

**NATO EXPANSION: EXAMINING THE ACCESSION
OF NORTH MACEDONIA**

HEARING

BEFORE THE

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS
UNITED STATES SENATE**

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NATO EXPANSION: EXAMINING THE ACCESSION OF NORTH MACEDONIA

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12, 2019

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:18 a.m. in room SD-419, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. James E. Risch, chairman of the committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Risch [presiding], Johnson, Gardner, Romney, Young, Menendez, Cardin, Shaheen, Murphy, and Kaine.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES E. RISCH, U.S. SENATOR FROM IDAHO

The CHAIRMAN. This morning we are going to talk about the potential accession of North Macedonia as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO.

April 4th marked, as we all know, the 70th anniversary of NATO. I am glad to have another opportunity for this committee to discuss the importance of this alliance.

NATO is the world's most successful political-military alliance in the history of the world. Founded by the United States and 11 other nations in 1949, it has expanded 7 times since its founding and now includes 29 countries. North Macedonia would make 30.

The Senate's consideration of North Macedonia as a member of NATO is a piece of unfinished and long-delayed business. North Macedonia was originally eligible for NATO entry in 2008 and was set to join the alliance, alongside Croatia and Albania in 2009. An ongoing dispute over North Macedonia's name prevented that from happening, but the leaders of both North Macedonia and Greece showed great political courage, given the tensions in each of the countries on that issue, in reaching an agreement earlier this year that has made today's discussion possible. The courage of the prime ministers to move the situation in the Balkans forward should be applauded. Not only does this Prespa Agreement pave the way forward for North Macedonia in both NATO and the European Union, but it is an excellent example of how other conflicts in the region could be and should be resolved.

Over the past 70 years, NATO has remained a critical piece of the framework that supports our collective security, and while this small nation has not yet been inside the alliance, North Macedonia has worked alongside NATO for many years. From 2002 until 2014, North Macedonia deployed about 4,000 troops in support of the international security assistance force in Afghanistan. It is cur-

rently supporting the Resolute Support mission to assist the Afghan Security Forces. The country has also provided support to the NATO-led peacekeeping forces in Kosovo. Recently NATO troops have begun training on a North Macedonian military training range, which is considered to be one of the best in Europe.

NATO has proven not only to be a military success, but a political and economic one. NATO's security umbrella has provided the kind of stable political and security environment necessary for economic growth and investment. Since joining NATO in 2017, Montenegro has seen forward investment from members of the alliance double, and North Macedonia has high hopes for the same.

Like most nations, North Macedonia is not without challenges. As a small country with a young democracy, it will require further government reforms and military modernization, as have most new NATO allies.

For example, it will need to continue its transition from legacy Soviet equipment, further reform its intelligence services, continue to strengthen its anti-corruption institutions, and importantly, resist Russian interference.

Yet, through its contributions to NATO missions, its already substantial democratic reforms, and the Prespa Agreement, North Macedonia has demonstrated robust commitment to the alliance and its values.

Just as important as a commitment to shared values is allies' commitment to burden sharing. Seven allies currently meet their pledge to spend 2 percent of GDP on defense, and 18 are on track to do so by 2024. We urge them to continue aggressively in that direction. North Macedonia has pledged to meet the 2 percent spending requirement and is already in the process of spending 20 percent of that amount on equipment.

Many Americans might wonder how bringing a small country like North Macedonia into NATO will strengthen the alliance. North Macedonia brings military capabilities like its training center that I mentioned earlier, but it also brings political stability to a region long fraught with conflict. In the era of great power competition, it solidifies Western values in a country that Russia has been desperate to keep in its sphere of influence. North Macedonia has wisely declined.

The West must honor commitments made to countries that have painstakingly made the reforms the alliance has asked of them. Otherwise, they may have nowhere to turn but towards Russia and China.

Bringing a 30th member into NATO during its 70th year is a strong signal to allies and enemies alike that NATO continues to be critical to the United States for her security and alliance and that it is adapting to modern challenges.

I look forward to hearing your testimonies and to hopefully welcoming North Macedonia into the alliance.

With that, Senator Menendez.

**STATEMENT OF HON. ROBERT MENENDEZ,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW JERSEY**

Senator MENENDEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing.

NATO is vital to the security of the United States, and approving its expansion is one of the most important responsibilities that this committee has.

Let me first acknowledge the presence of North Macedonia's charge d'affaires, Marijan Pop-Angelov. We appreciate you being here and joining us.

And let me also acknowledge our newly confirmed Ambassador to North Macedonia, Kate Byrnes, who is with us as well. Congratulations, Ambassador. You have gone through the gauntlet successfully. So we look forward to your service.

Mr. Chairman, before I begin my remarks, I would like to ask unanimous consent that a letter of support for North Macedonia's NATO bid from U.S. delegates to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly be entered into the record.

The CHAIRMAN. So ordered.

[The information referred to is located at the end of the hearing]

Senator MENENDEZ. Today's hearing would not be happening without the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia, which resolved the country's longstanding name dispute and came into force this past February. I appreciate the hard work that these countries undertook, as well as the diligent work of American diplomats, to make Prespa a reality. I look forward to hearing more from the State Department on North Macedonia's progress towards implementing its commitments under the agreement.

I also hope to more broadly examine the geopolitical context of North Macedonia's candidacy. We know that the Kremlin tried to thwart the Prespa Agreement by clandestinely funding disinformation and political manipulation campaigns against the name change in both North Macedonia and Greece. We must again make clear no country outside of the alliance gets a veto over who joins NATO, especially not Russia.

Though a small country, North Macedonia has made notable contributions to international security missions. I understand that North Macedonia has deployed more than 4,000 troops to Iraq in support of U.S. efforts there. In 2018, North Macedonia boosted its contribution in Afghanistan by 20 percent. It has also supported missions in Kosovo and actively supports the international counter-ISIS coalition, as well as that North Macedonia is home to a military training ground, as the chairman mentioned, unlike any other in Europe. And I look forward to hearing how that will benefit U.S. and NATO military readiness. These are all strong arguments in favor of its inclusion in the alliance.

I want to stress the importance of each NATO member spending 2 percent of its GDP on defense. Since 2014, countries across the alliance have increased their defense spending in reaction to a clear and growing threat from the Kremlin, not necessarily bullying by President Trump. North Macedonia does not currently meet that threshold, but it is making progress. It is closer to reaching the second half of the Wales Commitment, spending 20 percent of the defense budget on major equipment. In 2019, it will reach 18 percent of the defense budget. The North Macedonian defense

minister committed to this committee their intention to hit these targets, and we should hold them to it.

Belonging to NATO is not just a measurement of military capability. We were established as a club of democracies that abide by a certain set of principles. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry laid out some criteria when the Clinton administration was considering new members: individual liberty for citizens, democratic elections, the rule of law, economic and market-based reforms, resolution of territorial disputes with neighbors, civilian control of the military.

I would like our witnesses to address the durability of North Macedonia's recent rule of law improvements. Following corruption and abuses of authority under the previous government, North Macedonia's main political parties came together and signed the Przino Agreement to address the rule of law issues. In keeping with the agreement, North Macedonia has made difficult reforms and taken steps to address corruption by appointing a special prosecutor and tackling difficult cases.

More work remains to continue to perfect North Macedonia's democracy. NATO member states should not consider this process complete and should urge North Macedonia to fully implement its reform commitments.

Admission of North Macedonia into NATO would mark another important step towards fully integrating the Balkans into international institutions that have helped to contribute to peace and stability over the years in Europe. There is unfinished work for peace in the Balkans, and U.S. leadership is necessary to resolve these long-running challenges.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Menendez.

Now we are going to hear from a couple of excellent witnesses on this.

Before I do that, I would respectfully disagree about characterizing the President's actions of attempting to get our allies to meet their commitments of 2 percent as bullying. Indeed, I would think that there is not a member of this committee that have not met with our friends and allies in this that have not urged them in the strongest terms to meet that commitment. The President has done the same, and as we all know, he has a unique way of communicating ideas that are in his mind. And so I have no doubt that he and all of us on this committee will remain united to urge that our allies—and they are our allies—meet their 2 percent of GDP defense commitment, which is indeed a commitment.

So with that, we will now hear from the Honorable Philip Reeker. He is the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs. He previously served as a political advisor and civilian deputy at U.S. European Command. In his distinguished career, Ambassador Reeker has also served as Counsel General in Milan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs focused on the Balkans, Central Europe, and Holocaust issues, and more importantly, was U.S. Ambassador to Macedonia from 2008 to 2011.

Mr. Reeker, we welcome you and you no doubt have a very expert and unique view of this matter. So we are interested to hear your view. Mr. Reeker, the floor is yours.

STATEMENT OF PHILIP T. REEKER, ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY, BUREAU OF EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ambassador REEKER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator Menendez, and the other members of the committee. It is indeed a pleasure for me to be here today some 11 years after I was in this same room for my hearing to become the fifth Ambassador in Skopje. I am really grateful for the opportunity to discuss, along with my colleague from the Department of Defense, the critical role that NATO plays in our security and North Macedonia's place in the alliance.

It is my first appearance before the committee since I was asked by Secretary Pompeo to take over the responsibilities of former Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell, and I really look forward to continuing to uphold the excellent standards established by Assistant Secretary Mitchell and our Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, and that includes working with the members of the committee and your staffs and being responsive to your questions and concerns. We are very grateful for you holding this important hearing today.

I do want to thank our next Ambassador, my successor, Kate Byrnes, who is with us today. I am absolutely delighted that she will follow in the footsteps to continue working with North Macedonia, which is an important friend to the United States. I can think of no better colleague to have there representing the United States, and she will be leading a team, along with the Bureau of European Affairs, that focuses on exactly the issues that Senator Menendez mentioned in terms of working with Macedonia to continue their reforms and their strong support. And I want to thank the committee for seeing that Kate Byrnes was confirmed expeditiously because we are very excited to have her get out to Skopje.

I do welcome the opportunity to explain why the administration strongly and unequivocally supports North Macedonia's membership in NATO. We firmly believe that North Macedonia's membership in the alliance benefits the national security of the United States and all Americans.

As you may know, as you heard, I have a long professional and personal connection to the country. I did serve there at our embassy in Skopje from 1997 to 1998 as the public affairs officer and then later, with the advice and consent of this committee, as Ambassador, then as Deputy Assistant Secretary for South Central Europe.

I have seen North Macedonia develop into the strong partner and, with the Senate's blessing, NATO ally that we need in the Western Balkans. I was also in Skopje after the Bucharest NATO summit in 2008, and I can tell you that the people of North Macedonia have yearned for and earned this moment, a moment to reflect on the long and sometimes difficult path that they have had to travel, but one that ultimately has led to a true and enduring

commitment to peace, democracy, and prosperity for North Macedonia and for enduring transatlantic security and stability.

I might note that the 19th century German statesman, Otto Von Bismarck, used to refer to the vexing Macedonia question. Well, some years ago, with the independence of this country, we answered that question. A democracy, multi-ethnic, that shares its values with the transatlantic community and now is the Republic of North Macedonia—we can continue to see that this difficult place in the world with a complicated geography is in fact an important element of our transatlantic security.

Let me begin by reaffirming the role of NATO. As President Trump has said, the alliance has been the bulwark of international peace and security for 70 years, something we celebrated along with many of the members of the committee at the ministerial just a couple of months ago when Secretary Pompeo presided over the 70th anniversary celebration.

The alliance will remain the bulwark of international peace and security, and NATO's accomplishments are many. From deterring the former Soviet Union during the Cold War to contributing to international security in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and Afghanistan and Iraq, to confronting emerging security challenges and, throughout it, all the time welcoming new members into this critical alliance.

To be sure, we face complicated security challenges. As outlined in the National Security Strategy, the return of great power competition is the defining geopolitical fact of our time, and the need to systematically prepare for this competition is the central task of U.S. foreign policy and, indeed, of the transatlantic alliance. The most immediate threat to transatlantic security continues to be Russia, which is engaged in wide-ranging, nefarious efforts to undermine the peace and prosperity the West has built over the last 70 years. President Putin seeks to weaken the cohesion among NATO allies and to subvert and destabilize our democratic institutions and processes. We also face increasing threats from China, which is seeking a strategic foothold in Europe by employing so-called gray zone tactics, including investments in sensitive technologies, critical infrastructure, and natural resources.

The NATO alliance is evolving to meet these challenges by enhancing its readiness, mobility, command structure, and ability to face hybrid and cyber threats. Through efforts like the NATO Readiness Initiative and additional coordination on hybrid and cyber threats, we will be even stronger and more prepared to face down emerging challenges. And I will let my colleague address those in further detail.

Let me turn to North Macedonia and the benefits it will bring to the alliance when it becomes the 30th ally.

The implementation of the historic Prespa Agreement and the resolution of the name dispute with Greece underscore that North Macedonia is willing to make sacrifices and dignified compromises needed for peace and stability.

In recognition of its progress and potential, allies unanimously agreed in July 2018 to invite the Republic of North Macedonia to begin accession talks. And in February of this year, allies signed the Accession Protocol for North Macedonia. Two days later, in an

historic moment fulfilling the promises made in Prespa, Greece and its dynamic leadership became the first country to ratify North Macedonia's NATO accession protocol. To date, 16 allies have completed the parliamentary requirements for ratification, and I would like to mention them for the record. They are: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Of those, 11 countries have deposited their instruments of ratification of the accession protocol.

Now, as we have heard, North Macedonia has contributed to international operations since 2002, deploying almost 4,000 soldiers, with soldiers from the United States and North Macedonia courageously fighting alongside each other in Iraq, where I was able to visit the Macedonian contingent. They still do so today in Afghanistan. And later this week, over 1,000 U.S. troops will participate in exercises alongside soldiers from North Macedonia and other allied countries at the Krivolak training area, already mentioned, a resource that North Macedonia has made available for NATO exercises, and I can attest from my experience at European Command an extremely admired a piece of geography, and it is very important for the kinds of exercises that our military and our alliance need to do.

Adding North Macedonia to the alliance will make NATO stronger, will enhance regional security and stability in what is historically one of the least stable places in Europe. North Macedonia takes its burden sharing seriously and has a clear and credible plan in place to reach the 2 percent–20 percent Wales commitment by 2024, and I reiterated that plan and those pledges in the meeting with the minister of defense of North Macedonia just last Friday at a conference in Bratislava.

North Macedonia also has a clear and credible plan in terms of spending already 18 percent of its defense budget on modernization and capabilities, and they will reach that 20 percent goal for capabilities already next year. That puts them in the upper half of current NATO members when it comes to meeting these key thresholds.

North Macedonia has also made great strides to meet NATO standards by implementing deep reforms in the defense, intelligence, and security sectors, and I have been able to monitor that progress throughout the course of my own career. And they have very much taken to heart the mentorship provided by the United States and our allies, including through the State Partnership Program where the State of Vermont and its National Guard have been so crucial in shepherding North Macedonia in this path.

And of course, as the chairman and Senator Menendez have already mentioned, North Macedonia has its challenges. We have made clear that we expect the reforms to continue and to hold. But given the progress and clear commitment to assuming the responsibilities of NATO membership, the administration sees an historic opportunity to advance United States and allied interests in the region by welcoming North Macedonia into the alliance, with the hope that it will expand its participation in the transatlantic community even further.

North Macedonia is an example, not just to other countries in the Balkans, but also to other NATO aspirants. Its soldiers have fought alongside the United States and NATO forces against shared threats. Its leaders have demonstrated a true commitment to carrying their share of the burden and doing their part to secure peace, democracy, rule of law, and common defense. Over decades now, the promise of NATO membership and broader integration into the Euro-Atlantic family have advanced democratic values in the country, respect for the rule of law, and the pursuit of security and defense policies in line with U.S. and NATO standards and objectives. This is a good thing for the United States and our interests. It has also incentivized countries to pursue difficult but critical political and military reforms over the sustained period, and our policy has yielded clear dividends.

So the rules have not changed. The open door policy is strong and NATO membership remains to all European nations who qualify and demonstrate the ability to contribute to alliance security.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Menendez, and distinguished members of the committee, I want to finish just by urging the Senate to continue our cooperation on NATO enlargement and at the earliest opportunity to provide its advice and consent to U.S. ratification of the Accession Protocol for North Macedonia.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your questions.
[The prepared statement of Ambassador Reeker follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF PHILIP T. REEKER

INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the critical role NATO plays in our security and North Macedonia's place in the Alliance. This is my first appearance before this committee since I was asked by the Secretary and former Assistant Secretary Wess Mitchell to assume this position. I look forward to continuing to uphold the excellent standards set by A/S Mitchell and the European bureau, and this includes working with the Members of this Committee and being responsive to your questions and concerns.

I welcome this opportunity to explain why the administration strongly and unequivocally supports North Macedonia's membership in NATO. We firmly believe that North Macedonia's membership in the Alliance benefits the national security of the United States.

As you may know, I have a personal connection to North Macedonia—as the former Embassy Spokesperson, and later Ambassador—I have seen North Macedonia develop into the strong partner and, with the Senate's blessing, NATO Ally we need in the Western Balkans. I was also in Skopje after the Bucharest NATO Summit in 2008. I can tell to you that the people of North Macedonia have yearned for—and earned—this moment: a moment to reflect on the long and sometimes hard path they had to travel, but one that ultimately led to an enduring commitment to peace, democracy, and prosperity for North Macedonia.

NATO

Let me begin by reaffirming the role of NATO. As President Trump has said, the Alliance has been the bulwark of international peace and security for 70 years, and it will remain so. NATO's accomplishments are many. From deterring the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, to contributing to international security in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, to confronting emerging security challenges, and throughout it all welcoming new members into this critical Alliance.

To be sure, we face complicated security challenges. As outlined by the National Security Strategy, the return of great-power competition is the defining geopolitical fact of our time, and the need to systematically prepare for this competition is the central task of U.S. foreign policy, and indeed, of the Transatlantic alliance. The most immediate threat to Transatlantic security continues to be Russia, which is en-

gaged in wide-ranging, nefarious efforts to undermine the peace and prosperity the West has built over the last 70 years. Putin seeks to weaken the cohesion among NATO Allies and to subvert and destabilize our democratic institutions and processes. We also face increasing threats from China, which is seeking a strategic foothold in Europe by employing so-called “gray zone” tactics, including investments in sensitive technologies, critical infrastructure, and natural resources.

The NATO Alliance is evolving to meet these challenges by enhancing its readiness, mobility, command structure, and its ability to face hybrid and cyber threats. Through efforts like the NATO Readiness Initiative and additional coordination on hybrid and cyber threats, we will be even stronger and more prepared to face down emerging challenges.

NORTH MACEDONIA’S NATO PATH

Let me turn to North Macedonia and the benefits it will bring to the Alliance when it becomes the 30th Ally.

In recognition of its progress and potential, and with the understanding that North Macedonia and Greece would reach an agreement on the name issue, Allies unanimously agreed in July 2018 to invite North Macedonia to begin accession talks. In February of this year, Allies signed the accession protocol for North Macedonia. Two days later, in a historic moment fulfilling the promises made in Prespa, Greece became the first country to ratify North Macedonia’s NATO accession protocol. To date, in total 16 Allies have completed the parliamentary requirements for ratification. They are: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Of those Allies, 11 nations have deposited their instruments of ratification of the Accession Protocol. The implementation of the historic Prespa Agreement and the resolution of the name dispute with Greece underscore that North Macedonia is willing to make sacrifices needed for peace and stability.

North Macedonia has contributed to international operations since 2002, deploying almost 4,000 soldiers. Soldiers from the U.S. and North Macedonia courageously fought alongside each other in Iraq, and they still do so today in Afghanistan. Last week, over 1,000 U.S. troops participated in exercises alongside soldiers from North Macedonia and other Allied countries at the Krivolak Training Area, a resource North Macedonia has made available for NATO exercises.

Adding North Macedonia to the Alliance will make NATO stronger and enhance regional security and stability in what is historically one of the least stable places in Europe. North Macedonia takes its burden sharing seriously and has a clear and credible plan in place to reach the 2 percent–20 percent Wales commitment by 2024. It is already spending 18 percent of its defense budget on modernization with plans to reach NATO’s goal of 20 percent next year, which puts them in the upper half of current NATO members when it comes to meeting this key threshold. North Macedonia has also made great strides to meet NATO standards by implementing deep reforms in the defense, intelligence, and security sectors, and by taking to heart the mentorship provided by the United States and our Allies.

Of course, North Macedonia also has its challenges. We have made clear that we expect reforms to continue and to hold. But given its progress and clear commitment to assuming the responsibilities of NATO membership, the administration sees a historic opportunity to advance U.S. and Allied interests in the region by welcoming North Macedonia into the Alliance, with the hope that it will expand its participation in the transatlantic community even further.

North Macedonia is an example, not just to other countries in the Balkans, but also to other NATO aspirants. Its soldiers have fought side by side with U.S. and NATO forces against shared threats. Its leaders have demonstrated their commitment to carrying their share of the burden and doing their part to secure peace, democracy, rule of law, and common defense. Over decades, the promise of NATO membership has advanced democratic values, respect for the rule of law, and the pursuit of security and defense policies in line with U.S. and NATO standards and objectives. It has also incentivized countries to pursue difficult but critical political and military reforms over a sustained period. This policy has yielded clear dividends. The rules have not changed: the Open Door policy is strong, and NATO membership remains open to all European nations who qualify and demonstrate the ability to contribute to Alliance security.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Menendez, and distinguished Members of this Committee, I urge the Senate to continue our cooperation on NATO enlargement, and at the earliest opportunity to provide its advice and consent to U.S. ratification of the Accession Protocol for North Macedonia.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much, Ambassador Reeker.

I think most members of this committee have already given the advice, and we are moving along on the consent as rapidly as we can, given our rules.

Next we will turn to Ms. Kathryn Wheelbarger. She is the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. She oversees policy issues related to the nations and international organizations of Europe, including NATO, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Western Hemisphere. Previously Ms. Wheelbarger served as Vice President for Litigation and Chief Compliance Officer at CSRE, Inc. from 2011 to 2017. Ms. Wheelbarger served as Policy Director and Counsel on the Senate Armed Services Committee and as Deputy Staff Director and Senior Counsel on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

Given that background, we are anxious to hear your comments, Ms. Wheelbarger. The floor is yours.

STATEMENT OF KATHRYN WHEELBARGER, ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY, INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, WASHINGTON, DC

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Good morning, Chairman Risch, Ranking Member Menendez, and members of the committee. It is a pleasure to be here today to describe DOD's support for North Macedonia's membership into NATO.

I will try to be brief, and I apologize in any way that this is duplicative of what you have heard thus far. That was very comprehensive and we appreciate it.

For nearly two decades, North Macedonia has been a trusted bilateral and multilateral partner. As the chairman and ranking member already highlighted, they have deployed side by side with our troops in Afghanistan and Iraq for years. Moreover, North Macedonia is the first country ever to go into combat in Afghanistan alongside our U.S. National Guard. It has continued to increase its troop contributions in Afghanistan over the last 2 years, emphasizing its commitment to NATO and our shared security goals.

North Macedonia also provides logistical support to the NATO mission in Kosovo, as we have heard, by offering its training facilities for NATO training missions. And just last week, it was the center of the largest military exercise in North Macedonia since the break-up of Yugoslavia, with more than 2,500 NATO forces participating.

It also cooperates with U.S. counterterrorism efforts, especially as part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Significantly, North Macedonia was one of the very first countries to commit to taking back their foreign terrorist fighters and prosecuting under their local laws. And I cannot overstate the importance of that leadership to worldwide security. They are an example for the rest of the West.

North Macedonia's political commitment to defense reform also demonstrates its dedication as a partner that upholds core NATO values. Just recently North Macedonia completed its strategic defense review, exerting a significant political will to right-size its military and divest itself from legacy Soviet equipment.

Equally important is North Macedonia's commitment to NATO pledges. As we have heard and as the Ambassador reiterated, North Macedonia has a credible plan to meet 2 percent and 20 percent requirements by 2024, and again, it continues to serve as an example for other NATO allies.

North Macedonia also budgets for increases in national expenditures to acquire Western-made equipment, including U.S.-made infantry vehicles. Their plans will increase both their readiness and NATO interoperability. They also have more than 900 graduates from U.S. schools and training programs such as the International Military Education and Training program. As you know, this program is vital. It creates enduring connections and relationships for our mutual security interests that sustain over decades. North Macedonia proves the value of this program, as many of their graduates are in positions at the highest level of government in North Macedonia.

Finally, we just celebrated, as we heard, the 25th anniversary of its close relationship with the Vermont National Guard through the State Partnership Program. This program is a tangible symbol of our long-term commitments to our relationship and addressing together our mutual security interests.

North Macedonia's accession presents an historic opportunity to further extend the stabilizing influence in the Western Balkans, a key strategic region for European security. The Department believes North Macedonia is ready for NATO membership.

And I would like just to close by highlighting, from our perspective in DOD, a key attribute of North Macedonia, and that is not just its capabilities, but it is the will it has to contribute to some of our most important and challenging missions and they have for decades.

So we appreciate your time today, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Wheelbarger follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF KATHRYN WHEELBARGER

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 2 years. North Mac-

edonia 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 25th 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 6 and 9 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 heli-

copters, 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.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you very much. I appreciate your remarks, both of you.

We are now going to do a round of questions, and I am going to start briefly.

Mr. Reeker, you mentioned that you talked with the North Macedonians recently about the commitment to reach their 2 percent–20 percent. As we know, they already have the 20 percent, which is a good sign. And you also noted that they are in the upper echelon for people who are reaching for that goal.

What is your optimism for them getting to the point that we want to see that they have agreed to get to and that we all want to see?

Ambassador REEKER. Thanks, Senator.

Mr. Chairman, I think I am extremely optimistic is the simple and short answer based on my experience with particularly this government under Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, the foreign minister, the defense minister. Their dedication to meeting the criteria to join NATO, as we discussed, has been a long-term goal not just of the government but really of the people of North Macedonia across all different lines, across political divides. This has been their goal. And they have a very credible and well thought through plan fiscally to meet that 2 percent criteria.

They are already, because of the positive benefits of the Prespa Agreement, seeing economic benefits in terms of greater investment. The trade opportunities that are presented by having a very positive relationship with Greece now in terms of infrastructure and mobility will pay off results, which means they will be in a better position to direct spending on the military as required. And we have really seen that. And I think a number of you know personally the leadership of both the defense minister, the foreign minister, and the prime minister and how dedicated they are to this.

So we are quite confident. And of course, our team on the ground under our ambassador and those of us in Washington will be working with them hand in hand to hold them to those commitments but also to help them with the kind of mentoring and advice that we have provided really over the country's independence.

The CHAIRMAN. I appreciate that, and I appreciate your raising the issue with them. I am not going to ask you about your view of the other 22 of our friends and allies who have not met that commitment. And I would hope and would urge, as chairman of this committee, I want to urge that all of us continue to underscore for these 22 allies how important that commitment is. All of us over the years have talked to them about it, but we always felt that we were being put off and patted on the head and told how well they were going toward it. And over the last 29 months, we have seen real movement in that regard, and I think it is important that we all keep the pressure on them for them to understand this is a for-real commitment, and it is important to every member to meet that commitment, just as it is to meet all commitments.

So in any event, thank you for doing that.

And with that, I will turn it over to the ranking member, Senator Menendez.

Senator MENENDEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Prespa is the reason that we are able to discuss North Macedonia's NATO accession, the agreement between Greece and North Macedonia.

What progress has North Macedonia made towards its commitment under the Prespa Agreement? What is the United States doing either diplomatically or through our security assistance programs to support those aspects of Prespa that aim to improve ties between Greece and North Macedonia?

Ambassador REEKER. Thank you, Senator Menendez, because I think that is an important thing to highlight.

The Prespa Agreement, as you know, outlines a timeline for full implementation of the agreement and the mechanisms for cooperation, including technical, as well as political phase-in on the name, "North Macedonia," and of course, some of that is also tied to North Macedonia's opening of EU accession chapters.

I have long believed—and I think we have had these conversations—that North Macedonia and Greece can be, should be, and are naturally poised to be the best of friends. And as allies and potentially soon EU members, they are really working in that direction. The agreement, like any agreement, does take time to implement, but I think we have seen strong support. There is a bilateral joint commission on historic and education matters that has been established that is already meeting. A group of experts has been estab-

lished to advise on commercial and trademark use. And most importantly, they are taking it seriously at both an official and a private business level.

And so the United States has remained ready, as we were over the past 25 years, but particularly during the period when the two governments showed the courage and the true leadership to come together and resolve this issue that they have our support and our backing as they move forward to implement this.

My colleague may be able to describe more some of the security assistance.

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Just briefly, I think our continued focus on NATO interoperability, modernizing of their forces, and joint exercises is a key focus of not only their ability to partner with all of NATO, but Greece in specific.

Senator MENENDEZ. Secretary Reeker, while North Macedonia has made progress in addressing the rule of law issues under Prime Minister Zaev, the country has made a lot of progress on the rule of law in the 2000s before it slid back in 2008 to 2015. How would you assess the durability of North Macedonia's ongoing rule of law reforms? What are the most substantial outstanding areas of democratic reform to be undertaken in North Macedonia?

The mandate for the special prosecutor dealing with the 2015 scandals expires next year. Should the U.S. advocate for the appointment of another special prosecutor to deal with corruption cases?

Ambassador REEKER. Thank you, Senator.

I have, of course, seen the progress that North Macedonia made in its early years emerging from the break-up of Yugoslavia as the only one of the Yugoslav republics not to experience war. And of course, the support from the United States and the international community was important in that, including U.S. troops that participated in the UNPREDEP deployment back in the 1990s. Their support for our goals during the Kosovo war was unprecedented in terms of refugee flows and working—

Senator MENENDEZ. I appreciate that, but since I have limited time, I am trying to get to the rule of law reforms.

Ambassador REEKER. And so, as you saw, they made tremendous reform, and then after the Bucharest decision, the government in power at the time slowly began backtracking on these things. And I know Senator Shaheen visited us and saw, witnessed what we had there.

The Macedonian people spoke, and they did not cave in to the previous regime's methods and efforts to prevent a resolution of the name issue. And I think they have shown now a dedication to this.

They do have to finish the process on the special prosecutor. That is an important aspect. The prime minister realizes that and has spoken to us. Our embassy is regularly engaged on that. I feel comfortable and confident that they are dedicated to doing this—

Senator MENENDEZ. Should we seek reappointment of a special prosecutor?

Ambassador REEKER. I think that is something we have to continue talking about. I think it plays an important role, and we do want to see that organization, that institution, which has been cru-

cial to the forward movement, and we will continue to talk to the government about that.

Senator MENENDEZ. Very quickly, Ms. Wheelbarger, I am going to submit a series of questions for the record with respect to North Macedonia's military force structure, budget, planning, and logistics capabilities. Do I have your commitment to answer those questions in a timely manner?

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Absolutely.

Senator MENENDEZ. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Senator Johnson.

Senator JOHNSON. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Assistant Secretary Reeker, you are well aware of the significant geopolitical competition occurring within Central, South Central, and Eastern Europe. You mentioned in your testimony Russia engaged in a hot war not honoring the territorial integrity of Ukraine, China's growing investment.

One thing I have really become acutely aware of is how important the required reforms are for these nations to attract investment, to grow their economy, create the opportunity for their people. And a huge incentive for the body politic is the accession, the joining of NATO and the EU. Can you just kind of speak to that with your broad experience in the region?

Ambassador REEKER. Thank you for that because I think that is so critical to the transformation that we have seen in the western Balkans so that these countries—this broad area goes from being a consumer of security to a producer and supporter of security. And it has been, as our foreign policy has reflected, the reforms required on both these tracks—there is a parallel track, the NATO membership, as well as their efforts to join the EU, which we have supported as a matter of policy—that has produced that.

And I think we saw it in Slovakia, a country that is celebrating 30 years since the Velvet Revolution that had its own challenges after the Velvet Divorce in terms of democracy, but used the path to NATO and to the EU positively with the full support of their people, their population, to make those necessary reforms and now are a strong ally and an economy that is booming at a level that would have been thought unprecedented just 30 years ago, let alone 75 years ago when we liberated Europe and thought about the kinds of institutions we needed to build to build a Europe whole and free. And so I think that has been a key motivating factor.

I know I saw in North Macedonia these were the criteria they laid out. This was how they developed policy. This was where we directed our assistance dollars, whether it was in the financial sector or in civil society, and certainly on the military side. And we are seeing the fruits of those efforts, which contributes then to the security of the whole transatlantic area and to the American people.

Senator JOHNSON. So if the ability to join NATO and the EU would be cut off, that would be a really bad thing for the region. Correct?

Ambassador REEKER. I think it has been a very positive force for the region and the backbone of our policy certainly in the Western Balkans.

Senator JOHNSON. Ms. Wheelbarger, a group of more than 50 Members of Congress went to the Munich Security Conference, sending a very strong signal of how important we view those friendships, those alliances. In a meeting with Secretary-General Stoltenberg, one of the members questioning, really from the standpoint of a devil's advocate, the enlargement of NATO, about the only negative aspect there is. I mean, should we really be called upon to defend such a small country. I thought the Secretary-General's answer was—and I do not want to put words in his mouth, but basically was very simple saying we want to enlarge NATO because a larger defensive organization like NATO is just a good thing.

Can you speak to that from the standpoint of the defensive nature of the alliance?

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Sure, of course.

From the Department of Defense's perspective, the continued enlargement of NATO with countries that meet the requirements is a net gain for our collective security and the security of the transatlantic alliance. A country like North Macedonia, though small, brings significant capabilities to the defense posture in the region and also provides significant stabilizing force to what has historically been a very destabilized region. So we actually do see the continued progress on NATO enhancement and enlargement as a net positive for our collective security.

Senator JOHNSON. I have always felt, as important as the 2 percent commitment is, how that money is spent is maybe even more important. Can you talk about the strategic type of resourcing and development of individual militaries of these different nations in terms of its interoperability and cooperation within the NATO alliance?

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Absolutely, and that is a key aspect of not only members that are already in NATO but those that are aspiring to be in NATO is that they seek our input and our cooperation on how to become more interoperable and how to reform and advance their militaries in a way that is Western-aligned, which has a significant, obviously, counter-Russian influence just from the beginning.

As we have seen with North Macedonia and their strategic defense review, we worked closely hand in glove with them as they developed that, right-sized their military to ensure that they have the proper mixture of senior officers to junior officers and also a desire to truly create an NCO corps which is seen throughout the world as key to military success. So again, having the aspiration to join NATO has already allowed North Macedonia to make these significant steps forward in a way that protects themselves and protects the transatlantic alliance.

Senator JOHNSON. Well, thank you. Thank you for your service. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Johnson. That was an interesting point you raised that we have all talked about and that is the wisdom of the expansion of NATO. And I think if the Georgians were here, we have two regions still occupied by the Russians from recent activity, and the Ukrainians were here that have one full and one other partial occupied by the Russians, I think they could

make a very powerful argument as to why expansion is an appropriate idea. But a good thought.

Senator Shaheen.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I would like to begin by echoing your comments and those of Senator Menendez in recognizing the political courage and leadership that it took for both Greece and the Republic of North Macedonia to sign the Prespa Agreement. I think that is political courage that we do not often see, and so I think we should all remember that it is important to recognize that.

You both talked about the Russian attempt to disrupt the agreement between Greece and North Macedonia. And we have seen their influence perhaps even more notable in other parts of the Western Balkans, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

So can you speak to, Mr. Reeker, first how bringing North Macedonia and Montenegro perhaps into NATO helps to counterbalance that influence in the region?

Ambassador REEKER. Thank you, Senator. It is an important question because these are countries that have demonstrated clearly that their orientation is to the West. We share broadly a set of values in terms of democracy, in terms of respect for freedom for the rights of the citizen and free markets and collective security. And so by having these countries work through the path of reform necessary to meet the criteria to join NATO, they demonstrate, with the full support of their populations, obviously, that that is their direction. And they have not succumbed to some often powerful efforts by the Russians' malign activities and intents to disrupt, to sow discord, in the case of North Macedonia, to attempt to divide with false information, misleading stories, alarmist and fearful ideas of what would happen in terms of the Prespa Agreement.

And the people have shown wisdom by coming together not allowing the ethnic card to be played, but instead saying we have a goal that we have set out now over two or three generations since our independence and since setting our sights on integration into the Euro-Atlantic family. And I think by bringing them in as the 30th member of NATO, they will see the real accomplishment of that and they will work with us in the region as well to support our values and counter this Russian effort.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Ms. Wheelbarger, in your testimony you said that North Macedonia has worked closely with the United States to counter Russia in cyberspace. Can you elaborate on that a little bit and why that is important?

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Sure, absolutely.

And I will just echo the thoughts of my colleague in terms of North Macedonia's ability to counter the Russian influence.

We have recently met with their minister of defense, and it was quite elucidating, the experience they had at being able to counter the message before the messages were delivered. They were very adept at being able to estimate what kind of messages they thought Russia would deliver to try to upset the vote and prepare their population for their messages and counter them before they were even delivered.

Senator SHAHEEN. Can you talk about—because maybe there are some lessons there that we should take as we look at our upcoming elections—how did they prepare their populations? What kinds of things did they do?

Ms. WHEELBARGER. My understanding, based on our study and conversation with the minister, is they first established what they thought would be the messages, what were the key themes that Russia was likely to deploy. One of those, of course, is anti-NATO rhetoric. Others, of course, would be sowing ethnic strife within the country. So my understanding is their senior leadership made it their responsibility to have the conversation with their people and to explain you should expect these kind of messages from the Russians and sort of do not fall for it. And they had a pretty significant impact, we assess, on the outcome of that vote. So I have suggested that we could most significantly learn from their experiences.

Another key reason that our alliance with these countries are so valued is because they are on the front lines of a lot of this malign influence. And we can learn and adapt from them. And that is similar in the cyberspace arena. Especially during the last election, we had teams in the region watching and learning from what they were seeing in attempting to counter it in the cyber realm. And that was important for our own election because what we see there is going to come next year.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Can you both speak briefly just of how important it will be for the United States Congress to move this accession agreement as rapidly as possible so that the rest of our NATO allies see that, and how do you think they will respond to that?

Ambassador REEKER. Senator, I think our allies, of course, always take cues from the United States. We have led the alliance now for 70 years. There is unanimity within the alliance that North Macedonia should become the 30th member. I think our movement quickly on this would demonstrate not only that we support something that we have stood behind for a long time, but how important NATO is and illustrate not only to the other allies, but to the rest of the world, including our adversaries, that NATO is going strong, expanding as we have discussed, and increasing the security for all of its members as a defensive alliance.

Senator SHAHEEN. Thank you.

Ms. WHEELBARGER. And I will just quickly add even holding this hearing now is extremely important because we are coming upon our defense ministerial at the end of June. So the prioritization of this committee to hold this hearing now is very important because we can highlight to our allies, when we head to Brussels in June, that we are taking this significant step.

Senator SHAHEEN. Well, thank you both very much.

Mr. Chairman, I hope we can move out of this committee, as quickly as possible, the accession agreement.

The CHAIRMAN. The chair is committed to that proposition. I have already discussed it with leadership. They are aware of our sense of urgency on this matter. I think it is in everyone's best interest to get this done. So I commit to you that we will continue down that road.

Senator Cardin, welcome.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you, and let me thank our witnesses.

I certainly concur in the comments that have been made about the importance of NATO and the importance of NATO accession, and the fact that North Macedonia would have been in NATO by now but for the issues the concerning politics of its name. I recognize that.

But I also recognize that we have NATO partners today that made certain commitments about values that, if we were voting today, we may have questions as to voting for their accession. And Macedonia has had a history of challenges in regards to its commitment to basic rights and fighting corruption and democratic institutions. They certainly are on the right path at this particular moment. I would acknowledge that. But we would like to use the accession process to have a sounder foundation for confidence that this country will, in fact, live up to the commitments of the NATO alliance as it relates to values.

So I would just like you to respond as to how we should use this time, as we are considering accession, to give us the best chances that North Macedonia will remain true to these principles and resist the internal politics that we have seen occur in other countries backsliding on democratic commitments. What advice do you have for us?

Ambassador REEKER. If I may, Senator. Thank you for the question because I think North Macedonia has been a really good example of this.

We saw a government come to power in 2006. We thought we could work very closely with that government. We were, of course, open to working with whatever democratic government there was.

After 2008 and the Bucharest Summit, when I then arrived as ambassador, we saw an erosion, the erosion you are all aware of and talking about. And we raised this repeatedly that we understood the frustrations. They had made all these steps towards meeting the criteria at Bucharest but were faced with this political challenge. And what we tried to do was work with them to find a way forward and resolve the name issue. Instead, what we saw was lack of real commitment to doing that and a consolidation of power and the backsliding on a number of areas and real concerns about corruption, sowing divisions within the society.

But the people of North Macedonia, the Macedonians, the Albanians, all the other ethnic groups within the country, said, you know, we are not going to fall for this. And our orientation is West and we are tired of corrupt leadership and we want to see this issue resolved and we want to move forward to NATO and EU. And I think that is the best statement.

And we can continue to encourage that. They have robust politics in North Macedonia, and that is a good thing. It is a small country. People all know each other. But the United States can play a strong role there. And by meeting these criteria, they will have not only realized what they have dreamed about for some time with the full ratification and becoming the 30th member, I think that will be a very solid lesson not only in that country but for other countries in the region where we are still working to overcome some of the challenges. And Macedonia is a tough neighborhood, the great geographic area. North Macedonia has demonstrated how

to survive and thrive in a tough neighborhood, and we can be a part of that.

Senator CARDIN. So with Montenegro part of NATO and North Macedonia on the way to becoming part of NATO, how does that change the dynamic, if at all, in regards to Serbia and Kosovo? Is this a positive step or does it tend to put more pressure on Serbia—perhaps more vulnerability to Russia—as a result of the NATO expansion?

Ambassador REEKER. Senator, I think it is a very positive step. And the Prespa Agreement was the greatest accomplishment in the region in terms of stability and peace since the Dayton Accords. And, again, it was due to the courage and true leadership and convictions of both sides, in Greece and in North Macedonia, who said we need to do this. It is difficult. It is painful. But we can do this, and with the help and support of the international community, including the United Nations mediator.

And I think that sent an important signal to the rest of the region. It gave impetus to the Kosovo-Serbia talks, which need more impetus. I think seeing North Macedonia actually benefit from the results that the West, that the alliance, and now with the European Union considering the next steps in North Macedonia's accession as a member of the EU also reinforced that. And so this is a crucial important step.

Going back to Bismarck 2 centuries ago, we are solving what was called the Macedonia problem. North Macedonia is the answer, and they are providing stability in the region, providing good neighborliness to Greece and a model for Serbia, Kosovo, and also for Bosnia to resolve all of these issues and demonstrate the Western orientation despite efforts by Russia to disrupt and divide.

Senator CARDIN. Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator.

Senator Murphy.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

Two comments and I will try to squeeze in two questions.

The first is to align myself with, I think, the direction of the comments of the chairman. A few of us were at dinner some years ago with one of the key national leaders inside the NATO alliance, and that leader was making the case that had Georgia and Ukraine been inside NATO, that we would be at war currently with Russia in two different countries. Others of us around the table were of the opinion that had Ukraine and Georgia been inside the alliance, that we would have sovereign and independent countries without Russian invasion or interference. So that is why many of us are very glad that this agreement is before us and we can bring yet another country into the alliance.

This took not just courage but incredible leadership. There were great obstacles on both sides of this agreement prior to it getting done. And I am glad that we are recognizing both the leadership and courage inside of its accomplishment by moving this very quickly.

Ms. Wheelbarger, I wanted to talk to you a little bit about how the work that Macedonia has done to counter Russian interference pairs with our debate about the expectations we have of NATO

members to be in good standing. The fact of the matter is the tools that Russia is using to try to do damage to the alliance often are met with capabilities that are outside of the formal defense structure. And so when Macedonia is spending money through the foreign ministry on countering propaganda and trying to set up capabilities to distill real information from false information, that does not get counted towards their 2 percent quota.

I have made this case before in this committee, but I think we generally are gifting the Russians when we only think of your participation in NATO through the prism of how many planes and how many tanks and how many soldiers you are employing.

Is the work that Macedonia has done here successfully so far not an advertisement for why we might want to have a little bit broader understanding of what countries need to do in order to be members of NATO in good standing?

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Yes. Most certainly whole-of-government approaches to countering whether it be Russia or any threat we might face as an alliance is key to the success of the alliance and to our collective security.

I do think NATO does have a very thoughtful process in terms of what capabilities and what spending should count towards the 2 percent and the 20 percent, which was a very conscious, concerted effort on the part of NATO to develop the kind of—to have the money attached to the requirements for the actual defense of the collective security.

That being said, of course everything the United States does, for example, in the information realm, whether it be through the State Department's Global Engagement Center or other activities of our interagency, is important to our own security. But in a certain sense, we do have to sort of draw a line somewhere in the sense of what will count for hard numbers and what will not.

Senator MURPHY. I agree. I agree. But we tend to over-obsess in our discussions about NATO with respect to this 2 percent number. I would also argue that the country is making a concerted effort to break itself from energy dependence on Russia, which in no way counts towards the 2 percent standard. Their decision and investment in doing so probably contributes much greater to their security than the collective security of the alliance than the decision to stand up another set of capabilities inside a relatively small military. So let me just leave that where it is.

Ambassador Reeker, I wanted, while you are here, to get the opportunity to talk to you about another important subject connected to our transatlantic alliance, and that is the very confusing position of this administration on the ongoing Brexit negotiations. The President, no doubt, has been a cheerleader for Britain's departure from the European Union. I think that is a grave mistake for the future of transatlantic security.

While I was in Britain talking to them about this subject a few months ago, the President's son wrote an op-ed for a major British newspaper that went so far as to say that the pending agreement before the parliament, which would have protected the Good Friday Agreement, was an abandonment of the referendum. That was clearly believed to have been administration policy given that no

one there thinks the President's son puts op-eds in major papers without authorization from the administration.

But then just days after that, the Secretary of State was before our committee claiming that it was still the U.S. position to try to make sure that the peace process in Northern Ireland was protected.

The President was very enthusiastic about a trade agreement while he was there as a reward for Britain's departure from the European Union.

Have we laid down any conditions for that trade agreement, for instance, that Brexit be done in a way that does not harm the Good Friday Agreement, the Belfast Agreement? Are we making it clear that we have some interests that we want to be protected throughout the Brexit process and might be a condition for them entering into negotiations with us on a trade agreement?

Ambassador REEKER. Thanks, Senator. I obviously stand with Secretary Pompeo and his recent remarks there. As you know, he has also been recently in the U.K., and I joined him a couple weeks ago on a visit there prior to the state visit.

As we said, we support a Brexit outcome that maintains global economic and financial stability and minimizes disruption to the transatlantic commercial and security ties and preserves peace and stability in Northern Ireland. We have made that very clear, and it is something we watch closely.

We do stand ready to negotiate an ambitious free trade agreement with the United Kingdom as soon as they are ready to do so, as the President has said, and such a free trade agreement between the United States and the U.K. can have tremendous benefit for both countries. We have also been very clear that we want to continue our strong partnership with the European Union as well.

Senator MURPHY. Is the preservation of the Good Friday Agreement a precondition for those negotiations on a free trade agreement?

Ambassador REEKER. I think what we said is we are prepared to negotiate an ambitious free trade agreement. We have not established yet the full criteria there, but I think that remains. And we have repeatedly said preserving peace and stability in Northern Ireland is critical. The Good Friday Accords are vital there. There is a robust democratic system in the United Kingdom, and they will make sovereign and democratic choices when it comes to Brexit.

Senator MURPHY. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Murphy. I think that your observations are quite profound regarding the value issues for membership in NATO. We do have a tendency to count planes and soldiers and what have you. Before you can even sit down at the table like that, they have got to be a country that is bound to us by the kind of values. And I think that was very profound.

Regarding your comments on Brexit, why do we not leave those for another day? The Rubik's cube will be explored no doubt at some point by this committee. Thank you very much.

Senator Gardner.

Senator GARDNER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

And thank you to both of you for your testimony and service.

As I mentioned to you in the interim prior to the hearing, I have been bouncing back and forth to a Helsinki Commission hearing and a Commerce Committee hearing. So I apologize for being late.

You may have already discussed some of these questions, so if I am asking a question that has been asked before, I apologize.

One of the challenges we have seen in NATO—and I am a strong supporter of NATO and serve on the Senate NATO observer group, which I think is one of the key architectural frameworks this world has ever seen. I have even talked about perhaps some day we could see a NATO-like structure in Asia. It has got a ways to go, but obviously the power of NATO, the interests that unite us, the ability to respond to threats that we face with mutual values is incredibly important.

One of the challenges, though, we have seen in NATO and I think one of the questions that has rightfully been asked is issues of defense spending and contributions and those kinds of things. And perhaps you addressed this already, but would you, Ms. Wheelbarger, be able to talk a little bit about the defense spending and what you think would happen?

Ms. WHEELBARGER. We did speak about it a little bit earlier, but maintaining a focus and ensuring that all allies remain committed to their 2 percent and 20 percent Wales pledge continues to be a major effort in all of our defense ministerials, and it will be a topic of conversation again coming up here at the end of June.

We also like to highlight that it is three C's. It is cash, commitments, and contributions. So the importance of allies contributing to missions that are important for the alliance such as Afghanistan and the RSM mission and OIR continue to be a focus of our efforts as well.

Senator GARDNER. Thank you.

Secretary Reeker, one of the things that we discussed just at the Helsinki Commission hearing this morning—we talked a little bit about the counterterrorism efforts that Russia has made both with in and without the country that have the effect less of counterterrorism and can be counterproductive actually to U.S. values, U.S. ally values, and used less as a counterterrorism tactic but perhaps more as a geopolitical strategy to push back against U.S. or allied interests.

Could you talk a little bit about this accession and what it means and what we have seen out of Russia?

Ambassador REEKER. Thanks, Senator. We did touch on that a bit in noting how North Macedonia has consistently stood up against the Russian malign activities there. The Prespa Agreement has faced a lot of efforts at disruption to that by Russian activities not only in North Macedonia but also in Greece, particularly in northern Greece. And the people have spoken with strong efforts by the leadership on both sides of the governments to counter that. And I think what we are seeing, as they make their way and will become, with the support of this committee, the 30th member of NATO, a real decisive statement about the importance of that.

And that goes for counterterrorism, which President Trump has highlighted as an important thing for NATO to focus on, and they have. The efforts not only, of course, in Afghanistan and training missions in Iraq, efforts by NATO to focus resources on counterter-

rorism have been joined by countries like North Macedonia, soon to be a member, but as a partner signed up to the global counter-ISIS group. They have made real contributions there.

Senator GARDNER. Should NATO members, should European nations, the United States, others—should we be pushing more on the OSCE to be a more effective voice in pushing back against some of the counterproductive activities Russia has pursued, whether it is at the United Nations or any other forum?

Ambassador REEKER. The OSCE I think is a terrific forum that is often—I do not want to say forgotten, but does not have the profile perhaps that NATO does. But it is another institution that was created in the post-World War II era. Particularly during the Cold War, it gave us valuable opportunities for the types of engagement. OSCE has played a very important role in the Western Balkans, including in North Macedonia, over the years. This committee and the full Senate have confirmed a new U.S. Permanent Representative to the OSCE, and we very much look forward to Governor Gilmore taking up his role there where I do think the OSCE has an important role to play.

Senator GARDNER. Should we be doing more to push back and to express—

Ambassador REEKER. I think it is one of the tools and avenues that we have, and we will continue to do that robustly. And we look forward to continuing to work very closely with the Helsinki Commission on how we do that.

Senator GARDNER. Do you think OSCE has done enough at this point?

Ambassador REEKER. I think one can always do more. OSCE is a robust organization with a lot of members in it. It is a platform. And in fact, I am meeting with the OSCE chairman in office. I met the chairman in office from Slovakia last week, and I am meeting with the Secretary-General this week. And we will continue to look at avenues they can do and welcome your thoughts on that.

Senator GARDNER. Thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Thank you, Senator Gardner.

Senator Kaine, your patience is admirable.

Senator KAINE. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It has been a great discussion, and I want to thank the witnesses for this.

I add my words to those that you each offered and Senator Shaheen congratulating Greece and Macedonia for the diplomacy. I noticed May 31st both countries opened up embassies in each other's capitals, which was a positive sign. I think the timing of this hearing, as you said, Ms. Wheelbarger, is good because of the upcoming ministerial level meeting.

A comment about NATO, and then, Ms. Wheelbarger, I want to talk to you about DOD cooperation, mil-to-mil cooperation.

So NATO, 70th year. I do think it is very important for us to continue what is clearly a consensus here, DOD, State, the administration, colleagues on both sides of the aisle emphasizing the importance of NATO. I was in Paris giving a speech on the 70th anniversary of NATO in March, and the questions I was getting were really interesting.

You know, the President makes some statements that make people wonder about him, and I expected I might get questions about him. But actually the questions I got were more about the American public. Is the American public supportive of NATO? Presidents can be here for 4 or 8 years, and there can be other Presidents. But what does the American public think about it?

I have a bill that I have introduced that is pending before this committee that is bipartisan that would clear up a legal ambiguity. The bill basically says that just as it took Senate ratification of a treaty to get into NATO, we should not get out of NATO unless either by a Senate vote or an act of Congress. That is not particular toward any President, but it is an expression of will, that Congress believes this is important. And I would hope that that might be something we could take up.

I am very open. It is a bipartisan proposal, but amendments, changes, making it better. But because the questions that I was getting were about what do the American people think about the relationship at 70, something like that I think can be a very strong statement. And I actually think constitutionally it would be wise.

I think it would be an appropriate policy to say that a treaty of this magnitude that is accepted with such a consensus, that was entered into with a Senate two-thirds vote should not be set aside unilaterally by anyone.

I am also happy to tell my colleagues that in the Armed Services Committee, the NDAA, the text of which is being filed today, includes an amendment that says if any President were to say we should get out of NATO, no funds could be used to remove American troops from NATO missions for a year, giving Congress the ability to grapple with that and decide whether that was a direction the country wanted to go.

But I hope we might be able to take this matter up in some form and express powerfully that the Senate and Congress believe we should stay in NATO until we make a decision that we should get out of NATO.

I want to ask you, Ms. Wheelbarger. You talked a little bit about IMET and joint exercises. And the commitment of North Macedonia in troops to Afghanistan and other missions has been really powerful.

Talk to us a little more about the kinds of ongoing training that we are doing together with folks coming to our country for training, the likely exercises in the future. You mentioned a couple of them that North Macedonia will do together with U.S. troops. Because I think this is really important to build relationships, build capacity, send a message that is ultimately a message of deterrence.

Ms. WHEELBARGER. Absolutely, happy to do so.

I think our mil-to-mil relationship with North Macedonia is an exemplar for other countries. Their willingness to take our advice and be true strategic partners when it comes to particularly their strategic defense reforms, which from the Department of Defense view, when you are talking about what kind of training has the longest-term effects for a country, not only the training that they can do in the United States through the IMET program, which I will get you specific numbers of who is here in the country right now from North Macedonia, but in terms of defense institution

building. And I know this body, the Senate, has been a big advocate for that for many years.

The importance of that I do not think can be overstated simply because ensuring the proper civ-mil relationships, ensuring the anti-corruption efforts throughout defense industries and throughout defense institutions, having the right mixture between officers and enlisted, the right mixture between senior officers and junior officers, this can be a foundational core for any society.

We heard earlier the concerns about backsliding for a country like North Macedonia that had some trouble some years in terms of their democratic values. We do believe that mil-to-mil relationships and MOD-to-DOD relationships can provide a background of stability in some ways for those values. Again, if a country can get their defense institutions right, particularly on values of anti-corruption, values of meritocracy, that has an enduring foundation throughout the rest of the institutions of that society.

Senator KAINE. I would also add a value that militaries could often perform in a wonderful way are inclusion in any society where there is ethnic strife. The Russians were trying to amplify that to oppose the agreement with Greece. They often go at these ethnic tensions and try to drive them. And if you have a military where in the leadership and in the ranks, everybody is represented, everybody is treated equally, that often is a really powerful example. And I know that is one of the things, when we do training, we really work with other nations to try to model. So I would encourage you to continue in that good work.

Mr. Chair, thank you.

The CHAIRMAN. Good remarks. Thank you very much, Senator Kaine.

Thank you so much. If you will be patient with us for just a few more minutes. Senator Menendez.

Senator MENENDEZ. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have two final questions.

Mr. Secretary, the European Commission has recommended that the EU start accession talks with North Macedonia, but my understanding is that several EU members are reluctant to start those talks. Last week, Prime Minister Zaev warned that he may call early elections if the EU does not give a date for starting talks this summer.

How would you assess the status of North Macedonia's EU accession and what impact would delaying those talks have domestically in North Macedonia?

Ambassador REEKER. Thank you, Senator, for the very timely question. It is a subject we have been discussing in my meetings with European counterparts. In fact, we were in Berlin just last week underscoring the U.S. support for North Macedonia's European perspective and the start of talks. We all welcomed the European Commission's report for North Macedonia, as well as for Albania. Our encouragement has been to look at each country on their merits, and I think there is widespread support for North Macedonia to move forward with its EU membership, particularly with the Prespa Agreement having resolved the name issue.

Some countries, some member states do have their own political calendars. That is something that colleagues have highlighted for

us. Whether June becomes the exact date for starting the accession talks or announcing a date to start is not yet certain. I think there is still time for that to be—if it is June, if it is July.

Our advice certainly to Prime Minister Zaev and others is to look at how far you have come in this path that you have taken. They have done all the right things. That has been acknowledged by the commission, and I think North Macedonia beginning to open these chapters necessary to become a full member of the European Union is a foregone conclusion. The exact timing is something for the Europeans to work out.

Senator MENENDEZ. Outside of the timing, if the timing delays to a point, what is the purpose of the prime minister suggesting that he is going to call some snap elections?

Ambassador REEKER. Well, politics in North Macedonia is complicated, as it is in many countries. I think he continues to demonstrate that he has strong support, a strong mandate, and that is something he wants to highlight. But this is a reason that we have highlighted to our European colleagues both in Brussels institutionally but with individual member states our belief and the efforts we have made to help move this forward and why it would be in everybody's interest to let them begin that process as soon as possible.

Senator MENENDEZ. One last question. China has invested hundreds of millions of euros in North Macedonia's infrastructure as part of its 17 plus 1 initiative in Eastern Europe. And Prime Minister Zaev has stated that he wants to expand North Macedonia's cooperation with China.

Now, I remain deeply concerned about the threat China's investments, particularly in the telecommunications sector, pose to the security of the United States and our allies. We have seen time and time again that Chinese investment is manipulative at best and coercive in some of its worst forms.

Have you had discussions with North Macedonia regarding future Chinese investments, how they impact NATO's security? And what measures are you taking to ensure that North Macedonia's engagement with China does not negatively impact NATO?

Ambassador REEKER. We have had those conversations, as we have with so many countries, highlighting our concerns about Chinese geopolitical and strategic goals, warning of what we have seen in other parts of the world. I think North Macedonia and its leadership have wide open eyes about that. They do want to pursue opportunities in terms of trade and markets, but they have to do that knowing about the risks, particularly when it comes to things like telecommunications infrastructure. So as we have with others, we have highlighted that.

They are going to make their own decisions, but I think they understand and they are keenly attuned to the concerns about NATO membership when it comes to telecom infrastructure, as the 5G issue has illustrated. And we will continue to have those conversations. In fact, I find them quite welcoming of the conversations and the information that we can provide to them to highlight some of the risks and concerns.

Senator MENENDEZ. This is an example of why we not only need to confront China, but we need to compete with China so that coun-

tries have other opportunities at the end of the day to choose other than Chinese investment.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Well said, Senator Menendez.

Well, thank you to both of you for providing us with the benefit of your testimony, your information, and your expertise in this area.

For the information of members, the record will remain open until close of business on Friday. There has already been an indication that there are going to be questions for the record. So if the two of you would, as promptly as possible, respond to those inquiries, it would be very, very helpful to move this thing forward.

So with that, we are adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 11:35 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD

RESPONSES OF PHILIP T. REEKER TO QUESTIONS SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROBERT MENENDEZ

Question. As part of its NATO and EU accession processes North Macedonia has made a number of reforms:

What specific reforms has North Macedonia made thus far to tackle corruption; improve the judiciary; strengthen the electoral system's credibility; and clean up the bureaucracy and especially the intelligence services? What are their reform plans for those areas going forward? What is the current and future role of the U.S. in supporting those reforms?

Answer. Over the past year, the Government of North Macedonia made significant progress in implementing reforms needed for the country to align with NATO and EU standards. We agree with the European Commission's May 29 accession report which confirms North Macedonia has made significant reform progress in a range of areas including strengthening rule of law and judicial independence, media freedom, transparency, intelligence reform, and government accountability. The Parliament passed significant judicial reform legislation this spring with opposition support, including amendments to laws governing the courts, Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils, administrative disputes, and access to information. On intelligence reform, the implementation of an independent Operational Technical Agency continues to move forward, and in late May, Parliament adopted a law to replace the Department for Counterintelligence and Security (UBK) with a new body independent of the Ministry of Interior and with increased parliamentary oversight.

Another key step was the enactment of a new Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest in January 2019 that provided for the re-constitution of the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interest, giving it greater independence and strengthened competencies. It can now examine public officials' bank records, political party and election campaign finances, and all political appointments, as well as request prosecutions. Reflecting these efforts, North Macedonia moved up 14 places between 2017 and 2018 in Transparency International's Public Perception of Corruption Index, now ranking 93rd out of 180 countries surveyed.

At the government's request, we continue to support these important reform efforts.

Question. During the hearing on Montenegro's NATO accession in 2016, several members of this Committee noted that Montenegro still had work to do on its democratic and rule of law reforms—much like North Macedonia does now. How would you assess Montenegro's progress on those reforms since it joined NATO?

Answer. Montenegro is a strong NATO Ally, and we commend its commitment to regional and NATO collective security. Montenegro provides stability in an unsettled region and offers a positive example to NATO and EU aspirants.

Since 2016, it has made notable strides in advancing democratic principles and respect for the rule of law. As part of a package of rule of law reforms enacted in the lead-up to its NATO invitation, the Government of Montenegro (GoM) established a new independent Office of the Special State Prosecutor that handles major

cases involving organized crime and corruption, and appointed an independent Chief Special Prosecutor. A Special Police unit focused on corruption and organized crime supports the Special Prosecutor. The GoM also created the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption as an administrative body to oversee the implementation of anti-corruption laws and regulations. These new institutions are supported by a team of U.S. Embassy rule of law and police advisors with combined decades of experience. With the support and mentoring from Embassy Podgorica, these Montenegrin authorities have conducted hundreds of disruption raids against suspected organized criminals.

To further bolster democratic and rule of law reforms, Embassy Podgorica also supports civil society and independent media, which are important watchdogs on the government; the work of the independent human rights ombudsman in Montenegro; and ongoing efforts to make Montenegro's law enforcement institutions more professional and competent.

As the State Department documented in the annual 2018 Human Rights Report, pervasive corruption—marked by nepotism, political favoritism, weak controls, and conflicts of interest in all branches of the government—contributes to serious human rights problems, as does impunity. Attacks on, and harassment of, journalists, and several prosecutions remain unresolved. While some media outlets demonstrate willingness to criticize the government, threats of violence and economic or political pressure lead to self-censorship or biased coverage. Trafficking in persons and crimes involving violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons are also areas that the GoM needs to address.

We will continue to advocate for these and our other policy goals in Montenegro.?

Question. Prior to North Macedonia's name change referendum, U.S. officials warned of secret Russian efforts to influence the vote by funding pro-Russian groups that opposed the name change in both Greece and North Macedonia. Russia continues to oppose North Macedonia's accession to NATO and in the past it has gone to great lengths to stop new countries from joining NATO, even supporting a failed coup in Montenegro:

What actions, whether overt or covert, have we seen Russia take to obstruct North Macedonia's accession to NATO? Which individuals or organizations received support from Russia in opposition to the country's name change, both in Greece and in North Macedonia? Answer can be provided in classified format if necessary.

Answer. Russia has employed malicious tactics against the United States and Europe to drive a wedge into the transatlantic relationship, weaken confidence in America's commitment to Europe, and undermine the successes that we have achieved since the end of the Cold War. It continues its aggressive behaviour toward others by interfering in elections processes, promoting corrupt practices, and advancing non-democratic ideas. Toward these malign ends, Russia has worked to undermine implementation of the Prespa Agreement with Greece. These actions are consistent with Russia's destabilizing activities across the region. We have been clear that any efforts to undermine democratic processes by a foreign power are unacceptable. We are working with our Allies and partners in Europe to identify and expose Russian disinformation and to promote accurate messages that advance freedom, prosperity, and security in Europe.

The United States and Russia have very different visions for the future of the region. Russia believes its interests are served by sowing friction and tensions. The United States believes that the interests of the people of North Macedonia are best served by respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, transparency, rule of law, and understanding based on shared values and a shared future.

Question. According to the Open Society Institute's Media Literacy Index North Macedonia is the European state least prepared to deal with fake news, largely due to challenges with its education system. Russia is actively promoting Russian-language media outlets in North Macedonia, giving them a vehicle to easily spread disinformation:

What is the United States doing to help North Macedonia increase its resiliency to disinformation campaigns, particularly Russian disinformation campaigns?

Answer. Russia does not accept the post-Cold War choices made by countries in favor of integration with the West. In contrast, the United States supports EU membership for all the countries of the Western Balkans and NATO membership for those that seek it.

In the case of North Macedonia, Russia has spoken out against the country's democratically chosen NATO path and in advance of the referendum on the Prespa Agreement it sought to make overcoming this long-standing dispute and reaching

an agreement on the name much harder. The U.S. Embassy in Skopje works alongside the State Department's Global Engagement Center to monitor the spread of disinformation on Prespa and NATO. In addition, we support civil society efforts to analyze and debunk disinformation.

USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives has provided technical assistance to three of the largest and most influential media outlets in North Macedonia, improving their ability to counter malign disinformation campaigns. The U.S. Embassy also supports training for government communicators and journalists to learn how to succeed in disinformation-laden environments.

Question. In a March 2019 report, State's Overseas Security Advisory Council reported that approximately 156 North Macedonia nationals traveled to join terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria and that 83 of them have returned to North Macedonia:

Other than the seven who have been convicted and sentenced, what has happened to them? What is North Macedonia's strategy for dealing with returning foreign terrorist fighters? Do they pose a threat to North Macedonia or to NATO forces that may in the country?

Answer. We commend North Macedonia for repatriating seven of its citizens in August 2018, who had been detained by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) while fighting for ISIS. In March, these seven Foreign Terrorist Fighters pled guilty to terrorism-related offenses, and each received sentences between 6 and 9 years in prison.

With the repatriation and convictions, North Macedonia set an important example for all members of the Coalition to Defeat ISIS and the international community. As the United Nations recognized with U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2396 in 2017 and UNSCR 2178 in 2014, foreign terrorist fighters are a global problem requiring the attention of the global community. International cooperation to address the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighters in SDF detention is critical. Only repatriation provides a long-term solution to detained foreign terrorist fighters who traveled to Syria to join ISIS.

Further, the government of North Macedonia adopted in March 2018 the 2018–2022 National Counterterrorism Strategy and a standalone 2018–2022 National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, both accompanied by National Action Plans. The National Committee to Counter Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism (NCCVECT) partners with the international donor community to implement the action plans. This cooperation includes programming to prevent violent extremism, develop community resilience, and reform prison practices.

RESPONSES OF KATHRYN WHEELBARGER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROBERT MENENDEZ

Question. Ms. Wheelbarger stated that seven North Macedonia nationals were convicted of terrorism-related offenses and sentenced to 6–9 years in prison. What is North Macedonia's plan for ensuring that after their release from prison they do not pose a threat to North Macedonia or to any NATO forces that may be in the country? How will North Macedonia handle any attempt by those nationals to travel abroad following their release?

Answer. North Macedonia remains committed to cooperating with the United States and the international community to crack down on violent extremists. This commitment is underscored by the fact that in March 2018, North Macedonia's government adopted the 2018–2022 National Counterterrorism Strategy and a standalone 2018–2022 National Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism, both accompanied by National Action Plans. Following their release, local security services will monitor the seven convicted terrorists using physical and technical means. Any continued association with ISIS or other terrorist groups would be documented and could be used as evidence in future prosecution. North Macedonia also maintains a travel watch list, which they actively monitor and utilize. The watch list includes any individuals convicted of terrorist activities. The Border Police Unit is committed to enforcing North Macedonia's border security related laws.

Question. In a March 2019 report, State's Overseas Security Advisory Council reported that approximately 156 North Macedonia nationals traveled to join terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria and that 83 of them have returned to North Macedonia. Other than the seven who have been convicted and sentenced, what has happened to them? What is North Macedonia's strategy for dealing with returning

foreign terrorist fighters? Do they pose a threat to North Macedonia or to NATO forces that may in the country?

Answer. North Macedonia continues to be proactive, taking a strong stance against returning foreign fighters. Local security services closely monitor all individuals of concern in a counterterrorism context. North Macedonia has sought to investigate, detain, and prosecute any individuals associated with terrorism, including the 83 known returnees. Police operations resulted in the arrest and subsequent prosecution of 25 of these individuals; prison sentences ranged from 1 to 7 years. Security services continue to investigate the individuals who remain at large with the goal of developing enough evidence to allow for detention and prosecution. North Macedonia's strategy for future returnees is to prosecute them in accordance with recently implemented national plans. The North Macedonian National Committee to Counter Violent Extremism and Counterterrorism (NCCVECT) partners with the international donor community, including the United States, to implement the action plans. This includes programming to prevent violent extremism, develop local community resilience, and reform prison practices, among other areas.

Question. Ms. Wheelbarger stated that national-level security forces are receiving DOD counterterrorism training. How would you assess the capability of North Macedonia's local security forces and police to handle terrorism issues, particularly returning foreign terrorist fighters who may be in their jurisdictions? Is the U.S. assisting with training local security forces to deal with terrorist threats?

Answer. North Macedonia's law enforcement capacity to detect, deter, and prevent acts of terrorism continues to improve as a result of training programs and the development of operational plans to prevent and respond to possible terrorist attacks. The U.S. Embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) and Regional Security Office, working with the Department of State's Counterterrorism Bureau and Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Antiterrorism Assistance program (DS/ATA), offered various types of training events for members of the National Committee for Countering Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism (NCCVECT), law enforcement officers and investigators, prosecutors, and other government stakeholders.

Question. Please describe how North Macedonia's troop contributions have specifically benefitted U.S. and NATO missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo.

Answer. North Macedonia's valuable contributions to regional and global security far outweigh its size. Since the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission began in 1999, North Macedonia has continuously provided a dedicated element of 13 individuals that provide logistics support to KFOR. North Macedonia has deployed 490 military personnel to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), 2,700 military personnel to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and more than 400 personnel to the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan. These personnel have served alongside U.S. and NATO forces. For example, North Macedonian forces conducted a co-deployment with the Vermont National Guard, performing base security and staff officer work. This represents more than 3,500 personnel that the United States or other NATO Allies did not have to send into theater.

Question. I understand that U.S. forces have conducted some training exercises at North Macedonia's Krivolak Training Area and it has terrain unlike any other training area in Europe. What specific value does access to Krivolak provide for NATO forces? Please provide the specific plans that the U.S. and NATO have to conduct exercises at Krivolak over the next 2 years.

Answer. North Macedonia's training area at Krivolak is indeed unique and provides substantial value to U.S. and NATO forces. The main attraction of the Krivolak training area is the unfettered maneuver space that it offers. Krivolak's current usable area allows for a battalion-sized maneuver space. Once the northern portion of the range is cleared and declared safe of old unexploded ordnance, the training area will be even larger, including a total of 225 square kilometers. In addition to this, the Ministry of Defense has intentions to expand the borders of the training area to encompass 340 square kilometers, upon which a brigade-sized element could maneuver. The geographic location of Krivolak (3-hour drive from Camp Bondsteel, Kosovo) makes it much more attractive, from a cost, time, and mission perspective, than having U.S. KFOR units train in Graffenwoehr, Germany. The U.S. forces to the KFOR mission rotate every 9 months. The last two iterations have trained at Krivolak to maintain their warfighting skills and readiness, and future rotations plan to continue this practice as part of regular training. Currently the 56th Stryker Brigade from the Pennsylvania Army National Guard is participating in the DECISIVE STRIKE military training exercises in Krivolak. A total of approximately 1,300 U.S. personnel will be involved in the exercise, the majority com-

ing from the two participating battalions of the 56th, with additional soldiers from the 19th Special Forces from the Colorado National Guard and personnel from U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR). North Macedonia's army is also participating with approximately 1,300 personnel. Other NATO Allies participating are Albania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Montenegro. USAREUR is discussing plans to utilize Krivolak for its DEFENDER '21 exercise; initial assessments are for a brigade-sized force to train at Krivolak.

Question. I understand that NATO will have to fund infrastructure upgrades at the Krivolak Training Area to maximize its utility for military training. How much will those upgrades cost, and how much of that cost will the U.S. bear? How valuable would such an upgrade be for military readiness?

Answer. North Macedonia is committing national funds to improve the training area, including rehabilitation of a previously defunct rail line to facilitate transportation of equipment to and from Krivolak from other European destinations. NATO would only invest funding if doing so would be of direct benefit to the Alliance. The Ministry of Defense and the General Staff are currently developing their long-term improvement plan for Krivolak. USAREUR and 7th Army Training Command have provided recommendations of what to upgrade/construct to enable brigade-level operations.

Question. Ms. Wheelbarger stated that the U.S. is working on a bilateral MOU with North Macedonia that is "intended to guide North Macedonia towards its reform goals." Upon completion of the MOU, do you commit to share the MOU with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee? Which reforms specifically does that MOU address? What will DOD's role be in helping North Macedonia achieve those reforms?

Answer. Yes, the document is in final review, and we will share the MOU once complete. Specifics will be contained in the final document; however, the Department's role in helping North Macedonia achieve reform goals will be similar to our role with other partners and Allies and will be conducted in accordance with applicable law, policy, and regulations.

Question. I understand that since North Macedonia does not have its own air defense capacity, Greece and Bulgaria have volunteered to provide air defense support (contingent on acquiring F-16s in Bulgaria's case). Will their support be sufficient, or will contributions from other countries be required? Which other countries would be willing to provide air defense support if needed? Is North Macedonia planning on developing its own air defense capacity and if yes, on what timeline?

Answer. The support offered by Greece and Bulgaria is sufficient to meet current threats and is also a strong indicator of the Alliance's overall capacity to deter or defeat threats in potential threat scenarios. Upon accession and full membership, any air defense plan would fall under the alliance air defense strategy, which may involve other nations as deemed appropriate by military planning and allocation of NATO assets. This would like mean that there would be no independent requirement for North Macedonia to develop a fixed-wing air defense capability.

Question. North Macedonia is working to reduce the number of personnel in both its army and its Ministry of Defense (MOD) in order to reduce the share of the defense budget spent on personnel. What progress has North Macedonia made with these cuts? Has there been opposition from within the military or external groups to the personnel reduction and if yes, what impact has their opposition had on the process?

Answer. The North Macedonian Ministry of Defense has made a priority of optimizing its defense budget through the reduction of defense personnel. The Ministry of Defense's (MoD) plan to reduce the number of personnel to 650-700 has been drafted and is in the approval process. The reduction of forces in the Armed Forces is a multi-faceted transformation plan over the next 3-5 years. The planned method for reduction of both the MoD and the Armed Forces is primarily via attrition through retirement/separation and a simultaneous reduction of authorized billets within the force structure. This approach, although not immediate, will alleviate social and political repercussions and mitigate opposition to the reduction. There will still be some MoD employees who will need to be transitioned to other government agencies or to the private sector workforce; however, this is pending approval of the MoD reduction plan.

Question. To improve its budget planning and military procurement system North Macedonia needs to change a number of its laws, including one that requires government contracts to go to the lowest bidder regardless of the quality of their prod-

uct. Do all key political actors, including major opposition parties, support such legal changes despite their potential cost? Are companies or interest groups that stand to lose from changes to procurement laws opposing those improvements and if yes, what impact has their opposition had on the legislative proceedings?

Answer. All key political actors have voiced support for making the necessary changes to the military procurement law. There are no indications of any key stakeholders planning to oppose the law. Additionally, the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation-Skopje supported the North Macedonian Ministry of Defense in organizing multiple seminars with members of Parliament and their staff. The purpose of these seminars is to: increase and improve executive-legislative relationships; increase understanding of Army transformation and modernizations goals; jointly develop and understand requirements of the MoD and the Army; and determine what the Defense and Security Commission needs in order to advocate within broader Parliament for the passing of defense-related reform laws.

Question. Last year the North Macedonia army reviewed its current equipment to determine what should be disposed of and what will be needed going forward. What progress has North Macedonia made in implementing the findings of that review? In particular, North Macedonia reportedly has excess quantities of small arms and ammunition due to its personnel reduction. What is the government's plan for safely disposing of the surplus arms and ammunition such that it does not end up in the wrong hands?

Answer. North Macedonia recognizes the need to dispose of equipment properly in order to prevent proliferation or misuse. North Macedonia has previously donated small arms, ammunition, and hand grenades via U.S.-facilitated weapon donation programs. The majority of the equipment was inherited from the former Yugoslav National Army, purchased with national funds, or donated from partner countries. The plan for divestiture of obsolete and unessential equipment is complete and is pending final approval by the Government. The plan calls for the disposal of equipment, weapons, ammunition, etc., in the following ways: transfer to other government ministries/agencies; sale to approved countries; donation to approved countries; demilitarization and sale/donation to museums, etc., or destruction and sale as scrap metal as appropriate. North Macedonia has identified all obsolete equipment, catalogued it in detail, and created a plan to seek the required approvals. In order to proceed with the divestiture of donated equipment, the MoD must obtain approval from the donating country and is proactively addressing this. The list of obsolete equipment is a 16-page document containing 462 items varying from pistols, rifles, machine guns, ammunition (7.62 and 20mm), mortars and ammunition (60mm, 82mm, and 120 mm), 76mm guns, 122mm Howitzers, 20mm Anti-Aircraft guns, a variety of unguided rockets of multiple calibers, and a variety of spare parts and tools. North Macedonia has requested U.S. advice on best practices for divestiture. The Embassy's Office of Defense Cooperation will work with the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), USEUCOM, and the State Department's Weapons Removal and Abatement (WRA) office to assist with the safe storage/destruction of weapons and ammunition as requested or required.

Question. I understand that North Macedonia's MOD was set to complete a review of its existing infrastructure to determine what surpluses can be disposed of by June 2019. What is the status of that review? Please provide any documentation of this review that is available to the Department of Defense.

Answer. The review is in its final stages. It includes an assessment of all existing infrastructure including locations, requirements, roles, responsibilities, use, management, current condition, and refurbishment needs. It will result in recommendations for future needs, which sites and facilities to retain, opportunities for consolidation, and options for disposal.

RESPONSES OF PHILIP T. REEKER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEANNE SHAHEEN

Question. North Macedonia's membership would increase the integration of the entire Balkan region into Western structures and institutions. What economic benefit to the region do you anticipate from North Macedonia's NATO membership and how could that benefit in turn be strategically useful to NATO?

Answer. North Macedonia's NATO membership will contribute to regional stability, security, and prosperity. The greater stability and security membership brings give confidence to consumers, businesses, and investors—including foreign investors—boosting economic growth. Increased consumption leads to greater opportu-

nities for employment; more public investment leads to better infrastructure. Economic prosperity engenders good neighborly relations and open trade. A stable and vibrant economy attracts high-quality investment from foreign companies that respect the rule of law and demand a level playing field. North Macedonia has already seen an increase in foreign direct investment during the NATO accession process, and its economy is projected to sustain steady growth rates. NATO membership and associated reforms that strengthen the rule of law and fight corruption will bolster North Macedonia's institutional framework and provide it a stronger base for pushing back on Russia, China, and other malign actors. Stronger, more prosperous NATO Allies in turn contribute more to collective burden sharing.

Question. How would the increased military, political and economic integration of the region due to North Macedonia's NATO membership offset foreign influence from Russia, China or other countries working against U.S. interests? What threats would it help mitigate?

Answer. North Macedonia's membership in NATO will counter Russian efforts to sow discord and division in the region and other destabilizing threats. Allies have broadened their attention to China's activities in Europe too. The United States is leading the discussion by highlighting the potential dangers to NATO command & control and communications posed by Chinese telecom providers, such as Huawei. The United States emphasizes to Allies and partners the potential consequences of Chinese investment in, and ownership of, critical transportation infrastructure such as ports and airports.

Countries like North Macedonia, which have faced direct effects of Russian disinformation and problematic Chinese investments, contribute to a unified response to malign actors in Europe. Coordinated action by NATO Allies strengthens regional stability and our collective security.

Question. How would increased people-to-people (and military-to-military) integration make the Balkan region less vulnerable to Russian disinformation?

Answer. Russia does not accept the post-Cold War choices made by countries in favor of integration with the West, and has employed a range of malicious tactics against the United States and Europe to drive a wedge in the transatlantic relationship, weaken confidence in our commitment to Europe, and forestall the Western Balkans' Western integration. It aggressively seeks to incite divisions, interfere in elections processes, promote corrupt practices, and advance non-democratic ideas. In contrast, the United States supports EU membership for all countries of the Western Balkans and NATO membership for those who want it and are capable of meeting the requirements for accession.

We are supporting North Macedonia's further steps towards Western integration and pushing back on Russia's attempts to hinder these efforts. As part of the NATO accession process, military-to-military partnerships led by the U.S. Department of Defense and the Ministry of Defense of North Macedonia continue to strengthen the country's Western orientation. The State Department also supports a variety of programming to increase people-to-people ties. The State Department's Global Engagement Center monitors the sentiment of social media conversations and the spread of disinformation on NATO and other political events. Those analyses inform targeted, public engagement activities by the U.S. government and our partners, which are making the region less vulnerable to disinformation. People-to-people exchanges are further integrating the people of North Macedonia and the Balkans within Western institutions, further countering the disinformation narratives Russia peddles.

Question. How is the Prespa Agreement and North Macedonia's NATO accession an argument against nationalist political movements throughout Europe and how can the negotiations of the Prespa Agreement serve specifically as a model for the resolution of other conflicts or disagreements?

Answer. The implementation of the historic Prespa Agreement and the resolution of the name dispute with Greece underscore that North Macedonia is willing to make the sacrifices and compromises needed for peace and stability. North Macedonia serves as a model to the region, and the Prespa Agreement underscores to Serbia, Kosovo, and others in Europe that forward-looking agreements based on compromise can secure a better future.

RESPONSES OF KATHRYN WHEELBARGER TO QUESTIONS
SUBMITTED BY SENATOR JEANNE SHAHEEN

Question. North Macedonia has been a steadfast partner in international operations such as Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom and the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan. What does North Macedonia's military capability offer to NATO missions specifically and what is the value to NATO of incorporating smaller members of NATO in missions beyond their immediate region?

Answer. North Macedonia's commitment to the Alliance exceeds its size. North Macedonia has demonstrated its willingness, capacity, and capability to provide support to NATO missions. In addition to these missions, they have provided support to NATO Allies including the United States through the provision of access to training ranges, support to logistics, and strong political action with regard to returned foreign fighters. Once a member of NATO, these same capabilities will be enhanced as interoperability continues to improve. North Macedonia will be able to provide these improved capabilities once it is a full member, able to act in NATO's common defense and able to provide forces directly when and where the Alliance may need them.

Question. North Macedonia's membership would increase the integration of the entire Balkan region into Western structures and institutions. What is the strategic benefit of such integration from a military perspective?

Answer. North Macedonia's membership in the Alliance will solidify two decades of positive momentum towards regional security in the heart of the Balkans, where U.S. and NATO forces have twice been forced to intervene militarily. It also advances the Balkans towards western integration and helps to inoculate it from Russia's malign influence. The inclusion of another Ally who is interoperable and able to share military information seamlessly enhances the full range of military operations in the region. NATO accession also demonstrates that NATO's Open Door Policy remains strong and serves as an inspiration for other countries in the region to undertake reforms and make commitments required to enhance domestic and regional stability.

Question. How would you quantify the benefit to NATO and U.S. interests of bringing North Macedonia into the Alliance as a full member rather than continuing to engage them as merely a reliable partner?

Answer. The entrance of North Macedonia as a full member not only increases the stabilizing influence in the strategic area of the Western Balkans but allows for increased capability and capacity of the alliance to deter Russia, to fight against global terrorism, and to continue advancing interests as outlined in the National Defense Strategy. Already a strong partner, as evidenced by its support to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as a full member, North Macedonia would provide a solid commitment towards the goals of the Alliance and, if required, commit resources necessary to respond to threats. This commitment includes, but is not limited to, the commitment of forces as part of NATO's collective defense, a commitment to meet NATO defense capability targets, and resource burden sharing. The government of North Macedonia is already committed to meet the goal of defense spending at 2 percent of GDP by 2024. Furthermore, adding North Macedonia fills in the continental land bridge, providing continuous freedom of movement from the northern part of Europe to the southern flank. Its accession provides continuous access from the Black Sea to the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. All told, NATO membership is a key step in continuing to optimize the Alliance.

LETTER FROM THE U.S. DELEGATES TO THE NATO PARLIAMENTARY
ASSEMBLY SUBMITTED BY SENATOR ROBERT MENENDEZ

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 23, 2019

The Honorable James E. Risch
Chairman
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Menendez
Ranking Member
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
444 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Risch and Ranking Member Menendez:

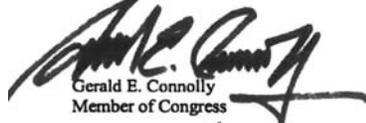
We write to you as the U.S. Delegates to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Parliamentary Assembly to share our support for the accession of the Republic of North Macedonia to NATO.

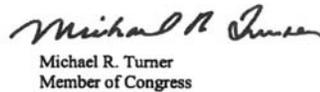
The Prespa Agreement signed in June 2018 resolved a nearly 30-year dispute between North Macedonia and Greece regarding the country name of North Macedonia. The formal name change to the Republic of North Macedonia and the signing of the NATO accession protocol in February 2019 were historic and foundational steps in North Macedonia's path to joining the Alliance.

The Republic of North Macedonia shares our democratic values and support for individual political freedom. The accession of North Macedonia to NATO will help bring stability to a region that is strategically important for the Alliance and will aid in the deterrence of Russian aggression in the Balkans.

We strongly urge the Foreign Relations Committee's timely and positive consideration of North Macedonia into NATO as the 30th member state.

Sincerely,


Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress


Michael R. Turner
Member of Congress


Rick Larsen
Member of Congress


Susan A. Davis
Member of Congress



Brett Guthrie
Member of Congress



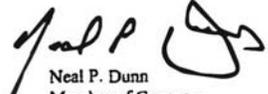
Filmon Vela
Member of Congress



John Shimkus
Member of Congress



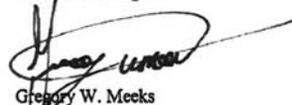
Tim Costa
Member of Congress



Neal P. Dunn
Member of Congress



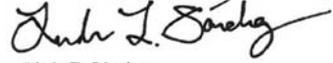
Steve Stivers
Member of Congress



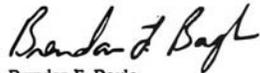
Gregory W. Meeks
Member of Congress



Paul Cook
Member of Congress



Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress



Brendan F. Boyle
Member of Congress