

Statement of Ambassador Mari Carmen Aponte
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Panama
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
May 18, 2022

Chairman, Ranking Member, distinguished Members of the Committee, I feel honored and grateful for the trust and confidence President Biden and Secretary Blinken placed in me by nominating me to serve as United States Ambassador to the Republic of Panama. It is an honor to appear before you for the second time, after having served as Ambassador to El Salvador and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere. I look forward to discussing my view of the bilateral relationship and how I will make it even more productive and dynamic if confirmed as ambassador.

The United States and Panama have a long history of partnership and collaboration to advance mutual goals. We remain Panama's largest trade partner and its number one source of foreign direct investment. Panama's location and role in global trade, due to the Panama Canal, make its success important to both U.S. prosperity and national security. Traffic to or from the United States represents nearly seventy percent of all Canal transits.

Panama's strategic location along major land and sea transit routes makes it critical in the interdiction of illicit drugs destined for the United States and a vital partner in addressing irregular migration. As a carbon negative country, Panama has the potential to serve as an environmental model not only for the region but for the world.

While Panama and the United States have ample historical, cultural, and economic ties, challenges exist in the bilateral relationship. Each year, thousands of migrants take a perilous journey through the Darién Gap, many passing through Panama on their way to the United States. We must find more ways to work together to manage migration, provide protection, and give potential irregular migrants incentives to remain in their home countries.

We must also continue to promote democratic governance and rule of law. Corruption, a serious challenge in Panama, has a corrosive effect on many layers of the state; we must not allow it to progress further. The government efforts to enforce recent anti-money laundering reforms and to correct deficiencies required for Panama's removal from the Financial Action Task Force's Grey List will

determine Panama's financial stability and attractiveness to investors. Panama also suffers from organized criminal activity, which threatens to undermine democratic institutions and economic prosperity.

If confirmed, I will use my position as ambassador to strengthen our relationship with Panama and build the security and prosperity of the entire region. This includes continuing our engagement with Panamanian government ministries, civil society, and the private sector to showcase our strong partnership and hedge against problematic PRC influence and activities. We need a stable, strong, and secure Panama, and Panama needs the United States as a friend, ally, and partner.

Effective implementation of U.S. foreign policy in Panama requires a cohesive, diligent, and effective whole-of-U.S.-government team, and we have an extraordinary interagency embassy team in Panama. The Mission's efforts center on the strategic work of ensuring the United States remains a valued partner, collaboratively managing migration through the Darién, and the battle against corruption that threatens the foundations of institutional democracy. Just as I did in El Salvador as U.S. Ambassador there, I want to empower and listen to the Embassy team to make the bilateral relationship stronger, more effective, and more dynamic. If confirmed, I will prioritize strengthening diversity and inclusion. I commit to ensuring our workplace remains a safe, fair, and just space for all.

The challenges we face, now more than ever, call for strong, smart, and vibrant diplomacy. Panama can and should serve as a key player in confronting Central America's challenges. We will strengthen bilateral ties by reaching out to the complete spectrum of Panamanian society, not just to government leaders and the country's elite, but to community leaders, minority and women's groups, youth, and all facets of civil society. We are going to do this with Panama, hand-in-hand, so that together we can move forward stronger.

If confirmed, I will lead our Embassy team in Panama City with pride and dedication and look forward to keeping you apprised of our progress. I will prioritize protecting U.S. citizens in Panama while championing the interests of the United States in cooperation with our Panamanian friends.

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