

Remarks at the 20th Anniversary of U.S.-Azerbaijan Bilateral Relations

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY GORDON: Thanks so much, Ambassador, for that kind introduction.

The Ambassador came to see me the other day, we had a very nice chat. As you left I couldn't help but think to myself he seems almost as American as I am. [Laughter]. The Toledo, Ohio thing now puts -- [Laughter]. I didn't know about the Toledo thing. But that explains a lot. We had a good talk then, and I'm really honored and delighted to be here with this distinguished group. You referred to it as a distinguished group and in the few minutes that I've been here, just looking around the room, it's a testimony to the relationship of the people who have turned up here from Congress, from the U.S. military, my colleagues at the State Department, the Defense Department, the White House. It underscores the importance of this relationship, and again, I'm honored to be able to offer a few remarks on this 20th Anniversary of U.S.-Azerbaijan diplomatic relations.

There are far too many distinguished individuals to single out by name. I would, as you did, note General Scowcroft, I really appreciate your being here; Governor Sununu we keep in touch with on these issues; and so many others and Members of Congress.

It's of course not a surprise, it speaks to the importance that President Obama, Secretary Clinton place on the relationship with Azerbaijan. When the Secretary visited Baku last year -- I was pleased to be able to accompany her to Azerbaijan -- she said very clearly that the bonds between the United States and Azerbaijan are deep, important and durable, and that's something I would want to stress here with this group this evening.

We have been building on those bonds in the 20 years since diplomatic relations were established and these links are on multiple fronts but three core areas are really of central importance to the relationship. Those are the areas of security, energy and political and economic reform.

Where international security is concerned our soldiers, American soldiers, Azerbaijani soldiers, have stood shoulder to shoulder in Kosovo, in Iraq, and we are very grateful for Azerbaijan's continued commitment to the allied effort in Afghanistan where Azerbaijani troops have served with great distinction.

Azerbaijan, of course, has also served as a vital transportation route for supporting NATO operations in Afghanistan with thousands of U.S. military flights transiting over Azerbaijan on the way to Afghanistan. You know the importance this President and Secretary place on our success in Afghanistan and Azerbaijan's contribution to that success is immense.

You've recently taken a seat on the UN Security Council for a two year term, assuming very important responsibilities for promoting global security, and Azerbaijan has also played a critical role in enforcing international sanctions against Iran, another high priority for this administration.

On security, no issue is more important than our commitment to a peaceful and fair settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, the United States continues to work closely with the sides to achieve a lasting negotiated settlement.

The final steps towards peace, of course, are often the most difficult, but we believe peace is possible and necessary. And with commitment and political will from the sides, we can move towards a more secure and prosperous future.

It remains our conviction that only a negotiated settlement can lead to long-term peace and stability and open new opportunities for regional development and cooperation. Again, I want to underscore Ambassador, and to everybody in this room, this administration's rock solid commitment to that process. Secretary Clinton follows the issue extraordinarily closely and has invested a lot of her time and attention on the issue. It is a commitment that goes to the highest levels of our government and we look forward to working with you. We're determined to move forward.

We also of course work closely with Azerbaijan on energy security. Again, I'm delighted to see so many distinguished figures from the world of energy both in government and outside here this evening.

We're building on past efforts like the so-called Contract of the Century and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline which are the hallmarks of, some of the hallmarks of the past 20 years of our cooperation.

We certainly share Azerbaijan's goal of establishing a southern corridor in natural gas exports to Europe. We welcome progress made last year including transit agreements that Azerbaijan signed with Turkey last October and that has paved the way for the southern corridor to play a key role in diversifying energy routes and sources for European markets in the years ahead. The southern corridor would be good for Azerbaijan, it would be good for Europe, and it would be good for the United States.

Another important pillar of our efforts, we look forward to continuing work with Azerbaijan on democratic and economic reforms including promoting respect for the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and the development of a vibrant civil society which we believe is essential to Azerbaijan's long term prosperity and success.

We view Azerbaijan as a country of tremendous potential and we want Azerbaijan to succeed in its goal of developing into a modern democracy and a regional and global leader. It goes without saying that Azerbaijan's progress in these areas will help to deepen our bilateral relationship. A strong, independent, prosperous and democratic Azerbaijan will always be a friend and a partner for the United States.

Ultimately our people, Americans and Azerbaijanis alike, are the foundation of our friendship as human ties unite our two countries. We have enjoyed real cooperation between our governments, and most importantly over the past 20 years between our societies.

To take just one example among many, American and Azerbaijan -- this is building on the Ambassador's experience in Toledo -- American and Azerbaijani students participate in academic exchanges every year to broaden our knowledge of each other and to share our ideals.

Over the past 20 years we have welcomed the progress Azerbaijan has made since it gained independence and our relationship continues to advance and deepen. The United States will remain a strong friend and partner.

From our joint efforts on the international stage to our shared cultural and family ties we have a great deal to celebrate about the future of the Azerbaijani-American relationship.

Thank you all again for being here. I'm honored to join you and look forward to building a relationship with you.

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