

Statement of Matthew John Matthews
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to Brunei
Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
December 4, 2018

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee; I am honored to appear before you today as the President's nominee to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Brunei. I appreciate the confidence the President and Secretary Pompeo have shown in me and, if confirmed, I look forward to working with you to advance U.S. interests in Brunei as we work to foster the international rules based system that supports the sovereignty of all nations, large and small, and a commitment of partnership to all nations seeking to do the same.

I am both happy and thankful to be here with my wife Rachel. We have served together through more than 12 postings in our 32 years in the Foreign Service. Without her support and encouragement, I wouldn't be here today. While my son Daniel could not break away from his commitments at his clinic in Bethlehem Pennsylvania, I am grateful that our daughter Kristen could join us today along with friends and colleagues from the Department of State.

The United States and Brunei have enjoyed strong and prosperous relations since 1850, when our two countries signed the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Commerce, and Navigation. Still in effect today, the treaty has underpinned our close cooperation for nearly 170 years. More recently, the United States was one of the first countries to recognize Brunei's independence from the United Kingdom in 1984. In the time since, the United States and Brunei have worked together to promote peace, stability, and development in the region, and if confirmed, I hope to continue that tradition by further strengthening our bilateral relationship.

Our partnership with Brunei is an integral part of our free and open Indo-Pacific Strategy, in which independent nations with diverse cultures and different aspirations can prosper side-by-side in freedom and in peace. Support for ASEAN centrality, including with Brunei as a member of ASEAN, a valued partner, and 2021 ASEAN Chair, remains a cornerstone of our Indo-Pacific Strategy.

Brunei has long been an active and positively engaged participant in the region. In recent years, the United States and Brunei have cooperated to address a host of matters important to Southeast Asia. Brunei's position as a South China Sea claimant state, with good relations throughout ASEAN and with others across the broader Indo-Pacific region, allows Brunei to play a significant role in defusing regional tensions and advancing our interests within ASEAN.

The United States and Brunei have an active and growing defense relationship, highlighted by regular Bruneian participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises, both in Brunei and the wider Indo-Pacific region. We have three fundamental defense agreements: a Defense Memorandum of Understanding, an Access and Cross Servicing Agreement to facilitate logistics cooperation, and a long-awaited General Security of Military Information Agreement signed in July 2018. This last agreement will help facilitate information exchange between our two militaries and significantly strengthens our bilateral security relationship.

Our economic relationship is also a positive one, and the United States enjoys a modest annual goods and services trade surplus with Brunei. Brunei generally has very low tariffs, and U.S. companies seeking to export to Brunei can usually do so freely. Our positive collaboration with our Bruneian colleagues in APEC allows us to promote free trade in the region. If confirmed, I would seek to expand our bilateral trade relationship and employ the BUILD act to encourage the participation of U.S. Firms in Bruneian infrastructure projects.

Our cultural, educational, and people-to-people ties continue to grow and define our bilateral relations in new and positive ways. Together, these programs highlight a multifaceted relationship that is deep and broad, and one that is central to both promoting U.S. interests in the region and fostering the peace and stability that bring economic growth. With this in mind, I believe we can and should work hard to expand these exchanges.

Certainly, there are challenges in the relationship. Freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief, which includes the right to change one's religious beliefs, are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We regularly communicate with the Government of Brunei regarding human rights, including religious freedom, and encourage Brunei to uphold its international commitments on human rights including for minorities. In this context, the United States has serious reservations regarding certain provisions of Brunei's Sharia Penal Code. We are concerned that it potentially criminalizes aspects of freedom of religion and belief, for example. I am also concerned about the corporal punishments described in the Code. While we understand that none of these punishments have been carried out, as a signatory to the UN Convention against Torture, Brunei must ensure that its laws prohibit "torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment," and we must continue to urge Brunei to ratify and implement this important international convention.

Despite some challenges, the long-term prognosis for strengthening our bilateral relationship with Brunei is excellent. Hence we consider our engagements with the next generations of Bruneian youth to be critical, such as through promoting their participation in the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative, or YSEALI. Brunei was instrumental in developing the focus of YSEALI, which has now grown to nearly 130,000 members

across Southeast Asia. Through the Fulbright U.S.-ASEAN initiative, we are also supporting Bruneian scholars and professionals to conduct research at U.S. universities on topics of importance to ASEAN.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Markey, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today and for giving my nomination your serious consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

