

Statement of Yohannes Abraham
Nominee to be Representative of the United States of America
to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
July 13, 2022

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

I am honored to be here today. I am grateful to President Biden and Secretary Blinken for placing their confidence in me to serve as the U.S. Representative to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and I want to thank the Members of this Committee for your consideration of my nomination.

I also want to thank the most important people in my life: my family. Our story is a familiar one, and it is one that is only possible in this greatest of nations. This country welcomed my parents with open arms when the country of their birth was being torn apart by the cruel ravages of a dictator. With no money and no connections, but with faith and determination, they worked all manner of jobs to put themselves through college and graduate school. They went on to become successful professionals and small-business owners, as well as active members of our community of Springfield, Virginia. They raised my sister and me to love this country that had given them so much. They are the two most incredible people I have ever known, and they are the reason I am sitting here today.

The United States is a great nation. We are also a Pacific power, with deep roots and critical interests in the region. If confirmed, I look forward to working closely with Congress to realize our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, one where countries and individuals are able to make independent decisions free from coercion.

Southeast Asia's economically vibrant, youthful, and growing populations are at the heart of realizing that vision, which is why the Administration has made clear our commitment to ASEAN and its centrality. Our relationship is about collaboration to meet shared challenges and opportunities, including health security, energy and climate issues, and the economic prosperity of our combined one billion people. If confirmed, I would look to build on the recent U.S.-ASEAN Special Summit, including by continuing a whole-of-government effort to build ASEAN's own capacity to act on its interests.

Our vision for the U.S.-ASEAN relationship is a positive one; it is defined by what we are for. At the same time, I am clear-eyed about the challenge that coercive activity by the People's Republic of China (PRC) poses to that vision. It is in the national security interests of the United States for ASEAN to be strong, prosperous, united, and well-equipped to set the terms of its relationship with the PRC. Nowhere is that truer than when it comes to the PRC's increasing maritime assertiveness in the South China Sea. If confirmed, I will work with ASEAN to pursue our shared interests in maintaining peace and stability, respect of international law, and freedoms of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea.

A critical component of advancing our interests is standing up for our values. As President Biden has said, human rights are a vital interest of this Administration's foreign policy. If confirmed, I

will not hesitate to raise issues of human rights, democracy, and rule of law with interlocutors across the region. I have been moved by the tragic and disturbing crisis in Burma, including the horrific and widespread violence perpetrated by the Burmese regime against the people of Burma. If confirmed, I will support efforts to change the regime's calculus so that we can resolve the worsening humanitarian and political crisis and return Burma to a path toward inclusive, multiparty democracy.

Above all, if the U.S.-ASEAN relationship is to continue to deliver for our peoples in the 21st century, it must be durable. The return of a Senate-confirmed Ambassador to this seat in Jakarta – which has been filled on an acting basis for more than five years – would be an important step in the right direction, sending a powerful message to ASEAN and the world of American commitment to Southeast Asia and its premier institution.

If I am confirmed to this post, I would take as my responsibility to ensure the long-term success of the vital U.S.-ASEAN relationship. To do so, I would draw on the most important sources of stable, long-term U.S. engagement with the region: bipartisan cooperation and people-to-people ties. If confirmed, I would look to build on already strong Congressional support for U.S. engagement with ASEAN. I would also support our thriving people-to-people programs, including the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, that strengthen our already-strong bonds of friendship.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today and your consideration of my nomination. I look forward to your questions.