

Statement
by Dr. Hafiz Pashayev
Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Azerbaijan
at the conference
“The Azerbaijan-Turkey-US relationship and its importance for Eurasia”
Washington, DC, December 10, 2007

Dear friends,

It is such a pleasure to be back in DC, especially for such an important forum. I am very pleased to see so many old friends here. Washington has a unique diplomatic and political environment for which I miss this city very much. Even the Mayflower hotel, where we gather today, holds a special place for me, as it is where we conducted so many public and private discussions to advance US-Azerbaijan relations.

Today we are here again to exchange views and to discuss Turkish, Azerbaijani and American perspectives on the situation in the greater Caucasus region. A few weeks ago a similar conference with a focus on Eurasia took place in Moscow. Official and unofficial representatives of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Russia came together to discuss processes of integration in the context of Eurasian geopolitics. I would like to commend the organizers of both conferences.

At the Moscow conference, participants recognized the importance of close cooperation among Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkey for the creation of a unified Eurasian geopolitical space, but they also stressed that it is a difficult task to achieve considering current realities.

Here we have an opportunity to highlight important issues with regard to America's foreign policy in the region of the Caucasus, Central Asia and greater Middle East. This policy is going through one of the most dynamic and profound changes in the history of the United States. And, in this context, the roles of Turkey and Azerbaijan become even more important for the advancement of US national interests. However, much depends on the level of intensity, trust and mutual support in the US-Turkish, US-Azerbaijani and even, I would say, Turkish-Azerbaijani relations.

Speaking of US-Azerbaijani relations, I am proud to say that I was there at the very

beginning, in the 1990s, and saw many interesting things at that time. Now I have a chance to compare that period with today. I remember the level of US interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia region and how this interest was gradually transforming in front of my eyes. In an historically short period of time, all three countries went through tremendous changes with implications on relations among them. Take, for example, Turkey, which was in the forefront of the Atlantism concept and now is more focused on Eurasia. In fact, it is my firm belief that Turkey is moving towards Eurasianism precisely due to US policies in the Middle East. Or take the transformation of Azerbaijan from a little-known country to an important player in providing alternative sources of energy for Europe. Or compare the United States of America before and after September 2001.

The world in which we now live is very dynamic. We are in a period where people and nations become closer to each other, and seek various ways to better interact and build solid political and economic ties. We call it "the era of globalization". Even those countries that were ripped apart by bloody wars find themselves now in complete interdependence, trading goods and ideas to achieve prosperity for their people.

In a way, globalization has created opportunities for every country to find friends in the global scene. It is really up to us how to use these new opportunities. Some countries, like my country Azerbaijan, are excited about these new openings. We were secluded from the rest of the world for so long by the Soviet empire that Azerbaijanis at that time missed their chance to be part of the world community. Now, we are eager to use this opportunity to integrate into the world's economic and political processes and to make new friends. Obviously, large regional integration projects such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines, Kars-Akhalkalaki-Baku railway are vivid examples of this desire.

Unfortunately, some countries, even in our immediate neighborhood, still try to play real-politics and use every opportunity to promote their narrow political interests, without seeing the broader, more prosperous picture. They would rather promote the past than promote the future. This is the biggest problem in our region.

Azerbaijan now, as many of you know, is in the process of rapid development. This is a very historic period. Our economy is growing at the fastest rate in the world. Our political stability

is a source of pride. The real task ahead of us is to use this economic growth and oil revenues for the improvement of public infrastructure and to diversify Azerbaijan's non-oil economy for a better future for our children. It would be appropriate to mention here the vision and policies of President Ilham Aliyev, who is keen to invest oil revenues in other sectors of the economy and social life. For example, the President's priority areas are the elimination of refugee camps; the development of the social-economic situation in the regions outside of Baku; investing in education (both in terms of construction of schools and establishing Study Abroad Scholarship for 5,000 Azerbaijani youth); and finally, upgrading and modernizing our public infrastructure for future income generation opportunities.

I have been back in Baku for a period of a little over a year, and I see a completely new city, not only in terms of massive construction and improved infrastructure, but also in the faces of people. The city is becoming a truly globalized and international. Official statistics put the number of foreigners working in Baku at 32,000. One can come across various ethnic and racial groups in the streets of Baku. And the same applies to the regions. On a recent trip to Ganja, I was delighted to see positive changes, especially in the mood of people. In the sphere of democratic reforms, I must say that although some concerns are voiced about the pace of these reforms, we have not deviated from our commitment to the strategic goal of building a democratic, legal and secular state.

Azerbaijan's international standing is also strengthening. We are now the main locomotive for development in entire region. But our main problem remains the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Although there are some historic factors that prevent the resolution of the conflict, the real problem, in my opinion, lies with the distortions created by Armenian misinformation campaigns in the international arena. I find it rather an unfortunate coincidence that all three co-chairs of the Minsk Group, which is tasked with the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, are representatives of countries where the Armenian lobby is particularly strong.

Looking back to the early 1990s, I remember that Armenians intentionally played the religion card when interpreting this conflict. At that time it was an attempt by Armenian politicians to win the support of conservative Christian groups in the US Congress and in the governments of other countries. But soon after, reality prevailed, because this conflict is not of a religious

character at all. Otherwise, how one can explain the excellent relations of Muslim Azerbaijan with Christian Georgia and the support of Shia Iran to Christian Armenia? Today, however, when religious confrontation and tensions in the world are very high, Armenian politicians have once again started promoting this factor. To me, this reflects the positive results of our efforts to raise awareness in the world about the true nature of the conflict, and is a sign of Armenia's ideological loss. It shows that Armenian politicians have nothing else to say in their argument and again have to come back to such a primitive, yet potentially destructive, explanation of the conflict.

With regard to US-Azerbaijani relations, I can say they are at the strategic level. We have strong cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, energy, security and political consultations. But our relations could be even higher. The single, most negatively-influencing factor in relations with the US remains the Armenian Diaspora, and both Azerbaijanis and Americans still have not overcome it.

Unfortunately, many American politicians and policymakers still receive distorted information about Azerbaijan. A system of political lobbying, when a small group with ethnic interests can influence and negatively impact the national security and foreign policy of such a powerful country like the US, is very dangerous. This leads to situations where the US government makes decisions that may please lobbying groups but that lead to geopolitical and strategic losses for the US. A vivid example of this is US policy towards the construction of the Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway. Although this project meets the geopolitical and economic objectives of US Foreign Policy, the anti-Turkish and anti-Azerbaijani lobbying groups in the US Congress have blocked US involvement in this vital regional initiative. And it was Azerbaijan who assumed a leadership role and managed to push this project from idea to reality. Ten years ago, the US put all its political and economic weight to help make the BTC pipeline a reality, but this time it stayed out of the railway project, which is in my view no less important than BTC.

The US is a superpower and the influence of a single ethnic lobbying group on it will not create much danger for its overall position in the international arena. But the cumulative effects of multiple lobbying groups misguiding US foreign policy might. The US could lose one country after another and eventually this could create a dangerous scenario for the US

position in the region.

A small group of political pundits understand this problem well. But our goal is to continuously explain to the American public the danger of such a system. We need to work with ordinary Americans and to engage the human dimension of this problem. As long as people fail to see the danger of this system to themselves, they will not react.

Many people in Azerbaijan and Turkey see America's foreign policy being held hostage in the hands of the vocal Armenian lobby. For ordinary Azerbaijani and Turkish citizens, not well acquainted with the complex political system in the US, the policies such as the infamous section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, regular attempts to pass resolutions in the US Congress regarding the so-called "Armenian genocide", the indifference to the problem of the PKK in Turkey, and the support to the illegal regime in the Upper Karabakh region are often perceived as a betrayal and as a backstabbing. Average Azerbaijani and Turkish citizens do not see it as a result of the internal infightings between the Administration and Congress, but instead accept it as the foreign policy of the US being unified with, and supportive of, the Armenian cause. Many anti-American groupings within Turkey use it to push for stronger ties between Russia and Turkey. They stress that these two countries are the only ones which have the unique position to call themselves "Eurasia" and are united by 500 years of historical relations. Thus, much potential exists for stronger Russian-Turkish cooperation and the US should be aware of this.

Speaking of history, recently I came across the letter written in 1919 by US Congressman Walter Chandler to Ali Mardan Bey Topchubashov, the speaker of Azerbaijan's Parliament and the head of Azerbaijan's delegation to the peace talks in Paris in 1920. The letter is dated January 30, 1919. At that time, as you know, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict was exactly the same and the Bolsheviks made good use of it, eventually conquering both countries. In that letter, Congressman Chandler recommends that the Azerbaijani government establish a propaganda committee in the US Congress to lobby for the support of Azerbaijan's independence. He warns that Armenians have already done it. Unfortunately, at that time, we were not able to pursue those recommendations due to the invasion of the Red Army, but the ethnic Armenian lobby in the US managed to establish a strong presence in the US Congress since that time.

I find it amazing that more than 90 years later we find ourselves in the same circumstances.

On another note, I would like to talk about the excessive use of money in US politics. It is a very dangerous trend and even some members of Congress also admit this. I remember the McCain-Feingold Campaign Finance Reform bill, which was a move in the right direction, but was severely cut after many amendments. The US system is still not ready for money-free politics. It is a form of corruption even though in the legal framework. Money can negatively influence the democratic nature of politics. And people understand this. They have very negative feelings about the power of money in US politics. We need to raise awareness through education in order change the situation.

Education is a long process but we must do it. I remember when I had just became Ambassador, the foreign policy of the US towards the former Soviet region was so dominated by Strobe Talbot's "Russia First" policy that it was very difficult to capture the attention of the US administration. It took a long educational process to effect a shift in this policy.

The Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, which I am now heading, is intending to further advance the understanding of these issues by uniting scholars around the world in research, creating venues for healthy public discussions of issues important for Azerbaijan and the region. We hope it will also contribute to a better understanding of the region by American policy makers and help to shape more pragmatic policies.

Today we are witnessing US government efforts to promote democracy in the Greater Middle East. This policy is a noble one, but must be done very skillfully and carefully. The US should not be preaching to the countries in this region, because often this produces a counter effect.

Take the case of Azerbaijan. We have been under the domination of many empires in the past, as you well know. History is very important in this part of the region and affects the mood and mentality of people even today. Domination by world powers at certain periods of history created resentment toward outside influence and pressure. In a way, this has created immunity against the foreign domination. And today, many conservative groups within the country use

the example of American pressures and its influence on political developments in Azerbaijan to instigate negative feelings in society toward the US. Pressures on democracy issues are used by the old-fashioned politicians to prevent the faster development of democratic reforms. Therefore, on such issues the US should better understand and analyze the situation, and be able to engage tactfully. This is especially important as other regional powers are watching the issue very carefully and are ready to jump on it every moment to make the best use for themselves. The issue of democracy truly requires a delicate approach.

Since the theme of our conference is tri-lateral relations, I would also like to say a few words about Turkey. This country is going through some very deep, profound changes. But Turkey, and for that matter Azerbaijan, continue to serve as role models for the rest of the region in terms of religious and ethnic tolerance, moderate Islam, secularism and the exemplary co-existence of religious norms and democratic traditions of governance. In today's world, when religious extremism and a clash of cultures is at its peak, examples of Turkey and Azerbaijan can and should be used to change the situation in the greater Middle East region. From this perspective, both Turkey and Azerbaijan are natural allies of the US, even if sometimes they disagree on tactical approaches.

In closing, I want to say that there is no ideal country in the world. All have shortcomings, including the US, Turkey and Azerbaijan. But when talking about the shortcomings of Turkey and Azerbaijan, it is always important to look at what kinds of dissatisfaction these two nations have with America, from whom they had great expectations in the early 1990s. From this perspective, educating Turkish and Azerbaijani citizens is also important.

An uphill struggle for Turkey and Azerbaijan continues, much similar to what I described in my recent book "Racing Up Hill." For America, in its relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, it is vital to conduct a policy that puts the national interest above all other considerations. Only in so doing will the US ensure a stable and solid presence in the region where it can rely on the continued support of Turkey and Azerbaijan, both of which can be, and actually already are, the driving forces of the new version of the greater Middle East region, the model which America tries to build in Iraq today.

Thank you for attention.