

Interview with Ambassador Anne E. Derse
Khazar TV - Vugar Zulfugarov
Baku, Azerbaijan
March 13, 2009

Khazar TV: First of all, thank you for your time, Ambassador.

Ambassador Derse: It's a great pleasure. Thank you for coming. I appreciate the opportunity.

Khazar TV: Mrs. Ambassador, you are here for more than three years, and you know Azerbaijan well. What can you say about Azerbaijan? Can you share your opinions?

Ambassador Derse: You mean my impressions as a person about Azerbaijan?

Khazar TV: Yes.

Ambassador Derse: As I think I may have said before in other interviews, Azerbaijan came as a great and very pleasant surprise to me. It's really a unique country in so many respects. In my Foreign Service career I have traveled all over the world and I've lived in many many interesting countries, but Azerbaijan is really unique, and I'll tell you why.

Azerbaijan is a unique mixture, in my experience, of many different cultures, and it's a country that has been for centuries a crossroads, as you know, and it has adapted a blend of East and West and the Muslim world that I've never seen anywhere before. And as Azerbaijan has become an oil-, energy-rich, energy-wealthy country, it's rapidly adapting features also of a developed country, a very cosmopolitan, outward-looking, modern, global country as well.

I think you know that I've made an effort to study the Azerbaijani language and this has been a real eye-opener, as we say in English, for me to have a little bit of the language, and I'm studying to learn as much as I can. It really helps open the society and your very rich culture to me. It's a great discovery.

I try to read Azerbaijani poetry and literature and plays. And it gives me an insight I would not have into the culture and the people.

The other thing that has been such a great and wonderful discovery for me in Azerbaijan is the Azerbaijani people. You're famous for your traditions of hospitality. And I have to say that everywhere I've gone in Azerbaijan I've found that people's doors are open to me, their hearts are open to me, and I have really appreciated the warm welcome that I've received everywhere in Azerbaijan.

That's some of my personal impressions. I'd also like to say that I've come to really respect Azerbaijan as a country because you have had a difficult history in many respects. You are located in a very important but also volatile, difficult, sometimes dangerous part of the world. And Azerbaijan and Azerbaijanis have done a remarkable job, particularly in the period since

your independence in coping with that very sometimes difficult environment and bringing your country forward to develop in a modern way.

I have to tell you that I particularly enjoy talking to the young people like you in Azerbaijan because there's great energy, there's great intelligence, there's great commitment to your country and the future of your country. And I'm sure that with that kind of power coming from your youth you will overcome any obstacles and really develop Azerbaijan into a modern country, a democratic country, a prosperous country, a secure country and a stable country in the future.

Khazar TV: From the situation, how do you consider relations between the United States and Azerbaijan?

Ambassador Darse: Well you know the United States and Azerbaijan have had strong relations since your independence, really. We have been excellent partners. It started as, in many ways, an energy partnership back in the days when Azerbaijan was first making the decision to open its energy resources and the energy resources of the Caspian to the Western world through the BTC pipeline.

It was really the Azerbaijani-U.S. partnership, working with our partners and colleagues in Turkey and Georgia, that brought that very important project to realization and success. And, of course, that unlocked Azerbaijan's future as well, giving you enormous new resources for your development.

Since then, as Azerbaijan has developed and grown in regional and global importance, the United States and Azerbaijan have further developed our relations in a broad range of areas. We're expanding our energy cooperation now to work together on important projects to help bring Caspian gas resources to global markets.

We're building our economic partnership. The United States assists Azerbaijan with economic reform programs through technical assistance to support your bid to join the WTO, for example, and we also are working to strengthen commercial relations.

And Azerbaijan has been a very important, a very reliable, a very effective partner on security issues. The United States will never forget that after the terrible events of September 11th, Azerbaijan was one of the very first countries in the world to call us and offer sympathy and support. Since then we've worked very closely together in a range of areas as partners in fighting terrorism and extremism.

I know that the most important national issue for Azerbaijan of course is the resolution of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. And by the way, I would like to say that since I have lived in Azerbaijan for almost two and a half years, I've come to appreciate very deeply how important that issue is to every Azerbaijani, how sensitive that issue is to every Azerbaijani; how critical an early, peaceful, just solution is to that issue is to every Azerbaijani; and how important it is that the United States remains a very strong partner with Azerbaijan in bringing that conflict to a peaceful and just and mutually acceptable solution. And the United States will remain

committed in that respect. And this is an issue that should be of critical importance to all the countries in the region. It's very important. A resolution will help Azerbaijan and the region continue its development in a positive and constructive and peaceful and democratic, stable and secure way. So we are very committed to continuing to work with Azerbaijan to bring resolution as soon as possible.

I should mention our people-to-people ties also. We've worked to deepen our educational exchanges, our professional exchanges, and our work between citizens – our artistic and cultural exchanges – because these ties between people, as you know having been in the United States, are very very important. And we're committed to continuing to bring more Azerbaijanis to the United States, and I personally would like to see many more Americans come to Azerbaijan. We're starting to see that. So we'll continue to work hard on that.

Khazar TV: I think students are most important.

Ambassador Dersé: I agree with you. The people-to-people ties are fundamental to almost everything else we do.

But there is also another critical area where we work closely with our colleagues in Azerbaijan, and that's to support your development as a modern, democratic state. As you know, Azerbaijan made a decision early in its independence that it wanted to develop as a democratic state, it wanted to build ties and adopt values – Euro-Atlantic values and ties. This is a very wise decision because it will help Azerbaijan in a difficult neighborhood preserve its independence and its stability and its prosperity in the future.

And you know, this is a very important part of American policy as well, to support freedom, democracy and human rights all around the world. President Obama's inaugural address reaffirmed our unequivocal support for that effort, to promote human rights, democracy and freedom. And this is an area where we are working hard with Azerbaijani colleagues.

We don't always see eye to eye, and it's in this area that I see we have sometimes the greatest tensions. But the fundamental issue is to make progress in this area. It's not easy, we know, to transform from the legacy of Soviet years, the Soviet past, to a modern democratic future. But it's important to keep making progress. It's important for Azerbaijan's future as well as our partnership.

There's one other area I'd like to mention in which Azerbaijan could be an extremely important partner and where we have a lot of scope to develop our relations, and that is, as you know, President Obama has reached out to the Muslim world in his first television interview to al-Arabiya TV. I'm glad you saw it. And I wanted to emphasize the messages that he put in that interview and the message to the Muslim world.

First of all, that the United States in no way equates terrorism, extremism and Islam. We do not. They are different things. We believe that Islam is a great religion of the world. It's a religion of

peace. And we believe that we should build stronger ties, stronger links, and stronger communication with the Muslim world.

In that regard, Azerbaijan could be a very strong partner with the United States because Azerbaijan is a Muslim country, but it's a modern Muslim country. It's a secular country with great respect for all religions. It's a country that understands, because you are, as I said before, a crossroads. You have been a crossroads for centuries between East and West. so you understand our perspective as well as the Muslim world's perspective. So we think that Azerbaijan could help us a lot in building this important dialogue with the Muslim world. That's an area I would like to work on a lot with my Azerbaijani colleagues.

I know that I personally have learned a lot in my time in Azerbaijan from the very thoughtful people here who are scholars and experts on Islam – historical Islam and modern Islam. And I think Azerbaijan has a very unique and positive and helpful perspective on the issue.

Khazar TV: Some believe terrorism is linked with Muslims and they believe it is the same. We have a saying: a pure Muslim would never say he is a terrorist, and a terrorist should not brand himself as Muslim.

Ambassador Derse: That was a fundamental message that President Obama wanted to make sure everyone understood. That is our belief. It has always been our belief. And I think he has reiterated that very strongly.

Khazar TV: By the way, Madame Ambassador, what about Barack Obama's new administration's opinions about Azerbaijan?

Ambassador Derse: You know the very good news is that President Obama has been to Azerbaijan. As you know, he came with Senator Lugar some years ago. I've seen the photographs of that trip. It seems it was a very positive trip, a very positive experience, so he has that already in his mind.

Then you heard that he's coming, President Obama is coming to this part of the world. He will visit Turkey in early April. He'll also be going to other parts of Europe, the G20 meeting in London and perhaps to Prague to see the EU presidency and then the NATO Summit, of course, in Germany and France. But he's coming also to Turkey. So that's in this area, and I'm sure it will remind him of his travel to Azerbaijan, and I hope that one day we will be able to see a visit from President Obama as our relations develop. Of course, as the U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, I'll be strongly encouraging him to return to Azerbaijan. Because why? Because Azerbaijan is a strong partner and because Azerbaijan and the United States share very important interests.

Khazar TV: The new Obama administration started its visits in the East (Secretary of State Clinton's visit to Asia). How do you see it?

Ambassador Derse: That's a very good question, excellent question.

Don't forget that the United States is of course a transatlantic power and our relationships with our transatlantic partners have been very close for many years and are extremely important in our foreign policy. But we're not only an Atlantic power; we're also a Pacific power. A good half of our country is looking in that direction. And you know that the East is an important part of the world not just for the U.S., but for Azerbaijan as well. You also have strong relations with countries in Asia. So Secretary Clinton undertook that visit there because she wanted to underscore the importance of our Pacific relations. It's not by any means at the expense of our Atlantic relations. Those are fundamental to our foreign policy and to our national well being as well.

But since you mentioned Secretary Clinton's trip to Asia, she said some very interesting things on that trip that I think give an indication of the direction of U.S. foreign policy under this administration. Let me tell you a little bit about that.

She said very importantly that America is interested in more rigorous engagement, rigorous and consistent engagement and cooperation with all of its partners in the world, with our established allies and with emerging nations. And she said this for two reasons.

First of all because, as she says, the United States believes, America believes, that we cannot solve the problems of the world alone and the world cannot solve its problems without the United States. That's number one.

Secondly, she said so many of the problems that the world faces today are problems that reach across geographic borders and even political borders. They are truly global problems. That includes pandemics, disease; it includes climate change, environment issues; it includes terrorism; it includes proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. All of these issues. Human trafficking. These are global issues that require global responses. Therefore the United States has to build relationships, not just with countries or regions, but we have to build relationships around issues that transcend countries and regions.

She said that because we need the cooperation of our partners in the world we are ready to consult and we are ready to listen very carefully to what others have to say. Because we believe truly that we can get good ideas, we can have better policies if we listen to our partners. So this is something that I will also be working on closely with our Azerbaijani colleagues in the future.

Khazar TV: How do you consider Turkey's rising role in the Caucasus region?

Ambassador Derse: Turkey, generally speaking --

Khazar TV: How would you characterize the role of Turkey in the region, the Stability and Cooperation Platform, in light of the recent war between Russian and Georgia and in the proposed Nabucco project?

Ambassador Derse: Turkey has been an important regional power and a great partner of the United States and a NATO ally for many years. The United States and Turkey have had very close relations. We're partners in promoting global peace and prosperity. We share a commitment to democracy, to market economics, and to ensuring stability and security in the Caucasus as elsewhere in the world. And as you know, Secretary Clinton just met with Foreign Minister Babacan. She had a very successful, positive visit to Turkey. And she underscored, again, our important partnership with Turkey and our interest in working together with Turkey and other countries in the region in order to promote stability, security and prosperity. Then of course President Obama is going to visit Turkey in April.

Now you asked specifically about Turkey and energy, and we – I think Azerbaijan and the U.S. see eye to eye on this – both think that Turkey could benefit from being part of a broad corridor to carry Caspian energy resources west. This would offer Turkey many advantages in terms of its relationships with Europe and make it an important part of the global energy system. So we will continue to encourage Turkey to strongly support the idea of a southern corridor and to provide transit rights through its territory for Caspian resources to go west.

Khazar TV: Thank you very much. Thank you for sharing your time with us. I really appreciate it.

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