

Deputy Secretary Of State James Steinberg
Comments on Arrival at Heydar Aliyev International Airport
Baku, Azerbaijan
February 24, 2011

Deputy Secretary Steinberg: Good afternoon, everybody. I just wanted to have a chance to say how pleased I am to be back in Baku and looking forward to our meetings here; not only with President Aliyev, but also with representatives of civil society here in Azerbaijan.

We have a very strong strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, and I look forward to discussing with the President how we can deepen our cooperation in terms of a stronger bilateral relationship, working on regional security issues, as well as expressing appreciation for Azerbaijan's support for our common efforts in Afghanistan and other parts of the world. This is a very important relationship, and my visit that builds on the meetings that the President had with our President, as well as with Secretary Clinton. We are very much pleased to be here and look forward to our discussions.

Question: What is the United States expecting from the upcoming meeting of presidents Ilham Aliyev, Sargsian and Medvedev? What are the general United States' expectations from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

Deputy Secretary Steinberg: The United States is very committed to the Minsk Process – deeply engaged – and has been part of this process from the beginning. We are very hopeful to see some signs of progress. We believe that it is in the interests of both Armenia and Azerbaijan to move forward based on the Helsinki Principles.

In my discussions in Armenia, I stressed the importance of both sides showing flexibility and understanding the benefits to both sides to moving forward based on these principles. So I look forward to getting President Aliyev's perspective on this and to get his sense of how we can help in our common effort to move this process forward. We think it's very important to keep momentum on the diplomatic track because we think it serves the interest of everyone in this region to continue to make progress, and we are very committed to do our part to move in that direction.

Question: What type of discussions will you conduct on democracy, economic reforms and security cooperation?

Deputy Secretary Steinberg: This has been a topic which we have discussed regularly with President Aliyev and his government. We think it is an important opportunity to strengthen the involvement of citizenry here to continue efforts to build a tolerant society that gives an opportunity for the voices of all the citizens to participate. We will discuss the President's efforts on the anti-corruption front, which we are very much encouraging, and I see this as a very positive step, as well. And, in general, talk about how we continue to build a strong political and civil society here and a vibrant economy for Azerbaijan that not only builds on your very strong energy economy but also sees the opportunity to diversify the economy to create new opportunities for the citizens of Azerbaijan.

Question: Mr. President (Aliyev) mentioned that, despite the efforts of the Minsk Group Co-Chairs, the negotiations have been fruitless so far. And now there has been much concern about this upcoming event, and it is perceived that this meeting will determine the future of the negotiations and the process as a whole. What are your comments?

Deputy Secretary Steinberg: Well, I have in the past had the opportunity to express appreciation to President Aliyev for his efforts to be involved in this process and for the positive statements he's made about the Minsk Process and the Helsinki Principles, and I think it's in all of our interests to try to find a positive way forward. I don't think that any of us have any doubt about the difficulties that we've experienced over the past several years, but I think given the potential benefits to all sides and the risks of not moving forward, it is imperative for all of us to make our best efforts. And I stressed that with President Sargsian in Armenia – that both sides need to come together in a positive spirit to try to find common ground because that would serve the interests of all.