

**Testimony of John Mark Pommersheim
Nominee to be U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
October 11, 2018**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, it is a true honor and privilege to appear before you today as the nominee for the United States' Ambassador to the Republic of Tajikistan.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning, and am humbled by the confidence that President Trump and Secretary Pompeo have placed in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working with this Committee and other Members of Congress to advance the interests of the United States in Tajikistan.

With the Chairman's indulgence, I want to mention my gratitude for the support and love of my family (here today) that enabled me to pursue work for the United States abroad. My father, James Pommersheim, a professor at Bucknell University for 35 years, helped me understand the importance of family and service to others. My wife Natalya has been a pillar of support and love for over 24 years, raising our three sons in often challenging environments overseas. Our eldest son Arthur will begin his career as an officer on board the U.S. nuclear submarine USS Missouri, homeported in Pearl Harbor, HI. Andrew is finishing his studies and an ROTC program at the University of Maryland. James just started as a freshman at the College of Charleston (and is hopefully not missing too many mid-semester class assignments by flying in yesterday to support his Dad).

I have had the honor to serve as a career Foreign Service Officer for the last 28 years. Throughout my career, I have had the chance to work with many fine Americans in all branches of government, on promoting universal values such as rule of law, and the protection of human rights and dignity. The teams I have been privileged to lead and work with have advanced U.S. security and economic goals in countries across Europe and Asia. If confirmed, I would draw on this experience as ambassador to Tajikistan, taking a whole-of-government approach to working with our partners to solve problems such as strengthening counter terrorism cooperation and advancing good governance.

Having previously served in the neighboring country of Kazakhstan as deputy chief of mission, I have seen firsthand the difficult decisions and incredible effort necessary to build a sovereign nation in the short span of 27 years, and the important role that the United States plays as a partner that respects the

sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of its friends in the region. If confirmed, further strengthening the foundation of partnership and goodwill between the people of the United States and the people of Tajikistan will be my priority.

Mr. Chairman, Tajikistan is a country of extraordinary natural beauty and rich cultural heritage, but it faces many challenges.

Tajikistan suffered a devastating civil war, which ended just over 20 years ago, with health and human development indices still impacted. Per capita, Tajikistan remains in the poorest quarter of countries in the world and its GDP is the lowest in Central Asia. Youth under 24 are 53% of Tajikistan's population—a number that will grow. Tajikistan has a porous 800-mile long border with Afghanistan, and problems such as the illegal narcotics trade, trafficking in persons, the spread of terrorism, and violent extremism are deeply concerning.

If confirmed, I will work to strengthen our partnership with Tajikistan to address these serious challenges. Tajikistan has come a long way since the dark days of the civil war. With over 25 years of partnership, Americans and Tajiks can look back on a period of significant progress that helped transform Tajikistan and strengthen its independence and sovereignty. Continued progress in building out that partnership will contribute to stability both in Tajikistan and in the wider Central Asian region.

A Soviet-holdover focus on cash crops and Tajikistan's stark geographic landscape—nearly 93% mountainous—constrains the country's ability to feed its citizens. Tajikistan imports 70 percent of its foodstuffs, and U.S. development assistance to Tajikistan includes a strong emphasis on sustainable agriculture and high-nutrient farming. Unable to find work in Tajikistan, close to one million migrant laborers leave the country to find work in Russia and other countries, where the lack of a support system can leave them vulnerable to terrorist recruiting.

Tajikistan's long southern border abuts the most restive regions of Afghanistan, provinces that harbor Islamic State and other terrorist groups as well as Taliban-controlled territory. For years, the United States has been the foremost international supporter of training and infrastructure for Tajikistan's Border Guard service. In addition, the United States has been a strong supporter of justice and law enforcement reform. As Afghanistan's northern neighbor, Tajikistan is

crucial to that country's economic development and its future as a secure, stable, and prosperous state in a broader Central Asia that is also flourishing.

This is where Tajikistan's future and the future of the region lies— in the connections, sometimes rebuilt, sometimes newly established, of people, of businesses, of infrastructure and administration, of trade and transit. The United States has been a proactive supporter of connectivity. Under the President's South Asia Strategy and National Security Strategy, regional connectivity has taken on new energy and urgency as we seek to capitalize on momentum among states and to harness development and economic growth as a bulwark against radicalization— and as a path toward a better future for the region's younger generations. The United States actively participates in the "C5+1" regional diplomatic platform that brings together the United States and the five states of Central Asia. This platform catalyzes economic, environmental and security cooperation through assistance and engagement.

Hand-in-hand with intensive cooperation on key economic and security issues, we must as partners have a frank, constructive— and productive— dialogue on Tajikistan's international obligations on freedom of religion and other fundamental human freedoms. A nation cannot be truly secure while suppressing independent voices and basic human rights.

If confirmed, my number one concern will always be the safety of our embassy staff at U.S. Embassy Dushanbe and all U.S. citizens in Tajikistan. As this committee's members are aware, in July of this year four tourists— two of them U.S. citizens— were targeted and killed by attackers in Tajikistan who had pledged their loyalty to the Islamic State. I want to express condolences to the families of those who died and suffered in the attack. We stand with the families of the victims, and U.S. agencies are working closely with Tajik authorities in the ongoing investigation. If confirmed, one of my highest priority goals will be, as President Trump has recently asked of President Rahmon, deepening our information-sharing and counterterrorism cooperation with Tajikistan.

Mr. Chairman, if confirmed, I will always be available to and welcome the opportunity to work with you, the Committee, and other Members of Congress to advance the United States' interests in Tajikistan and throughout the region.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to the Committee's questions.