



Special Briefing
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On-The-Record Briefing on the 10th Annual U.S.-Azerbaijan Security Dialogue

Special Briefing by Acting Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs Stephen D. Mull and Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew J. Bryza and Azerbaijani Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov

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MR. CASEY: Okay. Well, good afternoon, everybody, pleasure to have you all here with us today. We wanted to take this opportunity to have these three distinguished officials speak with you this afternoon. In order of appearance, as you'll see them here, we have Acting Assistant Secretary for Political and Military Affairs Steve Mull, the Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan Mr. Azimov, and of course, Mr. Lambros' favorite State Department official, the ever popular Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matt Bryza.

He's not here today, Matt, but I know he's here with you in spirit.

MR. BRYZA: (Inaudible.)

MR. CASEY: Yeah. Anyway, I want to give them an opportunity to talk with you all about the U.S.-Azerbaijan security dialogue that took place today, also answer any other questions you might have about our relationship. With that, let me turn it over to our first briefer, Steve Mull.

AMBASSADOR MULL: Thanks very much, Tom. We were very pleased to welcome Deputy Minister Azimov today and a very high-ranking delegation from the Government of Azerbaijan for the 10th annual security discussions, security dialogue that we've been having with the Government of Azerbaijan. I think it's fair to say that the dialogue this year really took our security relationship to a quantitatively different level. Minister Azimov brought with him a very high-ranking delegation from a widespread of all of the security ministries back in Azerbaijan, including officials from the defense ministry, the border police, the ministry for emergencies, the state protection service, the ministry for national security, and the customs service.

And they're here for two days. We kicked off the discussions first thing this morning. We'll continue on into tomorrow. During the course of today, we discussed in great detail the -- Azerbaijan's plans for further integration with NATO and how we, through our security assistance program, can help support that in their efforts. We agreed to be -- to continue to be very supportive of their efforts to develop a more robust relationship with NATO.

We received a very thorough briefing on the military of Azerbaijan's plans to modernize itself, to make itself more of a contributor to global security concerns. And in that regard, we were very glad to have the opportunity to thank the Government of Azerbaijan for its very strong and steadfast participation in military enterprises around the world, especially and including Afghanistan and in Iraq.

We discussed this afternoon, at some length, the whole issue of missile defense, which, of course, has been very much in the news lately with the recent offer from the Russians to use the Azerbaijani-owned Gabala radar facility as part of discussions with where we're going to be going on missile defense. And we also will have the opportunity tomorrow to talk a little bit more about how we can cooperate together in countering terrorism in the region, how we can cooperate in promoting energy security, and how we can work together in addressing the many strategic challenges that both of our countries face in that particular region of the world.

It was a wonderful day. I think tomorrow, we'll have an equally robust and rewarding day and it's been a real pleasure to host our Azerbaijani friends.

Mr. Minister.

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Well, thank you. Thank you all. I think that my colleague, Ambassador Mull, has been precise enough in drawing the picture of our agenda and our discussions these days. I must tell that we are pleased enough to be here once more. We lead the security dialogue with the U.S. for last ten years and this year is 10th anniversary.

So besides the -- simply being an event in our bilateral relations, this meeting means a lot. It means a success of our cooperation in the security field. It means the strength of our partnership links. It gives certain opportunities and it gives us a chance to expand along the agenda of our bilateral relations. It gives a chance to Azerbaijani and the United States to consider, in depth, the security risks and threats coming across the region where Azerbaijan is located. You all know about volatility in that region, about turbulences and about difficulties which we encounter there.

Partnership of Azerbaijan and U.S. is very profound and we are happy and pleased to notice further growth of this partnership. Bilateral relations are viewed through not only bilateral programs of cooperation; we also address (inaudible) threats at the international and regional level and we also consider our bilateral partnership within wider frameworks of Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Regional cooperation with the United States also is aimed at creating much better involvement for further development of processes of trans-regional cooperation. You know that there have been many positive results of partnership between U.S. and Azerbaijan and some of those are well-known. Those are related to development of oil and gas resources in the Caspian sector of Azerbaijani -- national sector of Azerbaijan. And further development of these progressively successful achievements, I think, depends and demands increased partnership in security-related areas. That's why we have -- we are here, that's why we continue our talks, and let me say that I am looking forward to increased partnership with the U.S., whose commitment to Azerbaijan's independent, sovereign and -- sovereignty and to our total integrity remains unwavering. Thank you.

MR. BRYZA: It's a great pleasure and honor to be here today with three of my friends, with Ambassador Mull and Deputy Minister Azimov and Tom Casey, who I went to grad school with and consider -- I know, don't hold that against me -- or us.

As Ambassador -- or as Deputy Minister Azimov just said, the United States does have a deep commitment to Azerbaijan's sovereignty, its independence, and its territorial integrity. I spend a lot of my own time working on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and we proceed from a desire to negotiate a compromise between two fundamental principles which are the principles of a state's right to its territorial integrity and the people's right to self-determination. So while diplomats have to find some way to negotiate a compromise through those treacherous waters that is mutually acceptable and there's no universal formula, there's no worldwide accepted way to do that.

Ambassador Mull talked about the security aspect, obviously, of our cooperation, which is why we're here today. But the only other thing I'd like to say is we think that we have three sets of vital strategic interests with Azerbaijan, beginning with all the security interests that Ambassador Mull described. We also have, as the Deputy Minister just mentioned, deep shared interests in energy security.

Energy security means providing options, providing multiple transit routes and sources of energy supplies, especially natural gas. And Azerbaijan is now emerging as one of the great producers of natural gas anywhere and certainly, one of the most readily available supplies of natural gas to help Europe diversify and therefore, develop genuinely reliable sources of this most vital commodity. So we have shared security interests, we have shared energy interests, and finally, we have a shared interest in reform, reform that aims to expand political and economic freedom through democratic and market economic reform and also military reform.

And in fact, military reform and democratic reform are inextricably linked when it comes to a country's aspirations to deepen its ties to the Euro-Atlantic community. So we've talked about a full range of issues today and we believe that ultimately, to have a real partnership with Azerbaijan, one that will be stable for the long term and deeper for the long term, we need to make progress in all three of those sets of strategic interests at the same time.

Thank you.

MR. CASEY: Okay, guys. Why don't you -- why don't you go ahead and start. And please, if you've got a specific person you want to address the question to, go right ahead.

QUESTION: Two questions, the first one for Ambassador Mull. You said that you had talked about the issue of missile defense. Can you put a little more flesh on the bone, give us some sense of what you actually discussed in that context? Did, you know, it seek to get more information about the installation in Azerbaijan? What in particular came up in the context of President Putin's offer? And I know this is something that the United States has been thinking about since well before President Putin made the offer. I think General Obering himself has aired the possibility of publicly, someday making use of this installation. So I know that you've been thinking about it. What exactly did you talk about?

And then the other question is for Mr. Bryza, was whether the United States' longstanding concerns about human rights in Azerbaijan, the importance of free and fair elections, freedom of the press, et cetera, was actually raised in these discussions, even though they are focused on security matters.

AMBASSADOR MULL: Thank you. We spent today -- we have not, up until now, had a very extended discussion with our Azerbaijani partners on the rationale and the strategic objectives of the United States missile defense system. So we took a great bit of time to explain the strategic history of this concept of missile defense, how we've expanded it from missile defense of the territory of the United States to encompass, really, a global missile defense system to prevent attacks from rogue states and others who might wish to harm us through missiles.

We did note that when President Putin was in Kennebunkport earlier this month that there was a commitment by the Russian side to work with us through expert-level consultations to develop their proposal (inaudible) more -- much more detail about their proposal to use the Gabala site. We, of course -- Azerbaijan, of course, has an important interest in that since they are the owners of the Gabala site, leasing it to the Russians, and we've committed to consult with our Azerbaijani friends as news on that issue emerges.

You're right; there had been much speculation in the press before about possible alternate sites to those that the United States is currently pursuing in Poland and the Czech Republic; however, we had not received this as a formal proposal until very recently. Now that we have, we'll, of course, look forward to getting more details and having a productive and constructive dialogue on it.

QUESTION: Do you see this as happening mostly between yourselves and the Russians and merely consulting the Azerbaijan Government, or do you actually feel like you need to talk to them directly about what this might be?

AMBASSADOR MULL: Well, at this stage, it is a Russian proposal. We need to hear more details about what they are proposing, and we'll take it from there as we get them. But obviously, the Government of Azerbaijan and the people of Azerbaijan have a direct interest on any defense activity that takes place on their territory.

MR. BRYZA: Yes, we did discuss democratic reform in Azerbaijan. I should note that under the leadership of Ambassador Derse, who has joined us today, and Assistant Secretary Lowenkron, we have launched a bilateral dialogue on democracy and human rights that -- in fact, with whom the interlocutors are President Aliyev and Foreign Minister Mammadyarov to show the level of seriousness of that discussion.

The focus, of course, of today's discussions and tomorrow's is security, but nonetheless, we did talk about the importance of sustaining reforms across a broad front, not just military reform. And we talked about the strategic importance of Azerbaijan emerging as an increasingly democratic state with a Muslim majority population of all sorts of confessions, all sorts of religious confessions. I mean, many different interpretations of Islam are worshipped in Azerbaijan, but not only; there are Orthodox Christians and Catholics and a wide variety of religions that are practiced in Azerbaijan.

So the overall emergence of Azerbaijan, again, as a secular democracy with a Muslim majority population, but with a population of many religious varieties is a significant strategic development and we need to do everything we can together to make sure that's exactly the type of Azerbaijan that emerges.

QUESTION: I have a question for the Foreign Minister and Mr. Bryza, Secretary Bryza. It's a matter of the security. I'm wondering if you can discuss the TGI pipeline. And for the Foreign Minister specifically, if the Azerbaijan Government is ready to - (inaudible) some of the concerns that the Greek Government have regarding the supply of natural gas for this pipeline in the future.

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Well, the energy security, of course, is one of issues on the agenda, but there are many aspects of energy security. You deal with a political environment of you deal with economic aspects or you deal with security of infrastructure, and we have discussed and we continue tomorrow consultation of the issues linked to energy infrastructure security and its protection. And that, of course, is related to a bulk of issues; on the other hand, linked with maritime security and counterterrorism activities and increased operational capacities and so on.

Regarding the question which you gave on the project, on the specific project of TGI, let me say, first of all, that Azerbaijan always is pursuing the policy of diversification - diversified supplies, diversified routes for transit and diversified markets. And we always apply all those projects and suggestions on the basis of commercial viability.

Therefore, I can tell you at this point that TGI is one of those projects on the agenda. Those are being considered. There are several options for future transit of Azerbaijani gas to Europe. Azerbaijan is based on the approach of commercial viability. At the same time, Azerbaijan will be pleased to contribute to European energy security and Azerbaijan will be pleased, maximum possible, to extend partnerships with many countries in European Union.

We also think that the monopolization efforts will not bring benefit to anyone, so diversification is one of basic principles in this issue.

Let me also relate to the issue of reforms in Azerbaijan. You know, reforms are interrelated, and once we start talking on security sector front, that, of course, will, on the other hand, cover the issue of institutions and its development and human rights and other related issues. So of course, we discuss. Of course, we cooperate. And I think within our partnership with the U.S., we have many positive achievements, so that record, in terms of human rights and development of democracy of Azerbaijan, will be further improved.

Thank you.

MR. BRYZA: Just to add briefly to Mr. (inaudible), I do feel personally that there is some building momentum in favor of the Turkey-Greece-Italy pipeline, both in terms of the commitments Azerbaijan has made publicly over the last few months to expanding its gas production and providing large volumes for export to Europe via Georgia and Turkey and into Greece and Italy. Things are moving forward.

This isn't the forum in which we normally have those discussions. As the Deputy Minister just described, when it comes to energy security for this forum, we're focused more on the infrastructure security. But we have constant, ongoing, and very serious discussions with others -- well, Deputy Minister Azimov and others in the government, and I feel quite good about the alignment of our vision.

And part of what we're talking about here today is trans-Caspian security in a broad sense, and we have a challenge to make sure that market principles decide where the other great quantity of gas around the Caspian, which is in Turkmenistan, where that gas or how that gas makes it to market. There is a large -- a huge supply of natural gas in the far western reaches of Turkmenistan, which, if the market decides, will make its way to Europe via Azerbaijan. But this is a topic not so much for us today, but it's something we're constantly working on with the Government of Azerbaijan. And I'll leave for Turkmenistan tomorrow to see if we can help Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan build on the momentum they've already created in their relations.

MR. CASEY: Yeah, go ahead.

QUESTION: On the issue of Karabakh, obviously, we had recently a delegation from Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. It was the first-ever thing as far as I can tell, the first in, what, 18 years. Is there an effort to build on that, to continue a sort of process? Have you discussed it?

And have you also discussed the issue of Eynulla Fatullayev, who has been put in prison for writing an article on his visit to Karabakh? Has that come up or is there, in any way, a change of policy on writing articles about visits to Karabakh? For Mr. Bryza. If Mr. Bryza wants to comment, that's okay.

MR. BRYZA: Well, I certainly defer to Deputy Minister Azimov about your last question in terms of change of Azerbaijani policy. But in terms of this visit, this dual visit to Armenia and Azerbaijan, yeah, it's a significant development. It's not a breakthrough, but it is a major, serious, confidence-building measure. And sometimes people don't pay much attention to confidence-building measures and dismiss them as sort of running through the motions.

This is not running through the motions. Where these people visited is of great emotional seriousness, as you well understand. And the fact that the two governments were able to facilitate such a visit with the help of the Minsk Group and the chairman-in-office's personal representative, Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk, provides reason for hope.

That said, we're at a point in the negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh where the presidents need to make some serious decisions, some tough decisions. They have shown political will. Their deputy ministers have shown political will. Their ministers have shown political will and have taken the negotiations about as far as they can now go without presidents making the tough calls.

QUESTION: If you could comment if the issue of Eynulla Fatullayev came up during those talks or generally here in (inaudible)?

MR. BRYZA: There's still -- well, there's still ongoing talks. We talked -- we didn't get into the specifics of that particular case at this point, but we're going to do it probably tomorrow. And we're talking, though, about the broad range of reforms; democratic, security, the full range of reforms. So we will have a discussion. Thanks.

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Well, I've been asked to comment on this issue as to -- regarding repeatedly a given question on the case of a journalist. I don't think that it is related to the current agenda of my presence here. On the other hand, we have another institutionalized mechanism for consideration of issues related to human rights, democracy, freedoms of mass media in Azerbaijan between the U.S. and Azerbaijan. That group has its own agenda and I believe these issues can be addressed in that fora.

The -- on the other hand, this case should not be simplified to the way you suggested and the full -- the root causes and the situation there -- this might be more complicated than you've said. Also, I have never heard that in Azerbaijan, anyone has been somewhat criticized for writing anything on a particular topic, as you have formulated the Karabakh issue.

The conflict is very complicated. It's a long one. It had many heavy results for both nations, but of course, Azerbaijan is more suffering from that. Continued occupation does not bring anyone any benefit and I think Armenia has to get courage to deal with that -- with that issue. There are many other issues which both sides have to address. Therefore, these negotiations will continue, I believe.

Nevertheless, after St. Petersburg meeting of two presidents, it was of particular importance to see how intellectuals represented by some eminent cultural leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia, including science, including culture, education system led by two ambassadors, former colleagues -- I believe they have been ministers of culture on both sides -- and proceeding from their own desire to be helpful to societies, to give more knowledge about position of each other, to see and to view the situation and to get back the firsthand information, this all came across and resulted in this initiative.

I wouldn't draw now future continued efforts within this direction because this initiative has been so far only one during last several months. And further on, we shall expect results of that visit. The visit has not been charged by a concrete task, because it was, again, an initiative of two ambassadors of Azerbaijan and Armenia to Russia. But it was driven by a desire to get more objective information and I think they managed; they managed to gather this information.

And particularly important, I consider that the representatives of the Armenian public, those who can influence the public opinion-making process in Armenia, have been visiting Baku, seeing the development of the town, viewing the level of attention to the issue of conflict and relations with Armenia, having visited a building, an Armenian church which was once in the time of normal relations, having seen how this building is being renovated, maintained, cleaned, and used for cultural purposes, vis-à-vis your sad story related to a mosque being knocked down and a mosque in Shusha.

And also finally, coming to see the President of Azerbaijan, President Aliyev, having heard directly from him, a principle position of Azerbaijan toward settlement of the conflict and being able to carry this information without any distortion to their own back home -- to their own fellow colleagues in the -- whatever scientific and cultural institutions, I hope that this visit would help in further thinking and considering this information which they received, again, without a distortion which unfortunately, continuously takes place.

Thank you.

MR. CASEY: I think we have time for a couple more, so go ahead.

QUESTION: Thank you. Dmitry Sidorov of Kommersant, Russian Business and Political Daily. Two questions. First for Mr. Azimov: Do we raise the -- Vladimir Putin's Gabala proposal?

And the second one was for Mr. Bryza. As far as I remember on Friday in her interview with CNBC, Secretary Rice actually said that the U.S. doesn't agree with the Russian Gabala proposal. What is the reason for the Gabala discussion between the two of you today?

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Well, the Asian name of Gabala, thanks to President Putin, became so popular internationally. The proposal made by President Putin is given at a certain juncture and, of course, is an important one to be considered by all those who are inside the issue and, of course, Azerbaijan is becoming an interested partner because this station is a property of Azerbaijan. It is located in our old territory and is being leased by Russian Federation under the terms of an agreement signed for 10 years till 2012.

So these conditions already prescribes Azerbaijan's interest to the issue. Maybe this is one of reasons why we consult with both sides, with Russian Federation and with the United States. That is another issue of reaction of the United States to the proposal of President Putin and if this reaction will serve a basis for continued follow-up and if both sides will maintain these discussions, then probably Azerbaijan will be further engaged.

QUESTION: I'm sorry, sir. Can you -- does the Government of Azerbaijan has its own opinion about that?

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Opinion on what?

QUESTION: On this -- Putin's proposal on Gabala.

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Well, proposal of Russian Federation has been given to the United States. It has been obviously given within the framework of those strategic engagements and exchanges between U.S. and Russian Federation. It is obviously aimed at finding a solution to a problem which has preoccupied those minds at the current stage. If this proposal is to be found as a solution or as a way to solve the issues, then there will be a continuity.

As for Azerbaijan currently, this station is being used by Russian Federation. The information received by Russia is (inaudible) being processed accordingly by its own structures. And Azerbaijan has only maybe several obligations under the agreement, providing the electricity and other conditions for continued operation of the station, and also being concerned about its strategic security.

On the other hand, you would recall that President Aliyev has had a contact with President Putin on this matter when President Putin called him to consult on this issue. And you have heard the reaction of Azerbaijan's top authority, which recognized the strategic importance of Gabala station and the strategic importance of the issue itself. So the matter is -- now is between U.S. and Russia.

QUESTION: So you don't have your own opinion, right?

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Which one?

QUESTION: Whether you -- you said that Gabala is located on Azerbaijani territory, right?

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: It's not only located; it belongs to us, Azerbaijan.

QUESTION: Right. It belongs to you and it's a very important station, right? So what is your opinion? Will you agree that --

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Well, if -- if the station and its proposal about -- on use of this station shall be considered acceptable, then Azerbaijan probably would be interested in participation on consultations. And of course, we shall try to look at that from that angle. But in general, we are in favor of the successful maintenance of strategic security globally. I believe no dividing lines should appear in this case also.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. BRYZA: I'm going to defer to our Acting Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs in just a second to answer your direct question more -- well, more directly. But I just want to say that from my understanding, having seen what Secretary Rice has said, what she has said is that we are going to hear what President Putin's proposal is. We want to get a better understanding for what it is.

And I will just add, based on my responsibilities to work on U.S.-Azerbaijani relations, we will have no discussions and make no plans, and, of course, no decisions about Azerbaijan without Azerbaijan. As the Deputy Minister said, the Gabala facility is Azerbaijani property and as a matter not only of pure politeness, but friendship and partnership, we have to think through decisions and next steps together with Azerbaijan as well as with Russia. But now, I'm putting the cart before the horse because we really don't know what the Russian proposal actually is.

AMBASSADOR MULL: That's right. Matt is absolutely right. What we do not accept is that Gabala is a substitute for the plans that we're already pursuing with our Czech and Polish allies. We believe that those installations are necessary for the security of our interests in Europe, and both of those countries agree and the entire NATO alliance agrees. And so we do not believe that the Gabala suggestion replaces that. We're still going to go ahead with the installation on those sites.

MR. CASEY: We can do a last question over here.

QUESTION: Two questions, if I may. One for Mr. Azimov: Do you see any legal obstacles that would prevent U.S.-Russian cooperation on using Gabala installation?

And the second one for Ambassador Mull, if I may: Do you plan to send U.S. team to Gabala to see it? Do you need to do this or do you expect the Russians to provide all the necessary technical info that you need?

DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER AZIMOV: Well, proceeding from the current situation, we are -- have a station in our territory which has no status, military status, because Azerbaijan does not receive any and does not host any military state or base in its own territory. The current legal framework is being established by an agreement, and reasoned as I said, between Azerbaijan and Russia. (Inaudible) a framework of use of this station, proudly a new legal framework shall be created.

So for the time being, I don't see -- for the current situation, I don't see any legal obstacles for whatever because there is not subject for (inaudible). When there shall be a subject, then we shall consider possible new legal framework.

AMBASSADOR MULL: As far as your second question goes, the Russian Government has not yet invited us to visit Gabala. As I mentioned earlier, there will be expert-level consultations at the end of this month, and if they invite us, we'll consider it at the time.

MR. CASEY: Okay. Thank you, guys. Thank you, everybody. We appreciate you being here.

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