

**Statement of Robert F. Cekuta
Ambassador-Designate to Azerbaijan
Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
September 17, 2014**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Johnson, and distinguished Members of the Committee, for the privilege of appearing here today as President Obama's nominee to be the next United States Ambassador to Azerbaijan. I deeply appreciate the opportunity to testify this afternoon, and am humbled by the confidence President Obama and Secretary Kerry have placed in me. If confirmed, I look forward to working with this Committee and all Members of Congress to advance the interests of the United States in Azerbaijan.

I would like to introduce my wife, Anne, who has joined me here today, along with my daughter Margaret. My sons Matthew, who is working in Maine, and Stephen, who has just started university, are unfortunately unable to be here.

For just over 36 years, I have been dedicated to promoting U.S. foreign policy interests across the world. Most recently, as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the State Department's Energy Resources Bureau, I have worked to advance U.S. energy policy in some of the most complex regions from the Middle East to

the Caucasus to Ukraine. The core objective of my work has been boosting our energy security and diversifying our supply.

In this and all my previous assignments, my work has been defined by an unwavering commitment to advancing U.S. interests, including universal values of democracy, strong rule of law, and the protection of human rights and dignity. As Deputy Chief of Mission in Tirana, I advocated judicial independence, expansion of the operating space for civil society, and supported electoral reform in Albania. If confirmed, I will bring all of these experiences to bear in the service of advancing these and other core U.S. interests in Azerbaijan.

Many of you have been personally engaged on developments in Azerbaijan. Senator Cardin just led an OSCE Parliamentary Assembly delegation to Baku in June and chaired a hearing on Azerbaijan prior to that trip. Azerbaijan is a country with a rich history and has the potential for a bright and prosperous future. Our relationship with Azerbaijan is important not just to our two countries, but to Azerbaijan's neighbors and the wider region. The United States and Azerbaijan stand only to gain from a stable, democratic, peaceful, prosperous Azerbaijan strategically linked to the United States and our European friends and allies.

In the 22 years since the United States and Azerbaijan established diplomatic relations, we have worked with Azerbaijan on three equally important areas – security, energy, and democracy – necessary for the country’s full integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Allow me to speak to each of these three areas briefly.

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 and to offer his country’s close cooperation in our efforts to combat terrorism. That cooperation continues. American and Azerbaijani troops served together in Kosovo and Iraq. They serve together now in Afghanistan where Azerbaijan has shown a sustained commitment to the international effort including its role as a transportation route in the Northern Distribution Network for supporting NATO’s operations. 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.

If confirmed, I will also work to enhance our security cooperation in numerous other areas, including border security, non-proliferation, and countering human

trafficking. Later this month non-stop flights will begin between Azerbaijan and the United States, following several years of cooperation in bolstering Azerbaijan's civil aviation safety and security capacity.

The United States and Azerbaijan have also enjoyed more than twenty years of cooperation on energy security. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the progress on the Southern Corridor for gas represent powerful symbols of Azerbaijan's commitment to global energy security – a key element of our efforts 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, just as we continue our security and energy cooperation, we must also continue our efforts to work with Azerbaijan on advancing democratic institutions and processes, and strengthening rule of law. Both are essential to ensure long-term stability and to help Azerbaijanis unleash the full potential of their country. Democracies only thrive when they are bolstered by an independent judiciary, respect for the rule of just laws, a free media, a vibrant civil society, pluralism, competitive, democratic electoral processes, and respect for human rights and

fundamental freedoms, including freedom of assembly, association, expression, movement, and religion.

Azerbaijanis point to their 1918 post-Tsarist constitution to say they were the Muslim world's first democracy and that women had the right to vote in Azerbaijan before they won that right in our country. That constitution and republic fell in 1920, but it is a tradition of which Azerbaijanis can be proud.

Recently, Azerbaijan decided to continue a well-publicized program to decrease corruption at lower levels of public administration. The government established six administrative service centers in Baku and the regions, which function as one-stop centers for government services from nine ministries, where Azerbaijanis can obtain documents such as birth certificates and marriage licenses. However, much more needs to be done to combat corruption and protect those who identify it.

We recognize that Azerbaijan lives in a very difficult neighborhood and must maintain its security and stability, which the United States strongly supports. But we also recognize that the security, stability and prosperity that Azerbaijan seeks can only come with a strong commitment to democratic principles, including respect for rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms. Those are critical components of security and stability for any country. This is an area of

great concern to this Administration, as I know it is for you and your colleagues in Congress. If confirmed, I will do everything in my power to work with Azerbaijanis to build the strong, vibrant, modern democracy and sustainable, diversified economy that they want and deserve.

Finally, but no less importantly, Azerbaijan is a pivotal player in the region's future peace and stability. And there is no higher priority today for achieving a more secure and prosperous future for the Caucasus than the peaceful settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As a Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, the United States continues to assist all sides as they seek to achieve a peaceful, lasting negotiated settlement of the conflict based on the UN Charter and relevant documents, and 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.

The Secretary of State and Ambassador Warlick have made major efforts to facilitate a settlement. On September 4, Secretary Kerry met with the Presidents at the NATO Summit in Wales to discuss a way forward in peace negotiations. We publicly commended the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan for these important steps, and we encourage them to continue to discuss elements of a settlement.

Such meetings must continue, as only a negotiated settlement can lead to long-term peace and stability in the region. If confirmed, I will support the Administration's commitment, at the highest levels, to achieving this goal. In this, I will support the efforts of the U.S. Co-Chair, Ambassador James Warlick, as we work closely with the sides to reach a settlement.

As President Obama stated in June in Warsaw, "True democracy, real prosperity, lasting security – these are neither simply given, nor imposed from the outside. They must be earned and built from within." If confirmed, I will do everything in my power to work with Azerbaijanis to build the strong, vibrant, modern democracy and sustainable, diversified economy that they want and deserve. And I will work to advance our relationship in ways consistent with our shared interests and our shared values.

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