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SECURING THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION IN AZERBAIJAN

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Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliev's collapse on April 21—fainting twice during a live television broadcast from Baku's Republic Palace—is forcing the Bush Administration to plan for the eventual departure of the Azeri leader. The United States has been involved in Azerbaijan since the collapse of the Soviet Union and has much at stake. The U.S. should protect its interests while encouraging a democratic succession in Azerbaijan.

U.S. priorities in Azerbaijan include strengthening the Western orientation of Azerbaijan's foreign and domestic policy, including preservation of a secular state. Despite its population composed of over 90 percent Shi'a Muslims, Azerbaijan will likely remain free of Iranian influence. A secular Azerbaijan, with a more democratic multiparty system and a free press and that is being increasingly integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures, could play a part in deterring radical Islamist takeovers in Russian-controlled Dagestan and other Muslim areas in the North Caucasus.

A Democratic Transition Is Long Overdue.

The Aliev clan has ruled Azerbaijan since the early 1970s—with a brief hiatus in 1992–1993 for nationalist President Abulfaz Elchibei. Before becoming President of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliev served as Chairman of the republic's KGB, Minister of Interior, First Party Secretary, and USSR First Deputy Prime Minister. If Aliev's son, his heir-apparent, loses the transition struggle, there is little danger of a radical Islamic backlash. Moderate democratic nationalists, not fundamentalists, are

likely to come to power, with the Azerbaijani elite agreeing on a pro-Western orientation and a secular state.

A democratic transition in Azerbaijan, if successful and bloodless, would also be an important demonstration to South Caucasus and Central Asian states, which suffer from a democracy deficit. Neighboring Georgia is in a political tailspin and needs an example of a successful democratic transition from a political system dominated by a charismatic, Soviet-era leader. After its scandal-ridden presidential election on March 5, Armenia could also benefit from seeing a democratic process in neighboring Azerbaijan. The authoritarian states of Central Asia particularly need a model of a peaceful transition away from post-Soviet-era rulers. And the broader Muslim world—including many countries witnessing or contemplating a father-to-son handover of power—could benefit from a positive example from a fellow Muslim state.

Other U.S. Interests. The East–West transportation corridor, including access to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea, has been a top U.S.

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priority during the past three U.S. Administrations. Today, oil and gas are flowing from the Absheron Peninsula and the Caspian offshore fields to the Black Sea. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Pipeline will export up to 1 million barrels per year of high-quality Caspian crude by 2005.

The U.S. may also consider basing elements of its air power on the Absheron Peninsula, particularly as it reduces its presence at the Incirlik military base in Turkey and plans for future deployments in Bulgaria and Romania. Deployment in Azerbaijan will allow the U.S. to project power further into Central Asia and deter Iran from the north.

Finally, the United States has invested heavily in Azerbaijan, including hundreds of millions of dollars in assistance, and has developed diplomatic and security expertise in the Caspian region. The U.S., with France and Russia, co-chairs the Minsk Group—a forum sponsored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and tasked with negotiating a peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, currently occupied by Armenia. U.S. major oil companies are investing billions of dollars in developing Azerbaijani oil and natural gas fields and export pipelines. Both the Azerbaijani people and the U.S. need the stability and predictability that would come from a democratic Azerbaijan.

What the Bush Administration Should Do. If President Aliiev does not participate in the presidential elections scheduled for mid-October 2003, they could be conducted in a free and fair way. Therefore, the Bush Administration should:

- **Encourage** a political process—with agreement from all factions—to conduct free, fair, and transparent elections. The U.S. State Department can clarify this position through the U.S. Embassy in Baku and Azerbaijani Embassy in Washington, D.C., followed by a visit to Baku by a high-level official.
- **Recommend** that the U.S. House International Relations Committee, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Helsinki Commission conduct hearings on democracy in Azerbaijan.
- **Request** the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute to prepare a

pre-election assessment, an election observation mission, and a post-election report. Request the OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to launch similar missions.

- **Ensure** participation of international observers in the elections in order to guarantee international recognition of the next government's legitimacy.
- **Ensure** through diplomatic channels that Russia and Turkey do not intervene to support competing political factions and reassure Moscow and Ankara that their interests will be respected. Azerbaijan can clarify to Russia that Russia's leasing rights to the Gabala radar early warning station will be maintained, while the U.S. can assure Turkey that it supports completion of the Baku–Ceyhan Pipeline.
- **Continue** the search for a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, including restoration of Azerbaijani territorial integrity and sovereignty, through an additional round of trilateral consultations with Azerbaijan and Armenia. The U.S. should also continue to support the Minsk Process, the only existing multilateral process on Nagorno-Karabakh, which began in the early 1990s under OSCE auspices.
- **Deter** Iran, through diplomatic channels, from interfering in the electoral process. If Iran intervenes, the U.S. and Turkey could send a Turkish or joint U.S.–Turkish air force squadron to Baku, as Turkey did after Iran encroached on Azerbaijani territorial waters in July 2001.

Conclusion. The post-Aliiev transition will not just set precedents for Azerbaijan, but will have greater geopolitical and geo-economic repercussions throughout the region. The next, democratically elected Azerbaijani leader will likely continue to desire relations with the United States and improve Azerbaijan's security by bolstering Baku's ties with its neighbors. The next leader should enjoy democratic legitimacy based on a transparent and constitutional transition.

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