

**Statement of P. Michael McKinley
Nominee for Ambassador to Afghanistan
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
December 2, 2014**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today as President Obama's nominee to be the next U.S. Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. I am honored to have been nominated by the President, and look forward, if confirmed by the Senate, to working closely with you to advance America's interests in Afghanistan.

I have spent the past year serving as Deputy Ambassador in Kabul, and have had the honor to work with hundreds of remarkable civilian personnel from across the U.S. government and with our equally remarkable men and women in uniform. They serve as inspiration and a daily reminder of the immense sacrifices our nation has made these past thirteen years in Afghanistan, and of the achievements that provide a strong foundation for the next phase of our relationship with the Afghan people.

Our national security interest brought us to Afghanistan thirteen years ago, and it is our national security interest that keeps us there. It was in Afghanistan that the attacks of September 11, 2001 were planned. It was in Afghanistan that al Qaeda had its safest harbor. As the President announced in May, the United States' combat mission in Afghanistan will conclude at the end of this year, but we will continue to maintain a counter-terrorism capability there to prevent an al-Qa'ida resurgence in Afghanistan. And in order to safeguard the progress we have made in building with our Afghan partners a stronger, more stable, and more resilient Afghanistan, we, along with our NATO Allies and other international partners, will continue to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). Our shared partnership and successes in Afghanistan will help us continue to protect vital American interests in a critical region of the globe.

Thirteen years on, Afghanistan has undergone a major transformation. Millions of boys and girls go to school and university. Afghanistan has among the freest press and political environments in the region. The economy has quadrupled in size. Afghans have participated in four major elections. Millions of refugees have returned home. Women are no longer in the shadows but have a place in Afghanistan's government and public society. While we continue to help, the

Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have the lead in combat operations and provide security for the majority of the Afghans.

This is the context for 2014, a year that we anticipated would be a critical point of transition. And so it has proved to be. After a difficult period when the future of the U.S. security relationship with Afghanistan was unclear; when it was unclear whether a peaceful political transition could be achieved; and when the economic future of Afghanistan appeared to hang in the balance; the transition is happening, the Bilateral Security Agreement has been ratified, there is a new government in Kabul, and the Afghans can now turn their attention to their economy. .

On the security front, as noted, the ANSF have had the lead role in all combat operations since June 2013, and are on track to assume full security responsibility at the end of this year. They secured two rounds of elections earlier this year. The courage of the ANSF in carrying on the fight in spite of heavy casualties is a tribute to their resolve. Now, the ANSF are looking to consolidate the gains of past years, improve respect for human rights, and strengthen their capabilities to counter the Taliban and be a more effective partner to us in countering terrorism.

Afghans have recognized and welcomed the need for continued international support. On September 30, one day after his inauguration, President Ashraf Ghani, with his former rival and now his Chief Executive Officer Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, witnessed the signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) and the NATO Status of Forces Agreement. The Afghan Parliament voted overwhelmingly to endorse ratification of both of these agreements, demonstrating the broad popular support for a continued security relationship with the United States and our Allies and partners. These agreements give us the basis to work with NATO and partner nations to train, advise, and assist Afghan forces and to continue our counter-terrorism mission.

The transition is also happening politically. This year saw the first peaceful, democratic transition of power in Afghanistan's history, as Ashraf Ghani succeeded Hamid Karzai as president. The election was not easy, and we should not have expected it to be. The Taliban made clear their intention to target those who went to the polls. Two years ago, the country did not have the necessary legal framework for national elections. Millions of new voters needed to be registered; and the logistics and security for the elections took months to plan.

Afghans overcame these challenges, passing electoral laws, registering nearly four million new voters, more than a third of whom were women, and distributing ballots to every province. Afghan political leaders put together strong, multiethnic tickets, three of which included women as vice-presidential candidates. They conducted nationwide campaigns, organized hundreds of rallies and held many televised debates. And millions of Afghans defied Taliban threats and voted.

When credible allegations of fraud threatened to undermine these achievements, the two leading candidates agreed to an unprecedented audit, to abide by its outcome, and to form a unity government. The result is a legitimate and inclusive government of national unity with a solid mandate to pursue reforms to increase security, improve governance, strengthen democracy, and build the economy. It is important to emphasize that, while the United States and the international community facilitated this effort, the outcome is an Afghan political agreement that reflects the will of Afghan voters.

The transition is also happening in economic terms and developmental terms, as investors and ordinary Afghans look to the future with greater confidence and the new government outlines important reform objectives.

At the same time, however, it is clear that continued international assistance depends on concrete actions by Afghanistan to address corruption, increase transparency, improve revenue collection, and implement economic policies to lessen its dependence on aid. There are real concerns about the short-term fiscal shortfall the new government inherited and the need for a more sustainable economic model. President Ghani is already implementing an austerity regime, has pledged to reform Afghanistan's budget process, address endemic corruption, bolster revenue collection, reform the banking sector, and work with donors on a sustainable long-term strategy to grow the economy and to create employment. These are critical steps towards making Afghanistan an increasingly self-reliant, sustainable state. These themes are the centerpiece of the national unity government's presentation at the London Conference on Afghanistan which begins tomorrow December 3.

We owe the U.S. taxpayer the strictest accountability and assurances that the resources we provide will be used to achieve our foreign policy goals, strengthening and building on what has been achieved. I will, if confirmed, work closely with all our oversight inspection offices, including SIGAR, to address real shortcomings that are identified in our programming, and to chart the most transparent paths forward to success. This includes reviewing our counter-

narcotics programs as part of the broader challenge to develop strong Afghan institutions and implement the rule of law.

As I have noted, there have been many gains in the area of women's rights. The new Afghan government intends to build on these gains. Three weeks ago, Ambassador Cunningham and USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah, in partnership with President Ghani, committed to the largest-ever USAID gender program in the world. The goals are to empower women entering leadership positions, expand higher education for girls, and strengthen gender protections. President Ghani has also pledged to nominate women to senior positions in the Cabinet and judiciary.

The optimism I express reflects the energy of the government of national unity, which took office less than sixty days ago and is already transforming promises – to promote national unity, protect human rights, and tackle corruption – into action. President Ghani, with the full support of CEO Abdullah, reopened the Kabul Bank investigation, the largest financial scandal in the nation's history. Money laundering regulations have been improved and issued. Reporters penalized for doing their jobs have been allowed to return to work. Judges complicit in the release of a drug trafficker have been charged. The government of national unity has also signed and effectively lobbied for ratification of the BSA and NATO SOFA and announced agreement on a formula and a timeline for appointing Cabinet members.

The new government acted quickly to improve Afghanistan's relations with the international community. Both President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah are in Brussels today for the NATO ministerial and will attend the London Conference tomorrow. President Ghani recognizes the importance of regional integration and has already reached out to neighbors in the "Heart of Asia" meeting in Beijing, and the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) discussions in Nepal. Energy investments and trade reforms are at the top of the integration agenda. President Ghani also visited Pakistan recently. The two countries are now focused on new opportunities to improve security cooperation and cross-border linkages in transportation, energy, and trade.

Ultimately, there will be the need to address a political solution to the conflict with the insurgency. President Ghani has taken the step of inviting the Taliban to talks. The United States has made clear we support efforts to negotiate an end to conflict inside Afghanistan. This, however, must remain an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led political process.

Afghans are hopeful for their future and want to take control of their destiny. At the same time, we have a stake in their success. Not just because of our sacrifices, or the partnership we built with the Afghan people, but because Afghanistan's success will, I repeat, will help protect vital American interests in a critical region of the globe. Our challenge is to consolidate and strengthen the gains of the past thirteen years. Thank you Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Risch, and Members of the Committee. I look forward to your questions.