



THE SOUTH CAUCASUS 20 YEARS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Keynote Speech

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WELCOME/MODERATOR:

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THOMAS DE WAAL: So hello again, everybody. Do keep on eating your lunch, but it's my great honor and pleasure to welcome as our lunchtime speaker Eric Rubin, who for a few months now has been serving as deputy assistant secretary for the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs, which means that he deals with all the easy issues: Greece, Turkey, Cyprus and the South Caucasus. He most recently served as deputy chief of mission in Moscow, which also gives him a very good perspective on how – what the Russians are thinking about this region.

He's going to talk for about 10 minutes about an intriguing title, the Silk Road to Europe – or the South Caucasus' Silk Road to Europe. Then, we'll have about 20 minutes for questions. Sorry it's so short, but that's what we've got. We're very glad to have him. He will be back with just conference participants for dinner this evening. This is on the record, so please bear that in mind.

Thank you.

[00:01:12]

ERIC RUBIN: Thank you very much, Tom. I'm very glad to be here. Thank you for the invitation and thank you for inviting me to help mark what I think is a very, very significant milestone, the 20th anniversary of independence of the countries of the Caucasus.

I'd like to make some remarks that I hope will spark some conversation, so I'm not thinking of a long talk at all but actually just some thoughts that I'd like to share and then get your reaction and see where the conversation goes.

I'd like to take a – probably what some people may find a surprisingly positive approach to this and I say that because there is so much gloom-and-doom talk when we talk about the South Caucasus. The past 20 years have had their share of very serious challenges and tragedies of difficult economic times. We all know about that, and I know that there's quite a bit of discussion already here today about that. And I don't want to ignore that by any means and I don't want to skate over it so I'm happy to talk about anything that's of interest.

But I would like to highlight what I think overall is a very positive story that sometimes is neglected looking back. I have the benefit of some historical perspective, having started working on the Caucasus in 1989. Actually my former boss, John Evans, is here. He was the deputy director of the Soviet desk at the State Department at the time, and I was what was then known as the Internal Politics and Nationalities Affairs Officer, which meant that I was responsible not only for Soviet domestic politics but also all 12 non-Baltic republics of the USSR. And I was lucky enough to be there all the way through to '91 and the last months of the Soviet Union and our efforts to establish relations with the new countries of the former Soviet Union.

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And I have the past 20 years since then as perspective looking on that, so this is by way of saying I remember what the challenges were. I remember what it was like. I remember how difficult it was, how at times scary, even depressing. And so I think, keeping that in mind, I know there are a lot of people, looking around the room, who also have that experience and have that perspective. I think that's really important as we address this topic to keep that in mind. For those of you who weren't there who've only read about it, it was a different world, and one of the

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things I'd like to do today is talk about how much things have changed and in what ways and then, as I said, take the conversation where you would like to take it.

I think in light of these changes that we've talked about and how different the three countries of the South Caucasus are today from what they were in the last days of the Soviet Union, I think we have to look more forward at the challenges they face now. I think we have to look at the ways that even the continuing challenges, some of the peacemaking that's still needed, some of the reconciliation that's still needed is hopefully going to go in a different direction than it has the past 20 years. And I'd like to talk about our efforts as the U.S. government to consolidate some of the gains that have been made and to build on some of the progress. And those efforts are based on the same goals that were established when we set up relations with all three countries. Those are based on the principles that we advanced then through four administrations. We've held to them, we believe in them and we believe that in all of these areas there has been progress.

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The five goals have been seeing that all three countries were able to live in peace with their neighbors, that they're able to integrate into geopolitical and economic groupings of their own choosing, that they're able to develop the infrastructure of democratic governance and civil society, that they're able to protect the freedom and personal liberties of their citizens, and that they're able to develop their economic potential to the benefit of their peoples and their neighbors.

The challenges that all three countries inherited from the last years of the Soviet Union and from the last years of the Soviet system were obviously daunting. They included a divide-and-rule strategy from Moscow that still, as we know, has left a very painful and difficult legacy in all three countries. The lack of democratic decision-making; prioritization of the vertical of power over individual liberty; and the demands of the neighborhood, the demands of relations with Russia, with Turkey, with Iran and with each other: That's a very, very heavy set of challenges to inherit. That was the inheritance. But thinking back 20 years and looking today, I think what you see – and for those of us who've had the opportunity to visit all three countries, it's visual as well as intellectual effects that really, really strike home. I think it's a different landscape, despite the baggage; despite the continuing challenges of reconciliation, peacemaking, economic development.

I'll start with Georgia, just to check off some of the things that I think almost everybody here in this room is aware of, but the project of transformation toward transparent governance and rule of law, which has made enormous strides in Georgia and is probably the single most important aspect of the past decade in Georgia. As Tom noted, the almost complete elimination of low-level corruption in Georgia is something that actually has been documented, is a remarkable achievement in any society. I believe it's a fairly unique achievement in newly independent societies, and certainly in that neighborhood, also a very impressive achievement. That is the kind of real change, which you feel when you're on the ground, which you see with your own eyes.

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Also the development of a real civil society – impressive gains in economic development, although still challenges with a very, very difficult global economic climate, high unemployment, agricultural decline and other issues that are very, very serious, and an active engagement in the international community. And I would cite that and I'll talk a little bit about that for all three countries. But one of the big changes was that these were three societies that were completely cut off from the world. All contact literally had to be through Moscow, and all three countries are now playing a very active role in the international community.

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And I think that change of not just the fact that you have people traveling and all that but the fact that these countries, as members of the United Nations, as members of OSCE, are playing a real role – all three of them in Afghanistan as well now in the international effort to stabilize Afghanistan. Georgia played an active role in Iraq as well earlier. I think this is a huge shift. Azerbaijan, just looking on the economic side first, the development of independent pathways for energy exports, has really changed the entire scene, certainly from political independence in 1991 to increasingly economic independence, which leads to a significant increase in political independence – a remarkable rise in standard of living, although very uneven and challenged by some of the same global forces that are challenging other countries – again, very active engagement, support for the international effort in Afghanistan, for other international efforts, really playing a very important role globally in a way that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago.

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Armenia, also very, very impressive economic development against a very tough backdrop, still facing very tough challenges that we know about in terms of unemployment, in terms of the fact that there are very few pathways for exports or imports. And with some halting progress on elections, also we hope on track for free and fair elections and for a more open society, which I think, again, in the context of 20 years ago, we've already seen real progress on – again, global integration involvement; participation in the effort in Afghanistan; very active participation in international institutions, a very, very different profile than the past.

The baggage that was inherited, obviously, is still there, and we're not by any means ignoring it. And as a matter of fact, we're hoping that the coming years will be a period of not only consolidation of the progress that I've mentioned but actually finally putting to bed some of these inherited issues that will be, as long as they're there, drags on economic development, on regional integration, on progress for all three societies. We are doing everything we can now to support the Minsk Group in helping, we hope, move to actual peace talks in Nagorno-Karabakh after so many years. This is something that has obviously been a priority for almost 20 years. This is not a success story in the sense that we have not had a lot of progress toward peace talks and a settlement in 20 years, but I also think it's important to note that through international efforts, through the OSCE; Minsk Group; our engagement; the engagement of Russia, France, of other countries, we've also helped Armenia and Azerbaijan avoid outright conflict. And I know that's a negative positive that's the absence of a negative, but that's something that's very significant given what that conflict was like and could be if it started again.

And it's tough sloggng. We understand that it's still very far from resolution, very far from being ready to move to actual peace talks. We're still working now to agree on basic principles, but the commitment is very strong and we believe the commitment is there from both Armenia and Azerbaijan and we're hoping that this coming year will be a year of progress on that after several years of halting progress.

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We, as you know, have worked very, very hard to further reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey. It's an area where we thought we saw major progress. Certainly, we did see major progress in the negotiation of the protocols of probably the most broad and direct dialogue between Armenia and Turkey in modern history, but unfortunately that process is stalled now. We are hopeful it can get moving again. This is something that we raise regularly with officials, both in Ankara and in Yerevan. It's something we're committed to, something we believe is in the interest of both countries and something we believe is possible. And we're encouraged by repeated affirmations from both governments that it is possible, that they believe in it.

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Obviously, those are words, and the key question is what we can do to move the process forward and actually start opening the borders, start doing more people-to-people contacts, seeing real change and a real warming in those relationships. But that's something that we're committed to.

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As someone who was in Moscow in the summer of 2008 and saw the diplomacy around the Georgia-Russia conflict of 2008 up close, I can say that this is also an area where we have made considerable progress against a backdrop of a very serious challenge. Obviously, we still have a fundamental disagreement over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We still start from the position of supporting Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty over its national territory but we also have a very practical interest in moving this dispute in a positive direction and also doing what we can to help all the people involved on all sides of the administrative boundary line and all the people who've been displaced and have suffered from this conflict.

We believe that the most recent event, which was the negotiation of an agreement between Georgia and the Russian Federation on transparency in trade information and on trade flows between Georgia and Russia, is a very, very positive step forward. It is potentially, we hope, a model for other practical cooperation. We see it, as both governments have described it, very much as a win-win compromise in which some tough decisions were made on both sides, but the end result will unquestionably benefit not just Georgia and Russia but all the other countries of the region that depend on that trade and the global trade system, as represented by the WTO.

We think this is really, for the first time in three years, evidence that despite the fundamental disagreements involved here, there is the possibility for practical progress. It's now been demonstrated. We want to do everything we can to help. Again, we're realistic. We know how difficult the disagreements are and we also know the legacy of the problem of the past 20 years. But this was in many respects, I would have to say, a very, very good moment and a very helpful moment in that regard.

We also are encouraged by some of the signs we see on democracy and civil society in the region. We are doing everything we can in a practical way to help advance civil society. We're doing everything we can to work with the governments that are organizing elections for the next year and the year after, Georgia and Armenia, to help them with both the practical nuts-and-bolts arrangements and also the bigger-picture decisions. We believe that upcoming elections in both Georgia and Armenia are a critical opportunity to consolidate the gains that have been made and to demonstrate the possibility of free and fair elections that is already there. And I have to say both countries have made significant progress.

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We've talked quite a bit about what's changed in Georgia since 2004. We believe that the elections in Georgia this year, next year and the whole question of where democracy and civil society are going in Georgia, I think, will help demonstrate the extent of the changes that have come since the Rose Revolution.

I think in Armenia we've also made clear both the positive aspects of the changes since the last election but also the importance of the upcoming elections being free and fair, having a real competition. We've been encouraged by our dialogue with the Armenian government on that and we're very hopeful for real progress, as the organization of the elections proceeds.

In Azerbaijan, we're working actively to support civil society. We have a good dialogue with the government. Our goal is very much to support democratic processes and institutions, not particular parties or individuals. I think

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that's something that the Azerbaijani government has expressed appreciation to for us that that's what they're looking for, too: institution development and the development of democratic political processes. Obviously, there are challenges, and we are going to do everything we can to help with them.

We do think, again, going back to the glass-half-full question that – again, going back 20 years, where all three of these societies were in terms of democratic development, the immediate legacy of the Soviet system, as imposed from the center – there really has been significant progress toward democracy, openness, civil society, but obviously very significant progress needs to be made in different areas, at different levels in all three countries. The key thing for us is to make clear that we're remaining engaged, involved and standing by to do what we can to help.

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I also think I would be remiss in not talking about the striking change in terms of economic development that we've seen. And this is something, as I mentioned, if you talk about visual elements of change, when you travel in the Caucasus, even getting out of the capitals – certainly the capitals are night and day compared to 20 years ago, but even getting out of the capitals, the changes in peoples' lives is quite striking. It's obviously early days and many – in terms of many forms of economic development, but we do believe that there are some basic trends that are positive.

One of them, we do believe, is transparency and efforts to combat corruption. And I've already cited Georgia as a model in that regard and I think in all three countries we've seen definite progress on that. Improving the business climate – and I think most important in that regard is – efforts to combat corruption are critical to attracting direct foreign investment. I think in all three countries the question of obstructed trade flows, which depends I think in part on resolution of some of the political differences, is also an important part of the picture. And this is a particular challenge for Armenia. It's one of the reasons we've pushed so hard to help get relations normalized with Turkey. But I think for all three countries you still have obstructed trade flows, obstructed trade corridors, and this has a real – really negative effect on economic growth.

I think energy has remained one of the critical questions for the region. Obviously, Azerbaijan's energy resources and development has been a huge boon, but how that money will be used and how it will be relied upon to generate development, to raise standard of living and to benefit the entire region is something that I know the Azerbaijani government's been focused on in discussions with its neighbors. We've been very supportive, as I mentioned earlier and as you all know, of alternative paths for energy exports, for the basic principle of energy independence, which we think has made such an important difference. It's already benefited many other countries in the neighborhood, but it's always a challenge when resources of this scale are developed, and then the question is how they're going to be used. We believe that the early results are encouraging, and I think, again, looking back to where things were 20 years ago, which is our theme, I think it's quite striking.

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I think one of the questions that we have to address, as we talk about all three countries 20 years later, is the impact of regional stability, is the impact of the broader neighborhood. And it's one of the reasons we've been so focused on pushing for improved ties, for pushing for open borders, for pushing for transparency in trade.

I think, given the level of problems, the number of problems inherited, the levels of difficulty that all three countries have encountered, this really has been a drag. And I know you'll be addressing in individual panel discussions some of the ways that this has impacted their development. When we're taking a regional approach, this is really our single most important focus for the coming year. And this does include intensified efforts on resolving conflicts.

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But it also includes looking at economic development in a broader regional context, talking to some of the neighbors. We're very, very hopeful that Russian membership in the WTO will lead to a significant increase in trade between Russia and the South Caucasus countries, but also through that region to the world. And we think that would also be very much a win-win for everybody concerned.

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As I said initially, these are just some very broad impressions. They're also intended to be positive rather than negative because I really want to emphasize the importance of taking into account the progress that's been achieved. But I think what'd be most useful now is just to open up the floor and take the conversation wherever you'd like to. So I'm all yours.

MR. DE WAAL: Thanks, Eric. Why don't you come –

MR. RUBIN: OK, great.

MR. DE WAAL: – come and sit down. But let me use my prerogative just to ask you one question. Europe's in your tide pool, and I think it was very sensible and good – your emphasis on the economic picture. But, as we know, the U.S. economic relations with these three countries are relatively modest. And of course, the U.S. has its own economic issues, which means that, you know, a small region like the Caucasus is not going to be a major priority for U.S. foreign policy.

That inevitably leads to the question of Europe, and whether you see the U.S., as it were, delegating a greater role to the EU in this region, and if so, how.

MR. RUBIN: Thanks, Tom. I would say not delegating, and not just because I don't think that's a fair word, but also because I think – first of all, I would take some issue with the way you let off that comment only because I think given the size of these countries, given our other priorities around the world, our other challenges, our other difficulties right now, one of the things I think that deserves highlighting is the fact that these three countries have been a major priority for the United States for the past 20 years. And some people in the room here could talk more eloquently about that than I can – about why and how.

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But I think, honestly, based on my awareness – my own personal awareness of the level of engagement, interest, concern from the senior-most leaders of government, up to and including the president – I think I would say this is a very, very major priority. Now, in short-hand terms, why? Well, for one thing, because this is a true crossroads. For another reason, because this is an area that if it prospers and is at peace will have a positive effect on the entire region, and if not there already have been negative spillover effects from some of the conflicts and other problems.

I also think there is a very deep commitment at all levels of our government that was made 20 years ago. And I believe we've kept it through significant resources devoted to assistance, to political support and to a level of engagement that, again, would not normally be the case with three countries of this size. So without overdoing my objection to your comment, I think it is a very, very important priority for us.

I think we understand, as we do with a lot of other countries, that most of their trade is not with us and isn't going to be with us. And that means, for example if we're talking about free trade agreements – which in principle is

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something that we favor – it would be much more meaningful for these countries to have free trade with the EU than with the United States. That’s understood. That’s normal.

And actually, we’re supportive, as we have been, not just of the broader European integration project but actually of the specific expansion of ties between the EU and all three countries in the Caucasus. I think the EU at this point is encountering a lot of – a lot of challenges, so I think that may be a little slower-going than some might hope. But I think in principle the commitment is there from the EU, from its member states. And I think that’s the direction it’s going.

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If I could offer one other comment in this regard, I think – one of the other questions that would have been asked 20 years ago is, are these countries in Europe? And, yes, officially they were and officially they joined what was then CSCE after the breakup of the Soviet Union. But I think psychologically it was not so obviously clear to everyone, including these countries themselves. I think now it’s very clear that this is Europe, that this is part of the European project, that the future of these countries is intertwined with that of Europe as a whole, that our entire trans-Atlantic effort very much includes them, and our perspective on European-American relations.

But I think also psychologically in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, this whole discussion is very different than it was 20 years ago because I think people see themselves as part of Europe in a way that they didn’t when they were part of the Soviet Union. So I think that’s an important psychological shift as well.

MR. DE WAAL: Thank you. I think we got time for three questions. I’m going to – I’ll tell you what I’ll do. I’m going to pick from our visitors one person from Azerbaijan, one from Georgia and one from Armenia. How about that – (laughter) – so that – on the basis that this conference is democratic and – (inaudible). I think Ilgama (ph) in the middle from Azerbaijan.

Q: Thank you. Ilgama Mader (sp) from Azerbaijan. You said that you have a positive, good dialogue with Azerbaijani government on the democracy issues. I would like to know what makes them good in concrete terms, because if it is just release of – occasional – (inaudible) – release of political prisoners, we have this process, like, permanent in the past 15 years. They put more people in prison and then release couple and then get praise from the international community – including United States.

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So if this dialogue has been always good in the past 20 years, so why things ended up in such a big – such a big trouble in Azerbaijan, where media is controlled, human rights are abused increasingly – like. So what – when the dialogue was interrupted in – the good dialogue –

MR. DE WAAL: I think we get your question, thank you. (Laughter.)

MR. RUBIN: I do get the question. And let me just say I in no way wish to gloss over some of the very real challenges and our real concern about aspects of the human rights situation in Azerbaijan. You can read about it every year in our annual human rights report and in our regular public statements as well, I think, as the very clear statements that our ambassador in Baku has made, including most recently today about the death – the tragic death of Rafiq Tagi, the Azerbaijani journalist who apparently was murdered.

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And this is something that both saddens us and I think is a cause of great concern whenever a journalist is killed. We don't know the facts; we can't say exactly why it happened. I don't think it's clear at this point. But it is the kind of thing that causes great concern.

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In this regard, I would say the Azerbaijani government deserves credit for immediately calling for a special investigative group to look into the circumstances around the death of Mr. Tagi. This is an example of where – when I meant – when I said we have a very good dialogue, we have a very good dialogue. We have the ability and – not only the ability, but we have a frank and fully candid discussion with the government of Azerbaijan on a regular basis, no holds barred. And it's a two-way conversation. And I think it's appreciated by the government of Azerbaijan as well.

So when I say the dialogue is good, I mean the dialogue is good. I don't mean to say that there aren't real concerns and real problems. And I think this was something that reminded us of those concerns and those problems. I think our efforts in Azerbaijan have been aimed on several levels. One of them is to strengthen civil society, to strengthen the people who are pushing for openness, who are pushing for the kind of structural changes that will lead to more open politics and more open civil society.

It's also to be clear when we disagree and to have the kind of relationship where we can work very closely together and yet have disagreements. And I think we have that kind of relationship with the government of Azerbaijan. And then I also think it is a relationship where we are able to speak publicly when we have concerns that we wish to flag, and we do that. And as I mentioned, Ambassador Bryza has just done that today in regard to Mr. Tagi's death.

So in no way do I mean to say that things are great and there are no concerns. But I think it is important that we're able to have this dialogue, that we're able to have these discussions. I know it may seem that it's one step forward, two steps back sometimes. But we believe there has been progress, there have been positive benefits from our ability to have this dialogue with the government of Azerbaijan. And we remain optimistic about positive changes in the future.

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MR. DE WAAL: Thank you. I think Gia Nodi (ph) will –

Q: In Georgian – in –

MR. DE WAAL: Just introduce yourself.

Q: I'm – yeah –

(Laughter, cross talk.)

Q: Gia Nodi (ph) – (inaudible) – from Georgia, yes.

MR. DE WAAL: Everyone likes Gia Nodi (ph).

Q: OK. There is a specific kind of document between – signed between Georgia and the United States, this charter of strategic partnership which was actually signed in the very end – the big – last period of the previous

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administration. But there are – from time to time, we hear that there are meetings about – to discuss a – (inaudible) – process. So – but it’s already – we’re coming to the end of the first term of the new administration. So could you somehow summarize what is tangible that come out of this agreement? Is there anything, and what it is.

[00:31:15]

MR. RUBIN: Thank you, absolutely. I think – first of all, let me just say that the question you’ve asked is very much at the front of our minds now as we look toward the NATO summit coming next year in Chicago and as we look toward the partnerships with NATO that countries like Georgia have established. And I think you raise a very important question. Where is this partnership going?

I would say this is a very positive story as well. And I think we have come a long way in the three-plus years – so it’s three years now of the Obama administration – working with Georgia. I think it’s based on the fundamental principles that were laid down during the Bush administration, which this administration has supported from the beginning.

Those principles are to support the change that has been underway in Georgia since 2004 that we believe is real and significant and can be a model for the region, to support Georgia’s economic development and to support Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, including Georgia’s aspiration to join NATO. And those are the core principles. They haven’t changed. And we’re committed to doing everything we can to advance all of them at the most – the pace that’s as – within reach, is what I would put it, each case.

I think on the question of the partnership and of the charter, we believe most importantly that Georgia’s role in the region, I think, can be a model. And I’ve mentioned this in terms of anticorruption. I think it’s also true in terms of Georgia’s engagement in international efforts – first in Iraq, now in Afghanistan. I think in terms of Georgia’s efforts to reform its military, to restructure its military, to restructure its security services, to be a truly post-Soviet military and truly post-Soviet security services, has achieved a lot of progress.

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And we have done a lot under the charter in our bilateral efforts, in our NATO efforts, training, investment in infrastructure and facilities, investment in capabilities. We’ve spent a lot of time training with the Georgians in their deployment to Afghanistan, which is significantly the biggest non-NATO contribution today and also the single biggest contribution on a per-capita basis of any country. I think that ability of Americans and Georgians to work together, to train together, to deploy together has turned this partnership into something very real and meaningful, and something that will have lasting benefit.

The same thing I think has been true with Georgia’s efforts to develop interoperability with all the other NATO countries and other partners in Afghanistan. This has exposed Georgians to really the entire world, and the entire world to Georgians. And I think long term this will have a very significant impact. We want to go beyond the progress we’ve made. It’s something we’re looking at now. It’s something that we know we, I think, have to address in Chicago in a way that answers your question, where do we go from here?

But I think the accomplishments – and this was recognized by the NATO ambassadors – the North Atlantic Council ambassadors, who were just in Tbilisi, and made very clear their belief that a lot has been achieved. I think that the past three years have actually been a time of a lot of progress. I also think, and this is true in terms of the larger neighborhood, that, as I mentioned, the agreement on WTO can be, we hope, a precedent for further efforts to reduce tensions in the region, to reduce specifically tensions between Russia and Georgia.

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And we believe that will, longer term, have a positive benefit on all the countries in the region. It's both a separate question completely, but also not a separate question from Georgia's relationship with NATO, Georgia's relationship bilaterally with the United States. We really think all of these pieces are part of a larger puzzle. One thing I do want to emphasize though, and I think it's a very important point, is we are supporting these partnerships – and very specifically the partnership for Georgia – because we believe they're stabilizing, not destabilizing, because we believe ultimately this will lead to enhanced security, not insecurity.

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We are very, very firm in our belief that these are agreements that benefit not just the two countries involved – in this case, if we're talking about bilateral Georgian-American relations – but also the larger region. And we also believe that the model that Georgia has established is something worth studying by other countries.

So that's my best effort to capture the various elements of this. I do think next year we will, I hope, have some ideas that will strike you as positive and strike you as moving forward, because we're working very hard on that and the Georgians are working very hard on that as well. And it's something that we intend to have as a very central part of our dialogue with the Georgian government in the next few months leading up to Chicago.

MR. DE WAAL: Thank you. And last but not least, I think Richard Geragossan (ph). He is an American but he's also an Armenian, so he just about qualifies. (Laughter.) And he lives in Europe.

Q: Without objection, let me fill the Armenian position in this trilateral troika. But my question, sir – Armenia's facing its first election since its March, 2008 post-election violence. Is there anything specifically you can comment on what the U.S. is going to do differently in terms of reassuring the Armenian population that this election will be perceived as another test based on the new threshold with higher expectations? And lastly, can you comment on Armenian-Turkish diplomacy? Do you see anything possible in the near term or anything we should be doing? Thank you.

MR. RUBIN: On the question of elections, returning to my theme of positive progress which I believe in this case is warranted, things are much better. And you live there, so you can correct me if I'm wrong. But I think things are much better than they were a year ago. I think every time there's been an election in Armenia it's been a time of heightened tension; it's been a time, sometimes, of unrest in the streets, and even sometimes of violence.

Going into this election, we're encouraged by what we see. We think the government is not just saying all the right things, but we believe is committed to an open, free and fair process and to a real contest in the elections. Obviously, the implementation of those commitments is the key question, not just the voicing of them. But given where we were a year ago, with real unrest in Yerevan and elsewhere in Armenia, and given what we've seen in the lead-up to other elections, we are encouraged.

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It's something that's at the front of our dialogue and at the top of every list when we meet with Armenian officials. They know that. It's also something, I think, that Armenians themselves increasingly see as something that they need to get right to further their own objectives for integration and to establish the kind of society that they set out to establish 20 years ago with independence. I think there will be bumps; there always are in any country in an election campaign season. And obviously we'll be watching this very closely and doing everything we can to offer support to both the government and to civil society and to help support the processes to the extent we can.

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The other thing I would say about these elections is they are getting a lot of international attention, which again reflects the fact that these countries really are at the – if not always at the forefront of the world’s attention, certainly on the world’s agenda, in the world’s eye. And I think that’s very positive actually, both reflecting their integration with the wider world but also the fact that people in United States and elsewhere across the world are concerned about where things are going. And I hope that concern and that support and that view from outside will be helpful as they move toward elections.

[00:40:00]

In terms of Armenian-Turkish relations, as I mentioned, we made a major investment in the dialogue and the negotiations between Armenia and Turkey. We believe it was historic. We believe the agreement on the protocols was historic. We believe it shows what is possible. And the encouraging thing is actually both governments agree that as well – not just because they agreed to the draft of the protocols, but also because to this day in their public statements the entire assumption now on both sides is that relations will be normalized, that the current situation is abnormal, that it should be normalized, and that both countries have so much to gain from that.

That is now accepted policy in both governments. It certainly wasn’t a few years ago. So that accomplishment is very real, very significant and we think will be lasting. Obviously, the practical problem is we’re stuck now without any path forward to get the protocols ratified by the Turkish parliament. We do periodically have outbursts of rhetoric on both sides that are, to use the classic State Department phrase, not helpful. And our efforts are consistently to sort of bring both sides back to moving this process forward based on this very strong foundation that’s been established.

The encouraging thing is what we hear from both the Armenian government and the Turkish government is a desire to do that. But with elections obviously having concluded in Turkey but now getting under way in Armenia, and with sort of the overhanging of public opinion on both sides, the Nagorno-Karabakh issue which never goes away, even if it’s not formally part of the subject being discussed – it’s challenging.

All I can say is we’re committed to helping move this forward. It is something that we will continue to push. Both governments know that. And I do believe, having come this far – without being specific about timeline because I don’t know when we’ll see the first real positive outcome – but I think it’ll be soon and I think once the door is opened a crack, it will start to open much more quickly. At least that’s my hope.

[00:42:20]

MR. DE WAAL: Thank you so much. That’s all we’ve got time for because in a few minutes we need to get back to talking about Azerbaijan. But on behalf of everyone here, I’d like to thank Eric for a very frank and fascinating and comprehensive presentation. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

(END)