

**“NATO Expansion: Examining the Accession of North Macedonia”**  
**Hearing of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations**  
**Opening Statement**

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Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, and Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to express the support of the Department of Defense for North Macedonia’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In many ways, this moment celebrates the culmination of the strong bilateral defense relationship the United States has fostered with the Government of North Macedonia since 1991. NATO membership for North Macedonia will advance a longstanding, shared commitment to the fight against global terrorism and the promotion of international stability in southeastern Europe.

Following the NATO accession of Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, and most recently, Montenegro, the accession of North Macedonia presents a historic opportunity to further extend a stabilizing influence in this strategic region. Our Allies and partners in the Western Balkans—a region where U.S. and NATO forces have intervened twice in the past 25 years—look to the United States as they strive to deter Russia and institutionalize the pillars of Western democratic values. NATO enlargement benefits not only our collective defense, but also serves to advance core U.S. interests under our *National Defense Strategy*.

North Macedonia emerged from the break-up of Yugoslavia to become a highly dedicated security partner to NATO, joining NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1995. Since that time, North Macedonia has consistently been an important force contributor, fighting alongside the United States and NATO in Afghanistan and Iraq. Since 2002, North Macedonia has deployed with us in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and, in Afghanistan, to Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) and increased its contributions to RSM in the last two years. North Macedonia also maintains staff officers deployed to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and to the EU mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Operation Althea). North Macedonia also notably celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary working closely with the Vermont National Guard under the State Partnership Program (SPP) and in 2010, was the first SPP partner to deploy in an overseas combat tour to Afghanistan with a National Guard unit. Most recently, the Government of North Macedonia committed to deploy another contingent of forces with the Vermont National Guard in 2020.

North Macedonia participates in over a dozen NATO and U.S. exercises each year, including a recent commitment to send a mechanized company and a Ranger platoon to U.S. Army Europe's SABER JUNCTION military training exercise in September. Additionally, North Macedonia provides logistical support to the NATO mission in Kosovo (KFOR) and offers the use of its largest training area, Krivolak, to U.S. and NATO forces, which provides a unique maneuver training area in Europe. This is a cost-saving contribution to KFOR operations. As a future member of NATO, North Macedonia will bring this asset to the Alliance, addressing the need for additional quality training areas to increase NATO readiness levels. Krivolak is also the center of the multinational military training exercise Decisive Strike, hosted by North Macedonia this month, which is the largest military exercise in the country since the break-up of Yugoslavia. More than 2,700 forces, including about 1,300 from the United States, are taking part in the exercise.

North Macedonia cooperates with U.S. counterterrorism (CT) efforts as part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, participating as a member of the Foreign Terrorist Fighter Working Group. North Macedonia was one of the first countries to publicly announce intentions to repatriate foreign fighters from Syria. Seven nationals of North Macedonia, captured and held by the Syrian Democratic Force, were convicted of terrorism-related offenses and sentenced to between six and nine years in prison. North Macedonia adopted in March 2018 the 2018-2022 *National Counterterrorism Strategy* and a standalone 2018-2022 *National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism*. Both were accompanied by National Action Plans. The Department of Defense is using the Section 333 authority to build the capacity of national-level security forces of North Macedonia, specifically the Special Police Units, in support of counterterrorism operations.

North Macedonia's resolute political commitment to defense reform over several years demonstrates a dedicated partner that upholds core NATO values, and that satisfies practical requirements. NATO's mechanisms for aspiring members, honed over decades of partnerships and numerous rounds of enlargement, serve to confirm North Macedonia's ability to satisfy such practical requirements as protecting classified planning documents, conducting secure operational communications, participating with personnel in NATO's integrated command structure, and applying NATO training and doctrinal requirements and other essential foundations of interoperability. Complementing these NATO mechanisms, the U.S. on a bilateral basis is also working with North Macedonia on a bilateral memorandum of understanding (MOU) for defense cooperation. Within the general framework of the aims of NATO and the PfP, the MOU is intended to guide North Macedonia towards its reform goals.

Going forward now, the election of new pro-NATO President Stevo Pendarovski this past May, backed by a pro-NATO Prime Minister and Defense Minister, are likely to further accelerate necessary reforms to meet the wider range of NATO standards and guidelines for the overall capability and posture of the nation's defense forces. The Government of North Macedonia is implementing changes to right-size its military and is divesting itself of Soviet legacy military equipment. North Macedonia also completed its Strategic Defense Review (SDR) in 2018 with U.S. and NATO guidance. North Macedonia has pledged to meet NATO's defense spending commitment of 2 percent of GDP by 2024 and is already spending 18 percent of its defense budget on modernization with plans to reach NATO's goal of 20 percent next year.

North Macedonia's defense spending will be in line with NATO standards: 50 percent on personnel; 30 percent for operations, maintenance, and training; and 20 percent for equipment and modernization. Under the SDR, the Government of North Macedonia has already begun transforming its armed forces based on its expected NATO capability goals. Complementing NATO guidance and support, North Macedonia has been a model steward of U.S. security assistance funding and plans continued increases in national expenditures for the acquisition of Western-made equipment, such as the purchase of U.S.-made infantry fighting vehicles. These new vehicles will replace approximately 25 percent of North Macedonian ground capability with new models, resulting in improved readiness and interoperability. Additional spending will focus on individual soldier equipment, Western-made transport helicopters, and renovation of defense information technology systems. North Macedonia also has more than 900 graduates from U.S. schools and training funded through International Military Education and Training (IMET), Foreign Military Financing (FMP), and other Department of Defense sources, including a several Senior Service College graduates and Intermediate Level Education graduates. Many of these graduates are in critical positions at the highest levels of North Macedonia's defense establishment.

North Macedonia maintains positive relations with its neighbors. North Macedonia is a founding member of the U.S.-Adriatic Charter (along with Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), which promotes regional cooperation and furthers NATO integration. Montenegro has assisted North Macedonia in providing insightful guidance in preparation for accession as well as NATO's expectations after membership is realized. Since the Prespa Agreement, relations with Greece have improved, including in the defense sphere. Although North Macedonia currently lacks a fixed-wing capability, Greece has been particularly helpful in this regard and has provided air patrols over North Macedonia's airspace.

The United States and our NATO Allies cannot be ambivalent toward the Western Balkans. Inaction invites Russian malfeasance, as evidenced by an attempted coup in Montenegro in October 2016, an aggressive disinformation campaign to derail North Macedonia's referendum in September 2018, and increased political paralysis in Bosnia and Herzegovina since the election of pro-Russian, ethnic Serbian nationalist Milorad Dodik to the country's tri-presidency in October 2018. Russia's underhanded actions across the region have provoked widespread skepticism of the Russian Government and have prompted several countries to engage even more closely with NATO, especially in the cyber domain. North Macedonia has worked closely with the United States to counter Russia in cyberspace, including initiating its first FMS case for cyber security upgrades. Additionally, in 2018, U.S. Cyber Command operated alongside cyber defenders from North Macedonia to improve network defense and information sharing on malicious cyber activities that threaten both of our democracies. These activities are consistent with the *Department of Defense Cyber Strategy*, which directs the Department to expand operational cooperation with our allies and partners.

North Macedonia is ready for NATO membership. North Macedonia's accession is critical to the stability and security of the Western Balkans, and to the realization of a Europe that is whole, free, and at peace. North Macedonia's accession will help rebuff Russian malign influence in the region and demonstrate to other countries that NATO's door remains open to those who share our values, are willing to make necessary reforms, and are committed to the responsibilities of membership.

It is my great honor to appear before this Committee. Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.