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ABCs: Building Blocks for Better Relations

Posted by [Robert O. Blake](#) / September 04, 2012



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Strategically located at the heart of Central Asia (it alone borders every other country in the region), [Uzbekistan](#) just marked 21 years of independence. I recently traveled to its capital, Tashkent, for our third round of Annual Bilateral Consultations, or ABCs, with the Government of Uzbekistan. I returned from Tashkent with appreciation for the increasing breadth and depth of our relationship, as well as its greater trust and candor.

In 2009, we began holding ABCs with each of the Central Asian countries to further cooperation across a broad range of bilateral issues, including security and human rights. The ABCs provide an opportunity to review progress in our relationship, discuss mutual concerns, and identify action to advance common interests. Our relationship with Uzbekistan, as with other countries in the region, is a complex one that affects vital U.S. interests. In Tashkent, I thanked the Government of Uzbekistan for its support for Afghanistan, especially its support for the Northern Distribution Network, a critical transit route for our military supplies going into and out

of Afghanistan. We also discussed cooperation in a wide range of areas, including trade and investment, science and technology, human rights, security, and educational and parliamentary exchanges.

An important part of the ABCs is advancing U.S. business interests and identifying opportunities to increase trade and investment. General Motors is already one of the largest foreign investors in Uzbekistan, and we believe the country holds considerable potential. Coinciding with this round of ABCs, the American-Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce organized a business forum with 50 U.S. businesspeople representing 25 companies. During the event, Lockheed Martin and the Uzbekistani government announced they would move forward with negotiations on an air traffic management program, and we held frank exchanges with Uzbekistani officials on reforms to make Uzbekistan more attractive for trade and investment.

Human rights issues remain an essential part of our engagement with Uzbekistan. We continue to monitor the human rights situation and raise these issues with all levels of the government. During the consultations, we had a long and candid discussion of human rights issues, including religious freedom and trafficking in persons. I reiterated our strong belief that the surest path to long term stability and prosperity is through democratic reform, respect for human rights, and the rule of law. To be sure challenges remain, but we saw some signs of progress. The Government of Uzbekistan hosted the first-ever Civil Society Forum as part of the ABCs, to discuss the role of civil society in working with and supporting parliament in areas such as parliamentary oversight, promoting the rule of law, and ensuring the adherence to international human rights norms. Going forward, I am optimistic we can further expand the scope of issues and participation in this forum, with the goal of deepening and enhancing our engagement on these vital issues.

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