

**Statement of Richard Morningstar
Ambassador-Designate to Azerbaijan
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
June 13, 2012**

Thank you, Madam Chairman, and distinguished Members of the Committee, for the privilege of appearing before you today as President Obama's nominee to be the next United States Ambassador to Azerbaijan. I am grateful for the opportunity to testify this afternoon, and I am humbled by the confidence that President Obama and Secretary Clinton have placed in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working with this Committee, other Members of Congress, and your staffs to advance the interests of the United States in Azerbaijan.

I would like to introduce my wife, Faith, who has joined me here today, along with my daughter Jill Morningstar and son-in-law Al Fitzpayne.

Long before my current position as the Secretary's Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy, and before my appointment as U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, I served as Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State on Assistance for the Newly Independent States of the Former Soviet Union. One of the primary goals during that time was the

stabilization and the development of the entire South Caucasus region – a goal that we continue to pursue today. I have vivid memories during the 1990s of working through my office to supply fuel oil and wheat to Georgia and Armenia to help them get through some difficult winters. Over the years, I made several trips to all three Caucasus countries.

The United States stands only to gain -- and to reap benefits well into the future -- from an Azerbaijan that is peaceful, democratic, prosperous, and strategically linked to the United States and our European allies. Azerbaijan has enormous potential.

This year, the United States and Azerbaijan celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of our diplomatic relationship. This milestone is an opportunity not only to appreciate the depth of our cooperation, but also to take stock of how far we've come in the three core areas of importance to the relationship: security, energy, and democratic and economic reform. The Administration believes we must intensify our cooperation in these areas and work together to resolve the ongoing challenges that the region continues to face.

The United States has long recognized Azerbaijan as a stalwart partner on international security. We remember that following the attacks of September 11, 2001, then-Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev was among the first to extend a hand of support in our time of need and to offer his country's close cooperation in our efforts to combat terrorism. That cooperation continues to this day. American and Azerbaijani soldiers have served together in Kosovo and Iraq, and they now serve together in Afghanistan. Azerbaijan has shown a sustained commitment to the allied effort in Afghanistan, including its vital role as a transportation route in the Northern Distribution Network for supporting NATO's operations in Afghanistan. Thousands of flights have crossed Azerbaijan's airspace en route to Afghanistan, and thousands of containers have departed Baku in support of the International Security Assistance Force. The U.S. works closely and productively with Azerbaijan on the UN Security Council, where this year Azerbaijan began its first-ever term as a non-permanent member.

The U.S. and Azerbaijan have also enjoyed twenty years of cooperation on energy security. In my current position as Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy, I work closely with Azerbaijan. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which I worked on in the past, and the development today of the Southern

Corridor for gas represent powerful symbols of Azerbaijan's pursuit of closer Euro-Atlantic integration and global commitment to energy security – a key part of our strategy to diversify energy routes and sources for European markets. If confirmed, I will continue to work with Azerbaijan to diversify its energy routes and bolster its critical energy infrastructure protection. But Azerbaijan's integration with the West can and must span well beyond pipelines.

The United States must also continue work with Azerbaijan on advancing democratic and economic reforms, including promoting respect for the rule of law, transparency, and fundamental freedoms. There is no question that Azerbaijan is located in a tough neighborhood, facing real pressures.

However, democratic reforms are essential to Azerbaijan's long-term security and prosperity. It is in Azerbaijan's own interest to undertake these reforms, both to ensure long-term stability and to unleash the full potential of its people. And as Azerbaijan advances along this path, our bilateral relationship will become even stronger. An independent judiciary, a free media, a vibrant civil society, political pluralism, competition through free and fair elections, and respect for fundamental freedoms are essential components of any democracy, and we need to work together to increase the

pace of Azerbaijan's development in these areas. The Secretary of State last week, while in Baku, made a strong statement on these issues. If confirmed, I will do everything in my power to help Azerbaijan succeed in developing as a strong, independent, and modern democracy.

To achieve a more secure and prosperous future for the region, there is no higher immediate priority for the United States than the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As a Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, the United States continues to assist the sides to achieve a peaceful, lasting negotiated settlement of the conflict based on the principles of the Helsinki Final Act, including the Non-Use of Force or Threat of Force, Territorial Integrity, and the Equal Rights and Self-Determination of Peoples. If confirmed, I will support the Administration's commitment, at the highest levels, to achieving this goal. I will also support the efforts of the U.S. Co-Chair, Ambassador Robert Bradtke, as we work closely with the sides to reach a settlement. The President, Secretary of State, and Ambassador Bradtke have made major efforts to facilitate a settlement. We must continue these efforts. Only a negotiated settlement can lead to long-term peace and stability in the region.

Madam Chairman, if I am confirmed, I will have the great honor of advancing a relationship that has progressed, steadily and uninterrupted, for the twenty years since Azerbaijan declared its independence. Our wide range of shared interests intersects with many of the United States' highest foreign policy priorities. But there is still much we can do to bring our governments, our societies, and our people even closer together.

Madam Chairman, thank you very much for considering my nomination. I look forward to your questions.