



Remarks En Route Astana, Kazakhstan

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

En Route Astana, Kazakhstan
October 5, 2008

SECRETARY RICE: Good morning. How are you? We are going to go to Kazakhstan now. It's an important stop because Kazakhstan is a very important regional actor. It's a country with which we have a lot of relationships built on economic ties, built on regional engagement. And, of course, we are looking forward to discussing with Kazakhstan the issues concerning its OSCE chairmanship that will come up in 2010, and the importance of meeting its commitments on political reform and human rights. We will have that discussion.

But this is really also a trip that is emblematic of our engagement with central Asia as a whole. We have been very active in thinking of central Asia as a place that has important links to Afghanistan. And I think much of that is being realized. So, I look forward to an opportunity to go to Kazakhstan, after having had a very nice trip to India. I just wish I could have stayed longer in India.

QUESTION: The Russian government sometimes accuses you of trying to poach their allies. Like Nazarbayev, who has sort of been on the fence a bit, done exercises with NATO, but also with the Russians, how do you respond to this Russian anxiety, that you are trying to take an ally of theirs away?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we don't see any of this as a zero-sum game. First of all, Kazakhstan is an independent country. It can have friendships with whomever it wishes, and I think Kazakhstan has wished to have friendships and relationships with all of its neighbors. And that is, I think, perfectly acceptable in the 21st century, so we don't see and don't accept any notion of a special sphere of influence. And so, we look forward to continuing to build our relationship with Kazakhstan. But there is nothing zero-sum game about it.

QUESTION: But there is no danger, is there, of sort of creating another Georgia-style situation?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, I think Kazakhstan is quite capable of defending its independence.

QUESTION: Is there anything in particular that you would like Kazakhstan to do more in Afghanistan, or to help you in some way in Afghanistan?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, when I met with the foreign minister at the United Nations General Assembly in advance of this trip, we talked some about some of Kazakhstan's interests in infrastructure and energy projects in Afghanistan. Obviously, Afghanistan is still just emerging, in terms of its reconstruction programs. But I do think that Afghanistan and Kazakhstan could have quite an important set of ties along infrastructure and energy lines.

QUESTION: Would that include, in any way, helping a sort of back-up supply route for -- in the event that supplying, you know, US troops in Afghanistan gets cut off by other countries?

SECRETARY RICE: That hasn't been the issue. The issue, really, has been more economic reconstruction and energy.

QUESTION: With the India external affairs minister, did you discuss Kazakhstan, and the role India and Kazakhstan could play together? There is also uranium that Kazakhstan has. Would India be importing some of that uranium? Is that -

SECRETARY RICE: We didn't talk about that issue, but we did talk about the important regional links between India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and central Asia. If you think about that as a sort of north-south or south-north corridor, obviously for Afghanistan, in particular, to succeed, it's going to have to be regionally integrated.

It has always been strongest, economically, when it was regionally integrated, when it was once a land bridge for the region. I think we don't think in terms of land bridges any more in the modern economy, but it still has critical links to its neighbors in the region.

QUESTION: What does Nazarbayev need to do on human rights?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, there are a set of commitments that the Kazakhs undertook, as a part of the decision that was taken by OSCE for their chairmanship. And so, we can review those. But they won't be surprising to you, in terms of media, freedom, ability of opposition to organize, and the like. But they are set commitments, and I expect Kazakhstan to live up to them, and they have their commitments that they have taken that they have said that they want to live up to.

QUESTION: And you're going to bring that up today?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, of course, we will talk about the OSCE and the commitments.

QUESTION: Any particular cases you will bring up, any special cases?

SECRETARY RICE: No, this is really -- what we have tried to do with Kazakhstan is to talk principally about political reform in the structural sense. And that is, principally, what I am going to talk about.

QUESTION: No special human rights cases?

SECRETARY RICE: We have already raised some cases. I will talk with David Kramer when I get on the ground, and see where we are. David Kramer, from Human Rights, will be with me.

QUESTION: Could you tell us anything about Ambassador Negroponte being in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: Just, he was in Iraq. He was there, he goes periodically, as we all do, to Iraq. And he was in Azerbaijan, you know. And so he wanted to go over to Iraq for several days and see how it is. It's an opportunity for him to help us also think a little bit about transition planning -- whenever you start a troop draw-down, as we have, you have to be concerned about how civilians will continue to perform their functions. So that's one of the things John is looking at.

QUESTION: Working on the security agreement? Is that -

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the security agreement is being negotiated by our negotiators. I am certain that he is going to have discussions with Iraqi leaders about it. But it's going along. There wasn't anything specific that he went to do on the security agreement.

QUESTION: Are you close to finishing that, finally?

SECRETARY RICE: Finally?

QUESTION: Well, you said you were close before, so -

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we are close. But, as you might imagine, because it's an important and difficult agreement when you're trying to work out arrangements that are both going to protect our people and be responsive to Iraqi sovereignty, that just takes some time. But John isn't doing anything particularly about it, although he will talk to Iraqi leaders.

QUESTION: Have you decided not to open an interest section in Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: We continue to look at the idea. I think it's an interesting idea. But, you know, we are going to take a look at it in the light of what it could do for our relationship with the Iranian people.

QUESTION: It's still a possibility in the Bush administration?

SECRETARY RICE: We are still looking at the idea. Thank you.

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