

Statement of Hugo Yon
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Maldives
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
March 15, 2023

Chair Murphy, Ranking Member Hagerty, and distinguished Members of the Committee, it is a privilege to appear before you today. I thank President Biden and Secretary Blinken for their confidence in me and for their support in nominating me to become the first U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Maldives.

I want to thank my spouse, Liza, without whose support and sacrifice over nearly two decades I would not be sitting here today. I also want to recognize my children, Hudson and Hannah, who similarly have had to endure and enjoy the itinerant life of diplomacy. If my parents were alive today, our life of public service would bring smiles to their faces. My father and his family ran from China during the tumultuous decade of the cultural revolution. After immigrating to the United States, he rebuilt his life ultimately becoming a civilian engineer for the U.S. Navy. My parents taught me that one can pursue the American dream, but also serve his or her community and help others advance. I carry these life lessons into the work of diplomacy, where we shape global rules and norms that allow Americans to compete and prosper, but also provide opportunity for other countries to join in and benefit from an open, free, prosperous, and secure world order.

If confirmed, I would help build the foundation to facilitate U.S.-Maldives ties for decades to come. As we take this important step toward strengthening our bilateral relationship, Maldives stands at a historical juncture in its own development. I would prioritize expanding and deepening our partnership with Maldives in the areas of democracy, diversification, and defense.

On democracy, Maldives is scheduled in the early fall to elect its president for just the fourth time. As a young democracy, Maldives has been building the institutions to support and strengthen the democratic process. The country made strong commitments at the Summit for Democracy. If confirmed, I would continue to prioritize the work of the State Department, USAID, and the Department of Justice in sustaining and strengthening democracy in Maldives.

On diversification, Maldives faces limited options to shape, resist, and adapt to global forces, whether those forces take the form of economic, transnational, or environmental challenges. Maldives is well known as a world class tourism destination. That strength is also a source of vulnerability for the economy, because Maldives relies so heavily on this single industry. Even as the country endeavors through infrastructure investments to expand tourism, sustain its fisheries, develop additional sectors, and adapt to sea level rise and land erosion, it faces vulnerabilities. If confirmed, I would build on our work with Maldives on financial management and transparency. I also look forward to facilitating deeper American business engagement and U.S. educational and training opportunities to help Maldives diversify economic choices for its people and meet the unique challenges that small island nations face.

Furthermore, Maldives has embraced the principle that all countries should engage peacefully for an open, free, prosperous, and secure Indo-Pacific region. In the United Nations, it stood firm against Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The country has played a positive role in international organizations in search of solutions to global challenges, including on climate change. If confirmed, I would deepen our work on regional and global challenges of mutual priority.

Third, on defense, the vast waters of Maldives' exclusive economic zone sit upon a critical global sea lane through which a significant portion of the world's energy and goods transit. In securing these waters, the Maldivian people face transnational threats such as trafficking, illegal and unreported fishing, violent extremist, terrorism, and communicable diseases as well as the environment and global economic forces I mentioned earlier. Maldives also must contend with actors who seek to undermine democratic values and erode the sovereignty and security of nations. We are addressing this broad set of challenges, including through our 2020 defense cooperation agreement, robust military exchanges, and engagement by multiple State Department bureaus and partner agencies. If confirmed, I would continue to expand our multi-faceted partnership to support Maldives' efforts to maintain the security, integrity and openness of the vast ocean territory we both work to protect.

Finally, at the top of my daily priorities list will be safeguarding our people, including the over 60,000 Americans who visit Maldives' signature tourism destinations each year.

I look forward to your questions.