

**Statement by Matthew S. Klimow
Nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
May 16, 2019**

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am honored to appear before you today as President Trump's nominee, to be the next United States Ambassador to Turkmenistan.

If confirmed, I pledge to work with this committee to advance our nation's interests in Turkmenistan and in the vital Central Asia region.

I'd like to recognize my wife, Edie, a retired Army nurse who is with me today. In the course of serving our nation, we have had 18 household moves, and we hope to have the privilege to do so again.

Our son, Daniel, is with us--he is an attorney at the State Department--also his wife Beth, who serves at the State Department as well. So, as you can see, diplomacy is a family affair for us.

The United States has long-term interests in Central Asia, and Turkmenistan presents opportunities and challenges in furthering U.S. policy objectives.

Turkmenistan's geo-political importance is clear:

- it has long borders with Afghanistan and Iran;
- it possesses some of the world's largest natural gas reserves;
- and it serves as a bridge between the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the regions beyond.

The reality is that Turkmenistan is situated in a tough neighborhood. Porous borders, terrorism, and drug trafficking are all potential threats to Turkmenistan.

Both China and Russia exert enormous economic and political pressure on the government in Ashgabat.

Since its independence, Turkmenistan has embraced a policy of “positive neutrality” to ensure its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

With those parameters, Turkmenistan has supported efforts by the United States to increase regional stability, especially in regard to Afghanistan.

If confirmed, I will work to support Turkmenistan’s contributions to a stable Afghanistan and ensure that our partnership in this area continues.

I will also work diligently to bolster America’s influence with the government of Turkmenistan.

We have an opportunity to act as a counterweight and positive alternative to Russia and China’s unrelenting push to further their economic and political objectives at the expense of the Turkmen people.

If confirmed, I will also encourage Turkmenistan’s increased integration in regional and global markets, which promotes greater stability and creates opportunities for U.S. trade and investment.

I will make every effort to promote diversification of Turkmenistan’s gas export markets—across the Caspian Sea as well as to South Asia.

Economic development, however, is a challenge in Turkmenistan given its weak regulatory environment and excessive bureaucracy.

Also troubling are concerted attempts to control access to information, to include the internet and independent news sources.

If confirmed, I will work toward making steady progress in those areas. That effort would include encouraging access to uncensored information and taking advantage of U.S. cultural exchanges and educational opportunities.

If confirmed, I will also engage the government of Turkmenistan assertively and constructively across the full spectrum of human rights issues, to include the use of forced labor in cotton harvesting and undue restrictions on religious practices.

I believe progress in those areas is possible through consistent / pragmatic / dialogue.

In 1948, tens of thousands of people died in an earthquake that devastated the capital of Ashgabat. That seismic fault line is still active.

I have spent a great deal of my life living and working overseas, often in dangerous places.

If confirmed, I will make the safety of our embassy staff a top priority, incorporating situational awareness and meticulous crisis response planning into all aspects of embassy life.

I am not a stranger to Central Asia. In the crucial months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I traveled throughout South and Central Asia with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, meeting with heads of state and chiefs of defense to solidify basing rights, gain political support, and articulate U.S. national interests. Although much has changed in the following years, those interests endure.

I can imagine no greater honor than returning to Central Asia and representing our nation at this critical time.

But, the greatest privilege that any person can ask for is to simply be entrusted to lead others.

If confirmed, I will work tirelessly to:

- make a difference in the lives of our staff,
- to forge a cohesive team that strengthens the institutions we deeply care about,
- and to do so in an atmosphere of mutual respect with dignity as our byword.

That is a leader's sacred trust:

- instilled in me at West Point,
- at the heart of my service as a soldier,
- and at the core of what we do every day as diplomats and professionals at the United States Department of State.

Thank you, Senator. I look forward to your questions.