

STATEMENT OF ROBERT E. PATTERSON
NOMINEE FOR UNITED STATES AMBASSADOR TO
TURKMENISTAN

SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE
APRIL 5, 2011

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am honored to appear before you as President Obama's nominee to become U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan. I am grateful to the President and to Secretary Clinton for their trust in me. If confirmed, I will work with you to advance America's interests in Turkmenistan.

The United States recognized Turkmenistan in February 1992 and since that time has supported its development as a stable, secure, democratic, and prosperous Central Asian state. Turkmenistan lies in a tough neighborhood bordering Iran and Afghanistan, and faces external and internal challenges in building democratic institutions and civil society, open media, and in fighting corruption.

A key U.S. priority in Central Asia is to encourage efforts to aid in the stabilization of Afghanistan. Turkmenistan shares a long border with Afghanistan and is aware of the danger that continuing instability there poses to itself and to other countries in the region. Turkmenistan has acted in accordance with its policy of "positive neutrality" to provide discounted electricity, housing, hospitals, and other forms of humanitarian aid to its Afghan neighbors. President Berdimuhamedov's recent announcement of the intention to increase electricity supplies five-fold to Afghanistan is a welcome sign of Turkmenistan's continued

engagement in that important effort. If confirmed, I will encourage Turkmenistan to continue to provide all possible support to Afghanistan.

Turkmenistan has significant natural gas reserves and is seeking to diversify their distribution. In recent statements, President Berdimuhamedov has expressed Turkmen interest in supplying gas to Europe through a Trans-Caspian Pipeline. We continue to strongly encourage Turkmenistan to send its gas across the Caspian to Europe via the Southern Corridor. Another potential project is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, or TAPI, pipeline, which President Berdimuhamedov has taken a leading role in promoting. If built, TAPI could strengthen economic ties between Central and South Asia by sending needed resources to growing markets. U.S. firms have the experience and a demonstrated track record in major energy projects, and, if confirmed, I would work hard to support their efforts to invest in projects in Turkmenistan, including projects like the Trans-Caspian Pipeline and TAPI.

Our commercial relationship with Turkmenistan goes beyond its prominent energy sector, however. U.S. companies are active in various sectors of the Turkmen economy- ranging from agriculture to civil aviation. If confirmed, I will actively support U.S. firms and seek to expand economic ties with Turkmenistan, particularly in light of the President's National Export Initiative.

As recent events have yet again demonstrated, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and transparent and accountable governmental institutions are essential to peace and long-term stability in any country. If confirmed, I will energetically engage the Government of Turkmenistan on the full range of human rights issues, including

arbitrary detentions and arrests, limitations on freedom of movement and expression, allegations of torture and prisoner abuse, and human trafficking. A frank and detailed discussion of human rights concerns already has a prominent place in our Annual Bilateral Consultations with high-ranking Turkmenistan government representatives. Those consultations began in June 2010, and I am certain that we will use such meetings and other contacts with the Turkmen government in the future, to discuss important human rights issues.

Turkmenistan's border with Afghanistan and outlet to the Caspian Sea have made it a significant drug transit corridor. In recent years, the U.S. has had some success in increasing cooperation with Turkmenistan on counternarcotics programs, including improved control of its borders and ports. Much remains to be done, and if confirmed I will seek opportunities to strengthen our emerging counternarcotics and border security cooperation with Turkmenistan with the goal of improving regional stability. A better capacity to combat the drug trade at its source ultimately contributes to the well-being of the United States.

Much of my twenty-five years in the State Department has been spent at U.S. missions overseas, and I have come to believe that we make our greatest impact on a country through engagement with its people in their own communities. Some of these contacts fall under the formal heading of "public diplomacy," but much happens when you simply get out and live life in the country to which you are assigned. In Turkmenistan, the small number of foreign visitors and residents makes such incidental contacts all the more important, and, if confirmed, I will encourage colleagues in our mission to demonstrate American values in their daily interactions with citizens of Turkmenistan. I believe that "public diplomacy," promoting more official people-to-people exchanges,

should also be a major priority. More than 740 Peace Corps Volunteers have been actively engaged in this effort in Turkmenistan since the start of the program there in 1993, teaching English and promoting health education in remote parts of the country.

Finally, I know that, if confirmed, I will ultimately be responsible for the welfare of my U.S. mission colleagues and their families in a fairly remote part of the world. Their welfare will be my top priority, as will the well-being and interests of other American citizens living in Turkmenistan.

Thank you. I look forward to answering your questions.