consultation with Department experts and take appropriate action to ensure protection of our mission personnel.

Question. Would you agree to waivers of diplomatic immunity for Embassy personnel in an adversarial country like China?

Answer. I was not part of the deliberations on waivers of personal inviolability in China with respect to COVID-19. If confirmed and presented with a decision on any waiver of diplomatic immunity for our personnel in any country, I would weigh the merits of the decision while considering all aspects of the situation, including the impact on the U.S.'s national security interests and personnel.

Question. Do you commit to consultation with Congress before taking any steps to waive diplomatic immunity for Embassy personnel in an adversarial country like China?

Answer. If confirmed and presented with a similar decision on waivers of diplomatic immunity for Embassy personnel in an adversarial country during a pandemic or other global health crisis, I would weigh the merits of the decision while considering all aspects of the situation, including the impact on the U.S.'s national security interests and personnel, and keep Congress informed on such matters.

Question. Does the Department commit not to nominate or re-nominate to a Senate-confirmed position any officials who were involved in developing or approving the policy to comply with the PRC's COVID protocols, including detention in fever clinics, invasive, non-transparent testing procedures, and arbitrary movement restrictions and lockdowns, family separation, and the limited waivers of inviolability (in 2020 and 2022) that allowed these practices to happen?

Answer. Decisions with respect to nominating or re-nominating officials to Senate-confirmed positions are made by the President. The Department has a robust process for choosing Chiefs of Mission candidates to recommend to the President for nomination. If confirmed, I am committed to working with the Secretary and Department leadership to ensure the Department continues to identify officers with demonstrated relevant experience and a track record of successful leadership in challenging posts.

Question. In briefings to SFRC staff and in formal front-channel communications, the Department confirmed that 30 Americans had been detained in Chinese fever clinics. Following press reports on the situation at Mission China, this number was revised to 16. What accounts for the change in the number of Americans the Department says were detained in Chinese fever clinics? During which period of time and under what definitions of "American," and "detained," were these figures determined?

Answer. If confirmed, I will have no higher priority than the safety of our personnel, family members, and facilities overseas. I was not serving in government during this time period. But I do understand that upon arriving at post, Ambassador Burns committed to the Embassy community and subsequently communicated to the PRC that he would not permit any American Mission personnel to be forced into a fever clinic or COVID hospital.

Question. When the United States re-imposed COVID testing requirements for Chinese citizens traveling to the United States, did the PRC Embassy submit an LWOI or equivalent in order for its diplomats to comply when entering the United States?

Answer. The United States did not impose testing on PRC diplomats in the United States. My understanding is that pre-flight testing of PRC diplomats in China does not implicate their immunity.

Question. Please explain why it takes so long to build an Embassy and why it is so expensive?

Answer. I understand the Department plans, designs, and executes worldwide construction projects in dangerous and unpredictable environments facing rapidly changing security risks, unrest, evolving climate threats, and malign influencers. These factors, combined with the cost of building increasingly complex facilities to stringent U.S. design and life safety building codes, legislated procurement and contracting regulations, host country permits and labor laws, and SECCA 1999 security standards, resulted in increased costs for site acquisition and construction and extended project timelines.

Question. If confirmed, what structural changes would you make to streamline this process to promote efficiencies and save taxpayer dollars?

Answer. I understand SECCA 2022 empowered the Department to develop solutions that balance mission location, footprint, setback, and colocation and will provide increased flexibility for site selection, design, and construction. If confirmed, I am committed to promoting further efficiencies such as using the design-build contracting methodology (as mandated by the FY 2022 State Authorization Act) and exploring ways to increase the number of contractors bidding on these complex construction projects.

Question. Do you commit, if confirmed, to implementing as quickly as possible the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 2022 (SECCA)?

Answer. Yes. I understand the Department formed a high-level coordination group and is working to develop a full implementation plan. If confirmed, I am committed to implementing SECCA 2022 and enhancing diplomatic presence agility; managing risk in the planning, design, and construction of the Department's facilities to respond to evolving national security priorities; and ensuring responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

Question. Do you commit, if confirmed, to implementing as quickly as possible the Diplomatic Support and Security Act (DSSA)?

Answer. If confirmed, I commit to timely implementation of the Diplomatic Support and Security Act. I appreciate Congressional attention to reforming the Accountability Review Board process and providing the Department with greater flexibility to advance U.S. national security priorities and foreign policy.

Question. Do you commit, if confirmed, to briefing my staff on the Department's implementation of SECCA and DSSA within your first 90 days?

Answer. As noted in my confirmation testimony, I have a strong appreciation for the work of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely and collaboratively with the committee and its staff to advance shared, bipartisan priorities, to include regular briefings on the Department's progress toward implementation of SECCA and DSSA Reforms.

Question. Do you believe that there are posts where U.S. diplomats struggle to get outside of Embassy or consulate on a regular basis?

Answer. Engaging with foreign government partners and members of society abroad is critical to advancing U.S. national security interests. While the vast majority of U.S. Government personnel worldwide interact outside Embassy walls unencumbered, there remain a select few locations where factors can occasionally limit or preclude certain engagements. I am heartened by the fact that, even at our high threat/high risk diplomatic missions, roughly 95 percent of engagement requests are approved. As Secretary Blinken said, "we have to accept risk, and manage it smartly." I commit to doing so if confirmed.

Question. Do Chinese, Russian, or Iranian diplomats have trouble accessing local populations in countries in which they operate?

Answer. Foreign diplomats have traditionally been targeted less than American diplomatic personnel. However, based on open-source reporting, Chinese and Russian diplomats may be engaging more frequently in certain high threat locations, but they have done so at great cost. In the last six months alone, Russian diplomats in Kabul, for example, have been killed in front of their own Embassy. A Chinese delegation was present during an attack at the Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while visiting members of the Taliban in their offices. These foreign diplomats were killed while operating with a lower risk threshold than that which the Department insists on to safeguard our personnel.

Question. How do you intend to improve the access of U.S. diplomats to local populations at our posts abroad, especially in high-threat posts where Embassy rules make getting off the compound difficult or nearly impossible?

Answer. Department leadership acknowledge that the U.S. foreign policy mission entails diverse types of risk and remain committed to managing it smartly and appropriately, such as the Department's efforts to re-open Embassy Kyiv. If confirmed, I will ensure the implementation of recent legislation enabling the Department to quickly establish new facilities and continue to expand diplomatic outreach. I look forward to supporting Department initiatives and I will have no higher priority than the safety of U.S. personnel, family members, and facilities overseas.

Question. If confirmed, do you commit to increasing the number of Diplomatic Security officers to better staff priorities and avoid DS personnel burnout?

Answer. If confirmed, I commit to reviewing Diplomatic Security staffing levels and if appropriate, to reviewing existing security requirements and newly imple-

mented NDAA changes and increasing staffing levels as permissible within budgetary limits. In the interim, DS will continue to align its personnel to meet the Department's most critical mission requirements, ensuring the Department is addressing world-wide security incidents and concerns.

Question. If confirmed, how do you intend to implement the Global Health Security and International Pandemic Prevention and Preparedness Act?

Answer. If confirmed, I commit to following and implementing all laws, including the Global Health Security and International Pandemic Prevention and Preparedness Act. I commend Congress for the attention it has brought to strengthening capacities and resources to prevent, detect, and respond to infectious disease threats, including the newly established Pandemic Fund, and I commit to working to ensure the Act's successful implementation at the Department, including in alignment with the Department's proposed Bureau for Global Health Security and Diplomacy.

Question. What concrete steps would you take to effectively organize and resource the Department's new Global Health Bureau to advance the global health security and diplomacy objectives of the United States overseas?

Answer. A unified bureau will streamline internal coordination between the Department's global health security foreign policy efforts and assistance programs, including PEPFAR, by placing these functions under one organizational umbrella within the Department. At the country-level, Chiefs of Mission will continue to direct, supervise, and coordinate all U.S. Government executive branch employees in the country or area of responsibility.

Question. The Department has been late in providing requests or feedback to our committee on State Department authorization, making it difficult or at points impossible to include some Department asks. If confirmed, do you commit to working in a positive manner with our committee on State Department authorization bills?

Answer. Yes.

Question. If confirmed, do you commit to provide the Department's authorization requests by March 17, 2023?

Answer. I recognize and appreciate that working together to develop flexible authorization legislation for the Department is an important process premised on close and transparent communication. If confirmed, I am committed to working within the Department and with interagency partners throughout my tenure to identify and propose to Congress in a timely manner authorities for Department operations that will help the Department advance U.S. foreign policy objectives and take care of our employees both domestically and abroad.

Question. The Department recently agreed to limit severely the definition of worldwide availability and has not been responsive to my requests for a briefing on the situation. What do the words, "worldwide availability" mean to you?

Answer. I understand the Department is considering whether to continue with the specific term "worldwide availability." The proposed medical standard for pre-employment clearance of career Foreign Service applicants is that they meet the minimum medical qualifications to serve at all MEDEVAC posts (currently Bangkok, London, Pretoria, and Singapore) and a unique standard would apply to applicants for medical specialist categories. Assignments will not be limited to those four posts, and employees—including those with a disability—will be expected to bid competitively and serve at a wide variety of posts in consultation with the Bureau of Medical Services.

Question. In your opinion, has the Department effectively eliminated "worldwide availability" by reducing it to just a handful of posts?

Answer. I understand that while the proposed pre-employment medical eligibility standard requires that applicants meet the minimum medical qualifications to serve at MEDEVAC posts, assignments will not be limited to those posts, and employees—including those with a disability—will be expected to serve at a wide variety of posts, in consultation with the Bureau of Medical Services. There are several dozen posts, in every geographical region, with medical capabilities equivalent to those at MEDEVAC posts. I understand this eligibility standard moves the Department towards more diversity, equity, and inclusion throughout the Foreign Service.

Question. I frequently hear from the Department and its personnel that the Foreign Service is akin to the U.S. armed forces. Does the change in definition of "worldwide" availability diminish the similarities between the Foreign Service and our armed forces? If yes, does that demand a reevaluation of employee benefits for the Foreign Service?

Answer. I understand career Foreign Service candidates will still be expected to serve at a wide variety of posts around the world, and the revised standard proposed is not expected to have a material operational effect on the Department's ability to meet its foreign policy and national security mission at posts throughout the globe. I understand the proposed policy will provide more career opportunities in the Foreign Service for persons with a disability as the Department seeks to welcome a broader array of qualified individuals into the ranks of the Foreign Service.

Question. I was troubled to learn last year that the Department has been medically clearing terminally ill Foreign Service Officers for duty abroad, so long as they can receive medical care similar to what they would receive in the United States. What is the purpose of a medical clearance if it does not indicate whether someone is fit for service?

Answer. If confirmed, I will ensure the Department continues to issue medical clearances for assignments in a manner consistent with law and Department policy. Federal privacy laws prevent the Department from commenting on specific cases, and as a nominee I am not privy to this type of information.

Question. In your opinion, should the Department be assigning personnel abroad who are terminally ill?

Answer. If confirmed, I will ensure the Department continues to issue medical clearances in a manner that is consistent with Federal law and Department policy. As things stand, the Department issues a Class 1 clearance to those with no significant medical condition or a Class 2 clearance for those persons for whom the availability of adequate medical care may depend on the post to which they could be assigned. Employees suffering from unstable terminal illnesses are issued a Class 5 clearance. Individuals issued Class 5 clearances are limited to service within the United States.

Question. Does the Department believe a Foreign Service Officer has a right to die while serving abroad?

Answer. I understand the Department works diligently to ensure our employees and their family members are assigned to posts where they can obtain the medical care needed to support medical conditions. In the event an individual's condition deteriorates to the point where local resources cannot provide adequate care, the Department, pursuant to 22 U.S.C. 4081, will evacuate the employee and/or their family either back to the United States or to a regional medical evacuation center where they can obtain the care they need.

Question. Given the small number of posts who can handle Class II cases, does the Department risk overwhelming the capacity of those Embassy medical units?

Answer. I understand many, if not most, of the Department's posts support the medical needs of employees with Class 2 clearances, better known as post-specific clearance. In the event post health units are unable to manage the specific medical condition of an employee, I understand health units will work to arrange for the employee to obtain appropriate care in the country of assignment, and in the event the medical needs of the employee cannot be supported abroad, MED will provide evacuation services as consistent with 22 U.S.C 4081.

Question. What is the ideal time for the State Department to process the average visa and what is the current average time? What accounts for this discrepancy?

Answer. The long wait times for first-time B1/B2 visitor visas in some countries are the result of pent-up visa demand outpacing consular staffing levels when pandemic-related travel restrictions ended. Nonimmigrant visa (NIV) interview wait times are coming down faster than projected due to policy changes, innovations, and staffing surge efforts. For a visitor visa, the median interview wait time is less than two months, half what it was in June 2022. Wait times for all other NIV categories, including students and temporary workers, are at or below pre-pandemic levels.

Question. What steps is the State Department taking to speed up the visa approval process and are there viable alternatives to in person interviews?

Answer. The State Department is pursuing multiple strategies to streamline visa processing and to dedicate more resources to reducing wait times consistent with national security. This includes surging staff overseas, working with DHS to pursue expanded interview waiver authorities for additional categories of low-risk visa applicants, and expanding the development and use of technological solutions to remotely adjudicate applications that do not require interviews. The Department also will soon pilot domestic revalidation of certain petition-based nonimmigrant visas.

Question. Due to the wide variation in wait times for visa appointments, is the State Department focusing on consulates with longer than average wait times? If so, what is the Department doing to support consulates with a longer than average wait time?

Answer. In FY 2022, the Department exceeded pre-pandemic levels of non-immigrant visa issuances in several categories critical to economic and bilateral interests, including for seasonal workers, students, and crewmembers. The Department is surging resources where wait times for B1/B2 visa interviews, needed by would-be first-time visitors, remain high, such as India and Mexico. Consular officers in some locations are remotely adjudicating tens of thousands of interview-waiver visas each week. Visa renewal wait times, crucial to the economy, are low.

Question. Do you have the funding and other resources necessary to reduce wait times for appointments? If not, what do you need in order to reduce the backlog?

Answer. Over the last year and a half, the Department reduced gaps in consular staffing overseas caused by the drop in fee revenue due to the pandemic's near-shutdown of international travel. With the resurgence of travel, the Bureau of Consular Affairs' financial situation has improved. If confirmed, I will strive to ensure that as many adjudicators as possible are assigned to overseas positions, to reach world-wide pre-pandemic staffing by the end of this year. Maintaining expanded spending authorities and additional fee flexibilities would help allow for continued innovation and additional hiring.

Question. When will the State Department return to pre-pandemic processing times?

Answer. In many places, visa wait times have returned to pre-pandemic processing times. Except for first time B1/B2 visitors in certain countries, wait times for all other nonimmigrant categories, including students and temporary workers, are at or below pre-pandemic levels. The Department updates nonimmigrant visa (NIV) wait time information on its public website weekly. Wait times vary depending on the visa category, appointment availability, and demand. The Department issued 13 percent more NIVs in the first quarter of FY 2023 than the same period in FY 2019.

Question. What is the ideal time for the State Department to process the average passport renewal and what is the current average time?

Answer. Processing times vary throughout the year and are dependent upon workload, which increases with seasonal spring and summer travel. I understand from the Department that processing time for passport applications was at pre-pandemic levels until February 6, when it increased with the normal cyclical demand. Processing times are now 8 to 11 weeks for routine service and 5 to 7 weeks for expedited service. The goal is to ensure the average application is processed within service commitments. Most applicants receive their passports weeks earlier than advertised.

Question. What steps is the State Department taking to speed up the passport approval process?

Answer. Processing time for passport applications was at pre-pandemic levels until February 6 when it increased with the normal cyclical demand. I understand from the Department that the Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) instituted an "all hands on deck" posture requiring Passport Services headquarters employees to adjudicate; authorized 30,000 hours of monthly overtime; and recruited volunteers, including re-employed annuitants, to work in the Washington, DC, Satellite Office (akin to a medium-sized agency). Since January 2022, CA hired more than 100 new staff, with more than 200 additional employees in the recruitment pipeline.

Question. From your perspective, what are the differences in roles and responsibilities between the Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources and the Undersecretary of State for Management?

Answer. The Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources and the Under Secretary of State for Management play critical, complementary roles in support of the resilience of our workforce and effective functioning of the Department. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with the Under Secretary for Management and would focus my efforts on addressing enterprise-wide challenges and opportunities domestically and overseas at the intersection of policy, management, and resources.

Question. If confirmed, how would you work with the Undersecretary of State for Management to ensure there are no gaps or overlap in responsibilities? Please de-

scribe your understanding of the anticipated work relationship with the Undersecretary for Management.

Answer. If confirmed, I would work with the Department to approach issues and resource needs that are cross-cutting and interdisciplinary, in coordination with OMB, Congress, and other departments and agencies. The Under Secretary of State for Management has a mix of operational responsibilities in support of the Department's ongoing mission and a focus on implementation and planning to ensure proposed improvements to workforce policies, management practices, and the Department's facilities and associated services are sustainable and effective in a wide range of operating environments, both domestically and overseas.

Question. The Office of the Inspector General found that during the pandemic, the Department encouraged maximum telework for both domestic and overseas staff. COVID-19 cases have drastically declined in the United States and around the world. The Biden administration declared its intent to end the national emergency and public health emergency declarations related to the COVID-19 pandemic on May 11, 2023. If confirmed, would you advocate for the full return to work for all State Department employees, especially when the emergency public health declarations are over?

Answer. Most domestic positions and all overseas positions are on-site routinely to meet mission critical goals. Given its global purview, the Department has always had an asynchronous and distributed workforce. If confirmed, I will ensure the Department continues to improve its agility in the face of 21st century challenges—most notably, the need to support global coverage and to recruit and retain top talent, particularly in competitive fields like information technology.

Question. The Office of the Inspector General found that during the pandemic, the Department encouraged maximum telework for both domestic and overseas staff. COVID-19 cases have drastically declined in the United States and around the world. The Biden administration declared its intent to end the national emergency and public health emergency declarations related to the COVID-19 pandemic on May 11, 2023. How can employees who regularly handle classified information consistently work from home?

Answer. If confirmed, I will support the Department's mission-first priorities. Employees who need classified access will continue to work on-site, with extremely limited exceptions due to security considerations. A very small number of secure communications kits, which allow access to classified information from approved alternate work locations—a home office, for example—are made available to approved personnel to facilitate 24/7 access.

Question. Diversity is now included as a promotion precept at the Department of State. How will the diversity precept be measured or evaluated for promotion?

Answer. I understand the Department issued a document defining the new Core Precept of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) for the global workforce and for the Foreign Service Selection Boards (FSSB). I understand the bureau of Global Talent Management is creating a "Procedural Precepts" document to define for FSSB members the relevant criteria and processes for promotion, including how to use the Core Precepts document to measure performance. I understand that before implementing these guidelines, the Department will negotiate them with AFSA.

Question. What types of activities will reflect positively for promotion in terms of diversity?

Answer. I understand Department employees should promote and demonstrate DEIA principles in interactions with colleagues and interlocutors. Some examples of this would include collaborating with others to achieve Department goals through inclusive teamwork; developing accessible communications for events, engagements, and interactions with the full complement of employees, interlocutors, and the public; actively recruiting and retaining diverse teams and improving methods of attracting diverse candidates for positions; and supporting equity in staff opportunities, roles, and recognition.

Question. What role does the Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer play in the selection process for Deputy Chiefs of Mission and other senior foreign service positions?

Answer. Beginning in 2021, Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer (CDIO) Abercrombie-Winstanley joined the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) Committee, which has oversight of the selection process for DCM, Principal Officer, Deputy Principal Officer, and senior foreign policy advisor (POLAD) positions. The CDIO also joined

the D Committee, chaired by the Deputy Secretary, which makes all Chief of Mission recommendations to the Secretary of State, and approves selection of Principal Deputy Assistant Secretaries and Deputy Assistant Secretaries. The CDIO, along with all committee members, encourages applicants from a variety of diverse backgrounds to compete for these positions, but selection is based on merit.

Question. The State Department has prioritized recruitment efforts in densely populated geographic locations and coastal cities over rural areas. This contributes to overrepresentation by Foreign Service officers from cities and those who can afford to travel great distances in order to take the oral exam required for entry into the Service. If confirmed, how would you work to reduce the costs and other obstacles placed on applicants?

Answer. I understand that the Department has successfully assessed specialist candidates using a virtual platform and is currently working to do the same for Foreign Service generalist candidates, making the hiring process more accessible to all individuals. If confirmed, I will work to continue efforts to reduce obstacles and ensure that oral assessments for FS generalists are also transitioned to a virtual platform.

Question. Our veterans sacrificed much to protect our nation and freedom. Their service, perspective, and experience is immensely valuable, and should be better harnessed by our State Department to advance diplomacy. If confirmed, how would you work to increase veterans' preference in the Foreign Service?

Answer. Upon application, and after passing the Foreign Service Oral Assessment, veterans receive additional points, allowing them to move higher on the rank-ordered Foreign Service specialist and generalist registers. Additionally, veterans may also receive an age waiver to enter the Foreign Service, allowing them to bypass the mandatory age requirements of the Foreign Service. If confirmed, I will work with veterans' groups and Department leadership to determine if additional benefits can be provided within the Federal hiring rules.

Question. A transparent promotion process has the potential to improve the quality of the workforce while also increasing diversity. What actions should the Department take to increase transparency in the promotion process? Should the Department consider changes to the promotion process? If yes, at what levels?

Answer. I understand the Department is developing a scoring tool for Foreign Service Selection Board (FSSB) members to use when evaluating candidates at all levels, as well as a new annual Employee Evaluation Report form that will measure employees at all levels using the same assessment as the FSSB, increasing transparency. With the implementation of the scoring tool, all promotion candidates will now see their average score on each Core Precept, as well as their total score across all Core Precepts, compared with the average total score of those against whom they competed and those who were promoted from their FSSB.

Question. The Department has notified Congress of its desire to create an Office of Anti-Harassment and Bullying Intervention. How is bullying defined? If confirmed, what safeguards would you put in place to avoid the weaponization of anti-bullying efforts through the filing of false claims?

Answer. I understand the Department defines bullying as a single, significant incident and/or pattern of unwelcome behavior that for a reasonable person creates an intimidating, hostile, threatening, or offensive work environment and/or interferes with an individual's work performance. Behavior that to a reasonable person has a demonstrable impact on others may constitute bullying, even if the recipient or target of the bullying behavior indicates they are not offended and/or affected. If confirmed, I will support a standardized and transparent approach to investigate allegations of bullying.

Question. The Inspector General's statement on the Department of State's major management and performance challenges for Fiscal Year 2022 highlighted that Department information systems are subject to serious threats that can lead to exploited weaknesses and compromised sensitive information. An audit of the information security program identified weaknesses in eight of nine information security domains. If confirmed, what steps would you recommend the Department take to ensure that the information systems are authorized to operate and effective monitoring programs are in place?

Answer. If confirmed, I will work with the Department of State to continue addressing the findings identified in the FY2022 OIG FISMA Audit. I will also work with the Department to continue implementing a Zero Trust architecture set forth by Executive Order 14028 and the Federal Chief Information Officer. Finally, if con-

firmed, I will partner with the CISA, the NSA, and other partners to implement cybersecurity best practices, remediate vulnerabilities, and monitor new and existing threats.

Question. The Inspector General's statement on the Department of State's major management and performance challenges for Fiscal Year 2022 found that public members serving on the Department's Foreign Service Selection Boards did not fully meet Department qualifications and that family members and personal friends of Department employees had been selected for these roles. Please describe your view on the importance of transparency in the Foreign Service Selection Board's process. If confirmed, how would you improve management oversight of the public member selection process?

Answer. It is imperative that the State Department ensure the work of the Foreign Service Selection Boards is conducted in a manner that is fair, transparent, and objective. If confirmed, I will hold the team accountable for abiding strictly by the newly issued written policy regarding public member referrals and recusals. I will work closely, if confirmed, with the Director General to oversee the process in which all resumes submitted are collected and tracked centrally, and all public member candidates are interviewed by a panel and ranked on a score sheet that documents their qualifications to serve on a board as established in the Foreign Affairs Manual.

Question. The Inspector General's statement on the Department of State's major management and performance challenges for Fiscal Year 2022 found that Department entities did not consistently and adequately monitor and document contractor and grantee performance. Please describe the importance of conducting oversight of contracts, grants, and foreign assistance domestically and abroad, and explain how you would improve oversight efforts if confirmed.

Answer. I understand the Department will realize better acquisition outcomes by more closely monitoring and frequently assessing contractor and grantee performance. Investing in a quality assurance program and enabling executive decision-making by bolstering access to, and use of, actionable data to monitor cost, schedule, and performance baselines is a must. If confirmed, I would ensure the Department's quality assurance program is improved and augment it with data informed, executive-level governance to drive planning and performance oversight of major business investments.

RESPONSES TO FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Thank you for the request to expand on my responses several questions. I appreciate the Senator's engagement and leadership on these issues, and if confirmed, I look forward to working with the Senator and his staff to address any remaining concerns.

If confirmed, the safety and security of the Department's personnel, family members, and facilities will be my first and foremost priority. As I said during my nominations hearing, COVID-19 presented an unprecedented challenge. This is true not only for the Department, but for organizations around the world.

As I understand it, the Department was faced with balancing compliance with certain local regulations on COVID-19 testing that would permit our personnel to remain in China and 50 other missions around the world, and asserting diplomatic immunity to object to such testing which would have prevented them from entering China or would have led to their departure. The balance the Department struck is one that allowed U.S. personnel to enter and remain in the country. The alternative was to exit China and over 50 other missions around the world, thus, severely impacting our diplomatic footprint at a time where direct engagement and international cooperation and coordination were critical.

Staying or getting into a country, in some cases, meant that the U.S. Government had to authorize limited waivers of personal inviolability for U.S. personnel, who enjoyed personal inviolability based on their particular accreditation status in order to allow them to be tested on arrival and in some circumstances quarantined. As a nominee who was not at the Department during the relevant period, I am not familiar with the specific cases, but I do commit to go back and review the situation at the Mission in China if confirmed, and to draw any lessons learned and process improvements that could be made for the future. I would intend to work closely with the committee on this set of issues.

I was not surprised to hear, and am encouraged, that upon arriving at post, Ambassador Burns committed to the Embassy community, and subsequently communicated to the PRC, that he would not permit any American Mission personnel to

be forced into a Chinese “fever hospital” or COVID isolation hospital. I strongly support that decision, and if confirmed, I will work to ensure that protocol continues.

Question. If confirmed, do you commit to immediately reviewing the waivers of diplomatic immunity for our mission personnel in China, and revoke them?

- If confirmed, do you commit to review similar waivers the U.S. agreed to in more than 50 other countries?

Answer. Yes, if confirmed, I commit to review the limited waivers of personal inviolability of our mission personnel in China, as well as similar diplomatic waivers across more than 50 other countries. I will conduct this review in consultation with Department experts and take appropriate action, as needed, to ensure protection of our mission personnel and the maintenance of an effective diplomatic footprint. I will certainly confer closely with the committee on this.

My understanding from the Department is that these waivers were not “blanket” in nature, but rather individual. That is to say, waivers were specifically issued for each traveler or group of travelers that came to post that applied to a specific testing requirement. Therefore, there are generally not ongoing waivers to revoke or rescind with the host nations.

Question. Would you agree to waivers of diplomatic immunity for Embassy personnel in an adversarial country like China?

Answer. As noted in my QFR’s, if confirmed and presented with a similar situation of waiving diplomatic immunity in an adversarial or other country, I would weigh the hardship placed on the Mission’s personnel by the particular local requirement at issue, the consequences to our diplomatic presence of asserting immunity and not complying with the requirement, and the national security interest of remaining in country. It’s hard to predict where I would come out in a hypothetical without knowing the full set of facts applicable to each case, but I can assure you, if confirmed, the safety and security of the Department’s personnel, family members, and facilities will be my first and foremost priority with respect to any decision that comes before my desk. If and when these situations arise in the future, we would certainly keep you and the committee fully informed and apprised.

Question. Do you commit to consultation with Congress before taking any steps to waive diplomatic immunity for Embassy personnel in an adversarial country like China?

Answer. If confirmed and presented with a similar decision on waivers of diplomatic immunity for Embassy personnel in an adversarial country during unusual circumstances, such as those seen during the COVID–19 pandemic, I commit to keeping Congress regularly informed on our policy and approach with respect to such matters. This includes, but is not limited to, abiding by the statutory notification requirements recently enacted under the NDAA.

Question. Does the Department commit not to nominate or re-nominate to a Senate-confirmed position any officials who were involved in developing or approving the policy to comply with the PRC’s COVID protocols, including detention in fever clinics, invasive, non-transparent testing procedures, and arbitrary movement restrictions and lockdowns, family separation, and the limited waivers of inviolability (in 2020 and 2022) that allowed these practices to happen?

Answer. As noted in my initial responses, decisions with respect to nominating or re-nominating officials to Senate-confirmed positions is solely the prerogative of the President, not the Department. Even if I were in a position to make such a commitment, I could not do so as a nominee without knowing all of the facts and circumstances that went into those decisions.

If confirmed, I will serve on the committee that recommends career Chief-of-Mission candidates. I will take that responsibility seriously and I am committed to working with the Secretary and the Department leadership to ensure the Department identifies officers that exercise sound judgment and leadership in challenging posts, including reviewing decision-making in the wake of COVID–19.

Question. In briefings to SFRC staff and in formal front-channel communications, the Department confirmed that 30 Americans had been detained in Chinese fever clinics. Following press reports on the situation at Mission China, this number was revised to 16. What accounts for the change in the number of Americans the Department says were detained in Chinese fever clinics? During which period of time and under what definitions of “American,” and “detained,” were these figures determined?

Answer. My understanding from the Department is that a total of 30 individuals (including U.S. Government employees or family members) tested positive for

COVID-19 upon arrival in China and entered PRC COVID protocols. Of these 30, 16 spent some time in a fever hospital. The remaining 14 were able to clear COVID protocols by PRC health authorities short of fever hospital admittance.

RESPONSES TO ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD SUBMITTED
TO HON. RICHARD R. VERMA BY SENATOR CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

Question. I understand that State has made significant improvements to the security clearance process in the last three years, and that 90 percent of cases are now processed well under the government-wide standard. However, 10 percent of cases take considerably longer, often due to delays within the U.S. Government, as other agencies do not respond in a timely manner. This leaves jobs unfilled and employees frustrated by the opaque process. If confirmed, how will you engage with other government agencies to ensure that the U.S. Government is not responsible for egregious delays in processing security clearances?

Answer. The Department continues to foster relationships with interagency partners to coordinate the expedient processing of security clearances and ensuring a trusted workforce. By bridging the communications gap, the Department has already seen a decrease in response times and faster timelines.

If confirmed, I commit to aiding Diplomatic Security to further modernize the security clearance process in line with the Secretary of State's modernization agenda and to ensuring that 10 percent of cases that may take longer than the average processing time are being addressed appropriately.

Question. Foreign national employees are the backbone of our foreign policy operations abroad. As U.S. Ambassador to India, you have firsthand knowledge of the critical role that our local experts play, from knowing the roads and traffic patterns in order to safely transport employees, to providing critical political insight on local issues. Since 1952, the U.S. has had a program to reward our most loyal employees abroad by allowing them to seek an immigrant visa after 15 years of exceptional service. However, I understand that this program is now in jeopardy due to increased demand for other visas in this category and resultant wait times. Can you explain how this program has ended up with such a concerning backlog, after operating without issue for nearly 70 years? Can you provide estimated numbers of the backlog?

Answer. The EB-4 immigrant visa category covers multiple categories of "special immigrants," including our locally employed (LE) staff overseas, "special immigrant juveniles" (SIJs)—certain unaccompanied minors who arrive at the southwest border—and other important groups. Congress sets an annual cap on the number of EB-4 visas available. Increased demand and a lower EB-4 limit for FY 1A2023 means LE staff and others now face an unusually long waiting period before visas are available. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress and our interagency partners on how to reduce this backlog.

Question. Can you describe the importance of the special immigrant visa program for U.S. Government employees abroad, and the impact that any disruption in this program will have on morale and retention?

Answer. The services provided by our locally employed U.S. Government colleagues overseas are indispensable, and the sacrifices they make on behalf of the United States are deeply valued. Due to recent increased demand for immigrant visas in the employment based fourth-preference category, local staff approved for special immigrant visa status now face a multi-year wait for a visa, as the demand exceeds the limited number of EB-4 visas available under the annual statutory cap. This wait and uncertainty harms local staff morale, recruitment, and retention. If confirmed, I look forward to working with Congress and our interagency partners on how to reduce this backlog.

Question. What steps is State taking to address the increased demand for this visa category? What additional legislative authority is needed to remedy this issue?

Answer. Demand for the EB-4 immigrant visa category derives from geopolitical and migration realities outside of the immediate control of the Department.

The Department of State cannot meet demand under the numerical limitations of the statute. Amending the INA could help to ensure certain groups covered under the EB-4 visa category are able to obtain immigrant visas upon completion of their qualifying service.

Question. Both the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the U.S. Department of State are charged with the protection of U.S. citizens abroad. However, it appears that we have allowed 40 countries to enter the Visa Waiver Program without a clear way to measure or assess reciprocal treatment of U.S. citizens, despite reciprocity being a key feature of the Visa Waiver Program. This program has existed since 1986, but there has been no effort to confirm that U.S. citizens are being treated fairly regardless of race, national origin, ethnicity, or religious background. If confirmed, how will you work to protect U.S. citizens abroad, and assess reciprocal treatment in all visa waiver and visa waiver-aspirant countries?

Answer. A key statutory requirement is that all Visa Waiver Program (VWP) countries extend privileges to U.S. citizens and nationals reciprocal to those that the U.S. extends to the citizens of VWP countries. This important principle includes that all U.S. citizens and nationals are treated equally without regard to race, religion, ethnicity, or national origin. The Department of Homeland Security in consultation with the Department of State is statutorily required to review at least every two years the effects of each VWP country's program designation on U.S. national security, law enforcement, and immigration interests.

RESPONSES TO ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD
SUBMITTED TO HON. RICHARD R. VERMA BY SENATOR MARCO RUBIO

Question. In May 2022, Secretary Blinken said that the People's Republic of China is the "only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) clearly holds all the reins of power in the People's Republic of China and has used this power to violate the sovereignty of the United States by flying spy balloons over our country, committing an ongoing genocide in Xinjiang, flood our communities with fentanyl, and emit by far the largest quantity of greenhouse gases. With their absolute control of Chinese society and industry, the CCP could stop all of these destructive actions tomorrow if they so choose. Is the Chinese Communist Party a threat to the United States?

Answer. The President has made it clear the United States views the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a strategic competitor that challenges the existing rules-based international order. Under President Xi, the Chinese Communist Party has become more repressive at home and more assertive abroad. We will defend and strengthen U.S. national security, prosperity, and values; defend international law and agreements and the other principles and institutions that maintain peace and security; protect the rights of individuals and sovereign nations; and make it possible for all countries to coexist and cooperate.

Question. Does the Chinese Communist Party undertake any activities that are beneficial to U.S. interests?

Answer. The United States will work with the PRC where our interests are aligned. We cannot let the disagreements that divide us stop us from moving forward on transnational issues that demand that we work together, for the good of the American people and for the good of the world.

Question. I note that you worked at Albright-Stonebridge Group, a consulting firm that does a significant amount of business in China. This is rather concerning. Do you have any remaining business interests in China or with Chinese companies?

Answer. No.

Question. Are there any areas in which the Chinese Communist Party could constructively work with the United States in good faith? If so, what are they?

Answer. The United States will work with the PRC where our interests are aligned. This includes exploring possible cooperation on transnational challenges such as counter-narcotics, global health, and food security. We cannot let disagreements that divide us stop us from making progress on the priorities that demand we work together, for the good of the American people and for the good of the world.

Question. Are you confident that our facilities and personnel in the People's Republic of China are safe from Chinese Communist Party directed interference and harassment?

Answer. If confirmed, I will have no higher priority than the safety of U.S. Government personnel, family members, and facilities overseas. All U.S. Government facilities, to include the U.S. Mission in China, operate consistent with applicable se-

curity programs and in consultation with Mission China leadership standards. Protecting personnel and facilities through the pandemic took extraordinary efforts by the Department's team and this focus will continue to be required as the operating environment changes.

Question. If confirmed, what policies would you put in place to ensure the safety and security of American diplomats posted to China?

Answer. The Department continues to evaluate and adjust the security posture as needed to ensure the safety of U.S. Government personnel, and family member, and facilities in the People's Republic of China. If confirmed, I will have no greater priority.

Question. Last month, the Administration stated it will terminate the COVID-19 public health emergency in May 2023. During the pandemic, the State Department significantly expanded telework eligibility for Civil Service and Foreign Service employees domestically, as well as overseas. It is time to bring back these employees into their respective offices, embassies, and consulates to properly provide services for the American people and conduct in-person diplomacy. U.S. Passport adjudication backlogs cannot be completed from an employee's dining room table and diplomacy to counter CCP influence around the world should not be conducted via a video conference on a boat in the Caribbean.

Answer. Overseas, all U.S. direct hire employees are in the office. As of April%, 2022, the Department adopted an All-Functions posture domestically, enabling full onsite engagement for all tasks requiring in-person presence. If confirmed, I will continue to support the Secretary's Modernization Agenda, under which the Department's Future of Work Plan employs a "Mission First" core guiding principle. This principle ensures that flexibilities augment our ability to deliver on our mission.

Question. Are you aware of the current backlog of U.S. Passports applications?

Answer. In FY2022, Consular Affairs adjudicated the highest number of passport products in history. I understand from the Department that processing time for passport applications was at pre-pandemic levels until February 6 when it increased with the normal cyclical demand. New application volumes are higher than volumes seen at the same time of year pre-pandemic. The Department increased capacity by hiring new staff, recruiting internal volunteers, requiring Passport Services headquarters employees to adjudicate, and authorizing 30,000 hours of monthly overtime.

Question. Should all Consular Affairs employees be back in the office to clear this backlog?

Question. In FY2022, Consular Affairs (CA) adjudicated the highest number of passport products in history. I understand from the Department that processing time was at pre-pandemic levels until February 6 when it increased with the normal cyclical demand. As of late August 2021, all adjudicators returned to work in the office. CA instituted an "all hands on deck" posture, requiring Passport Services headquarters employees to adjudicate; authorized 30,000 hours of monthly overtime; and recruited volunteers, including re-employed annuitants, to work in Washington D.C.'s Satellite Office (akin to a medium-sized agency).

Question. Should employees assigned to overseas posts be authorized telework from another country or domestically?

Answer. I understand in certain circumstances employees assigned to our overseas posts may be granted permission to telework while on medical travel or emergency visitation travel in the United States. This policy both helps posts accomplish their missions and take care of people. I understand employees assigned overseas are not permitted to telework from another overseas location or in other circumstances from the United States and "Third country" telework is not permitted.

Question. If telework remains authorized for our diplomatic missions overseas, why should the U.S. have a physical presence in our embassies and consulates if the work can be done remotely from the United States?

Answer. I understand Department policies do not allow for regularly scheduled or core telework for U.S. direct hire employees assigned abroad. Department telework policy permits situational telework only for U.S. direct hire employees assigned overseas. This means that supervisors have discretion to permit their employees to telework in certain circumstances including security situations, traffic disruptions, quarantine due to COVID-19, and other situations when the supervisor deems telework the best option for the employee to meet the needs of the mission.

Question. Should the U.S. taxpayer cover the costs of housing and other benefits for diplomats assigned overseas, but choose to work from the United States?

Answer. Housing and benefits are based on the location of assignment, which is the physical location where the officer is stationed. Foreign Service Officers and specialists assigned overseas, work overseas. Only in exceptional, temporary circumstances would they work from the United States. The Department provides housing for diplomats stationed overseas to ensure that employees at our over 260 U.S. diplomatic missions around the world have secure and functional residences to carry out U.S. foreign policy objectives consistent with their assignment abroad.

Question. It is critically important that we have a Foreign Service that is designed to meet the needs of this century. The talent we have recruited to the Foreign Service is impressive, but there are ways to further strengthen how we identify new talent and train the workforce that we have. During the Cold War of the last century, the State Department recognized the need to deal with the global threat of the Soviet Union, by hiring Russian speakers and experts on communist ideology. To meet the challenges of this century, our Foreign Service must be structured to counter the malign influence of the Chinese Communist Party, which is now our main geopolitical threat. If confirmed, what would you do to shift the focus of the Foreign Service toward developing regional expertise and advanced language skills, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region?

Answer. The State Department is focused on ensuring its foreign affairs professionals have the regional expertise and language skills necessary to responsibly manage engagement with the PRC, the United States' most complicated bilateral relationship. If confirmed, I would support the Department's recent launch of a Global China training course to deepen officers' understanding of how China exercises influence around the world and how the U.S. can counter that influence. If confirmed, I would also support the Department's plan to train additional critical officers in Chinese and to maintain advanced Chinese language skills.

Question. If the generalist model is to be retained, are you prepared to carve out a separate track for political and economic officers who specialize in one region and/or critical language?

Answer. While I am open to exploring changes, if confirmed, I understand that the current system ensures the Department has a well-rounded, skilled diplomatic corps. Foreign Service Generalist Officers are our key interlocutors with foreign governments, engage with foreign citizens, work to ensure the safety and security of U.S. citizens, and advance U.S. interests abroad. Many gain expertise in a language or region over their career. Given the global scale on which we compete, it is important that our officers be able to succeed in a variety of circumstances and conditions.

Question. If confirmed, will you commit to an evaluation of the personnel numbers in each region and adjust accordingly?

Answer. Yes. I understand the Department is currently in the process of reviewing positions, both domestically and overseas, for potential realignment to better support policy priorities.

Question. Since the start of the Biden Administration, the State Department has been in the business of exporting the same "woke" policies that divide our nation to our allies and partners. From sponsoring drag theater performances in South America to criticizing partners in the Indo-Pacific for same-sex marriage laws, State has placed divisive social objectives over our stated national security priorities. You are currently a member of the board of trustees with the Ford Foundation, correct?

Answer. Yes.

Question. I assume you are aware of the Ford Foundation's stated position to promote abortion access overseas in the name of democracy?

Answer. I am aware of the Ford Foundation's position on women's rights, including reproductive health services. Members of the board of trustees do not approve individual grants.

Question. If confirmed, will you support policies that put the American taxpayer on the hook for providing abortions for State Department employees, even if those employees are stationed in a nation where abortion is illegal?

Answer. I recognize and respect there are restrictions under U.S. federal law on using government funds for abortion services. If confirmed, I will execute the duties of my office and execute the functions of the Department consistent with federal law and Department policy both domestically and overseas.

Question. After the tragic East Africa bombings of the 1990s, the State Department's Accountability Review Board recognized the need for Diplomatic Security Special Agents, called Regional Security Officers (RSO) when overseas, to have direct lines of communication to convey accurate and timely threat information and provide security advice to senior State department leadership. Those recommendations resulted in the RSO no longer reporting to Management officers overseas and directly to the Ambassador. Unfortunately, those recommendations were only implemented overseas and as the events unfolded in Benghazi, Libya, the Assistant Secretary of Diplomatic Security in State Department headquarters did not have the ability to directly brief or provide advice to the Secretary of State, or Deputy Secretaries, here in Washington, without going through multiple layers of bureaucracy. In an increasingly dangerous world, where authoritarian regimes are waging war on sovereign states and operating undercover overseas police outposts, this inability to report unvarnished, accurate, and timely threat information regarding our overseas operations to our chief decision makers in the department puts our diplomats at risk.

- Why does the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security still report to the Undersecretary for Management, instead of directly to the Secretary in Washington, given the need to provide direct and timely security advice and while this reporting chain was eliminated at our overseas missions?

Answer. Direct engagement with foreign partners outside Embassy walls is at the heart of diplomacy. From my time as Chief of Mission in India, I recognize the importance of direct and frank threat security assessments from Diplomatic Security (DS) advisors to guide how the U.S. Government balances foreign policy imperatives and risks to U.S. Government personnel. By law, the DS Assistant Secretary reports directly to the Secretary as threats and circumstances require. If confirmed, I am committed to ensuring the Department respects Congress's intent of direct access to the Secretary.

Question. Would you agree that the passage of timely threat information and advice needs to be received in a timely manner directly to the Secretary and Deputy Secretaries, while not being pre-screened by a non-security professional?

Answer. I agree accurate and timely threat information reporting and security advice is critical to smartly balancing risk and our foreign policy objectives. By law, the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security has direct access to the Secretary as threats and circumstances require. If confirmed, I am committed to ensuring the Department respects Congress's intent of direct access to the Secretary by the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security, so that the Secretary has a comprehensive view of the risks inherent in diplomacy.

Question. The Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism (SEAS) is responsible for developing and implementing policies to combat antisemitism overseas and plays a critical role in urging and advising foreign governments to take measures to ensure the safety and security of their respective Jewish communities. Vital to its mission is adequate staffing levels and continuity between Administrations. How many positions (full time, part-time, and temporary) currently exist within the SEAS Office as well as the title, hiring mechanisms, and funding sources for such positions.

Answer. I understand from the Department that the staffing of J/SEAS currently consists of five FTEs, three of which are career (two Civil Service, one Foreign Service), one presidential appointment, and one schedule C, all funded via the American Salaries operating account within the Diplomatic Programs appropriation. FTEs include a Special Envoy, a Deputy Special Envoy, one Political Officer, and two Foreign Affairs Officers.

Question. Are there plans to provide the SEAS Office with additional positions or adjust staffing in the coming year?

Answer. I understand there are no current plans to provide additional positions to the SEAS Office or to adjust staffing at this time.

Question. What is the State Department's plan to ensure continuity within the SEAS Office between administrations and before a Special Envoy is confirmed?

Answer. Antisemitism is rising rapidly around the world. I know both the Department and Congress takes countering global antisemitism seriously. The SEAS Act, which elevated the rank of the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism to the rank of Ambassador, was signed into law in January 2021. It is my understanding the Department is still formulating a comprehensive plan to ensure continuity between administrations and special envoys. If confirmed, I will ensure

the SEAS office receives the resources it needs and a continuity plan is in place so the important work of the office can continue without disruption.

RESPONSES TO AN ADDITIONAL QUESTION FOR THE RECORD
SUBMITTED TO HON. RICHARD R. VERMA BY SENATOR TODD YOUNG

Question. The President has issued the PMA (or the President's Management Agenda) for initiatives designed to make government more citizen-centered, effective, and efficient. Using the passport processing crisis as an example—current passport processing times are not at pre-pandemic levels and the expediting program called “Hand-Carry” which supports urgent passport processing for Americans is not back to full operation. If confirmed, what would be your plan to return all remote workers to on-sight work and how should the Department leverage or utilize existing technologies in the private sector that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of those workers?

Answer. In FY2022, Consular Affairs adjudicated the highest number of passport products in history. Processing time for passport applications was at pre-pandemic levels until February 6, when it increased with the normal cyclical demand. As of late August 2021, all adjudicators returned to work in the office. Counter and courier services are at or above pre-COVID levels. The Department is evaluating strategies and leveraging existing technologies to alleviate backlogs and manage the demands of our workload effectively, including by piloting remote processing via On-line Passport Renewal.
