

Testimony of William Heidt
Nominee for Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
June 23, 2015

Chairman Gardner, Ranking Member Cardin, and Members of the Committee,

It is an honor and privilege to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia. I am deeply grateful to President Obama and Secretary Kerry for the confidence and trust they have placed in me by nominating me for this position. If confirmed, I pledge to work closely with this committee to advance the United States' broad range of interests in a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous Cambodia.

I am accompanied today by my wife, Sotie and son Allen, who have served overseas tours with me in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Poland.

I have spent the bulk of my 28-year Foreign Service career working on the interlinked challenges of promoting America's prosperity around the world and helping developing countries enact the policies and build the institutions they need to, improve living standards for all, protect the environment, and compete in the global economy.

One of my most memorable Foreign Service tours was in Phnom Penh, from 1997-99, where I worked on some of the most critical issues facing Cambodia—controlling rampant illegal logging, feeding the 10 percent of the country who went hungry every dry season, and helping the Cambodian government build a sustainable garment industry with decent and dignified conditions of work. I am proud that in 2000, after my return from Phnom Penh, I was awarded the joint Department of State – Department of Labor award for labor diplomacy for my work strengthening workers' rights in Cambodia's garment sector.

Cambodia has changed significantly since that time. Cambodia's GDP has grown more than seven percent annually for the past decade on the strength of increased agricultural production, a booming tourism industry, investment in real estate and construction, and growth in garment exports. As a result, the poverty rate fell from well over 50 percent in 2000 to just over 17 percent in 2012, and is surely lower today. Life expectancy has increased from 67 years in 2006 to 71.2 years in 2013, due to improved food security and health care. If confirmed, I plan to make growing the trade and investment relationship between the U.S. and Cambodia a priority. I also hope to advance our cooperation on health issues, which make a direct impact on the Cambodian people.

Cambodia's performance on human rights and democracy issues has been more uneven than its economic progress. The most recent national elections in 2013 drew unprecedented public involvement and were the most peaceful in Cambodian history but were also marred by allegations of fraud. After a year-long, post-election standoff, the ruling party and opposition reached an agreement on power sharing in the National Assembly and to reform the country's election law as well as Cambodia's National Election Committee, which oversees elections.

But despite these negotiated agreements, concerns remain, including with regard to provisions that appear to limit the activities of non-governmental organizations in the democracy area and open the door for increased influence by the Cambodian military and other government officials in election campaigns. The United States has a long history of supporting Cambodia's democratic development through foreign assistance funding and people-to-people contacts. If confirmed, I will make it a priority to work with the government, opposition, and civil society to strengthen Cambodia's democratic institutions and raise the level of public confidence in them. Conducting free and fair communal elections in 2017, and national elections in 2018, will be a key test for the Government.

The building of a vibrant, home grown civil society is one of Cambodia's most impressive achievements since the 1993 Paris Peace Accords ended years of conflict. Cambodian and international NGOs deliver crucial social services, educate the public on issues ranging from health to information technology, build people-to-people contacts with countries around the world, and develop the skills of thousands of Cambodian workers. It is no exaggeration to say that NGOs are one of Cambodia's finest faces to the world.

But NGOs in Cambodia today face deep uncertainty in the form of a draft Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organizations that is soon to be considered in the National Assembly. Provisions in this draft law would appear to limit, in vague terms, the activities NGOs may engage in, and create burdensome registration and reporting requirements for NGOs. The United States has spoken about these concerns, the lack of public consultations to date on the law, and the law's overall intent. If confirmed, I will work closely with civil society and the Government to encourage the creation of stable, and supportive conditions for a vibrant civil society in Cambodia.

Cambodia has also made progress in recent years on several crucial humanitarian and justice issues. With assistance from the U.S. government and a number of NGOs, Cambodia has made great strides in reducing child sex trafficking—one of saddest, and most pernicious social problems the country has faced. The State Department and USAID continue to work with Cambodia to reduce labor trafficking, which remains a significant problem in both Cambodia and neighboring countries. The United States supports the work of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal to help the people of Cambodia find justice and hold accountable those most responsible for the

atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge. We will continue to work with fellow Tribunal supporters and the Cambodian government to ensure the Tribunal completes its critical mission. And as one of the few Asian countries that is party to the Refugee Convention, Cambodia has made important progress in developing procedures to identify and protect refugees. At the same time, if confirmed, I will strongly urge it to apply those protections to people seeking asylum on its territory, including the Montagnards from Vietnam.

Cambodia is playing an increasingly active role in the Southeast Asia region. The United States supports Cambodia's reemergence on the world diplomatic stage, and has encouraged it to play an independent, principled role in ASEAN and other regional institutions. We have supported Cambodia's integration into the ASEAN Economic Community and collaborated with Cambodia in the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative or YSEALI. Through YSEALI, the United States is engaging with the 65 percent of Southeast Asians under the age of 35 and encouraging them to view their countries' goals and challenges in a regional context. The program has been enormously popular in Cambodia, and if confirmed, I will make youth engagement a priority.

Mr. Chairman, it is fitting to conclude my testimony with a few words about Cambodia's young people. Cambodia is one of the youngest nations in Southeast Asia with 70 percent of the population under 35. Most Cambodians were not even born during the brutal Khmer Rouge period and years of civil war, events that continue to define our perceptions of Cambodia. Young Cambodians today are very favorably disposed toward the United States, and like young people everywhere, want good jobs, a chance to engage in the political and social life of their country, and the opportunity to build a family. They are one of the main reasons I am optimistic about the country's future.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.