
Clinton Seeks to Warm U.S. Ties With Azerbaijan

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Azerbaijan on Sunday, the U.S.'s Independence Day, following stops in Kiev on Friday and Poland on Saturday. She was scheduled to travel to Armenia later Sunday, and then to Georgia, on a tour that aides say is aimed at promoting democracy and strengthening U.S. ties in the region.

In Azerbaijan, Mrs. Clinton held talks with President Ilham Aliyev, who stressed the urgency of his country's territorial dispute with neighboring Armenia. The two nations are in conflict over Nagorno Karabakh, an enclave in Azerbaijan that has been under control of Armenian troops and ethnic Armenian forces since a 1994 cease-fire.

Strategically located between Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan has been a key supply route for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, but ties with the U.S. have been frayed by multiple issues. Mrs. Clinton is the second top U.S. official to visit Azerbaijan in a month, following Defense Secretary Robert Gates' early June trip designed to smooth ruffled feathers and to guarantee U.S. supply lines for Afghanistan.

Gas-rich Azerbaijan's leaders have been seething for the past year as the U.S. pushed hard for a border-opening deal between Turkey and Armenia, Azerbaijan's rival. Baku felt the U.S. ignored vital Azeri interests by not linking the talks to resolving the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. The post of U.S. ambassador to Baku has been vacant for a year.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told Ukraine that the door to NATO remains open.

The perceived U.S. neglect, analysts say, has begun to alienate the ally to the point that it may threaten U.S. energy and security interests.

At a news conference later with her Azeri counterpart, Elmar Mammadyarov, Mrs. Clinton said they had discussed the territorial dispute at length. "The final steps toward peace are often the most difficult, but we believe peace is possible," she said. "This is a high priority for the United States."

On Saturday, addressing an international conference in Poland on democracy and human rights, Mrs. Clinton recalled Winston Churchill's warning 60 years ago that an iron curtain was descending across Europe. She noted that with the collapse of the Soviet Union that curtain no longer remains.

"But we must be wary of the steel vise in which governments around the world are slowly crushing civil society and the human spirit," she said.

Azerbaijan, which is holding two political bloggers in jail, appears to be a tough nut for Mrs. Clinton's democracy drive to crack at the same time it seeks to restore damaged ties. Mr. Obama last year singled the country out, along with Zimbabwe, for jailing reporters; the country's election process has also been widely criticized. Mrs. Clinton said that she raised the issue of freedom of expression in her talks with Mr. Aliyev.

The imprisonment of the bloggers, who were charged with hooliganism and inflicting bodily harm, drew concern from the European Union and widespread criticism from human-rights groups.

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