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Remarks by Assistant Secretary of State Philip H. Gordon

“The United States and Turkey: A View from the Obama Administration”

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Thank you, Strobe. It’s a great pleasure to be back at Brookings to deliver the sixth annual Sakip Sabanci Lecture. This is a homecoming of sorts for me and it’s great to see so many good friends here today. I’ve worked with Strobe both in the U.S. government, during the Clinton administration, and outside of it, during my tenure at Brookings. Throughout that time, he has been a constant source of wise counsel and clear-headed leadership. And though the Obama Administration has done its best to deplete the ranks of his staff, I am happy to see that Brookings under his direction is still thriving. Thank you for inviting me here today.

I’m especially pleased to be giving the Sabanci Lecture – an event I am proud to say I played a part in conceiving six years ago, to help foster a dialogue in Washington with and about Turkey. I’m happy to see you have maintained the tradition of including Sabanci University students and faculty by video link – something which makes this lecture a unique event – and I look forward to hearing

from colleagues in Istanbul today. I extend my best regards to Guler Sabanci who will be moderating the discussion from that end.

The growth and success of Sabanci University in Istanbul and this lecture in Washington are both testament to the vision of the man for whom they are named: Sakip Sabanci. A successful businessman and great philanthropist, his contributions to the intellectual, cultural, and economic life of his country were major forces behind Turkey's continued development and modernization. The Sabanci Lecture was established to highlight Turkey's increasing importance in world affairs and to promote Turkey's reform and integration into Europe – causes which Sakip Sabanci championed. I think the past several years have only confirmed the importance of this forum and of these issues, and that is precisely what I want to talk about today.

The topic that I wish to address is the relationship between the United States and Turkey – a dynamic and multi-faceted relationship that is beneficial to both our countries. This could hardly be a more important or timely subject and this is a particularly appropriate moment to reflect on it. Almost a year ago, President Obama traveled to Turkey during his first overseas trip. He went to deliver a message of partnership, saying “Turkey and the United States must stand together – and work together – to overcome the challenges of our time.” Turkey and the United States have been partners for decades and that partnership is as important

today as it has ever been. When Secretary Clinton went on her first trip to Europe, she too made a point of going to Turkey and she spoke of Turkey as a critical partner. The reasons why the President and the Secretary traveled to Turkey early in this administration's term are the reasons why I want to talk about Turkey today – because we believe that an engaged, active, and cooperative relationship with Turkey is an important interest of the United States. As the President put it when he met Prime Minister Erdogan at the White House in December, “given Turkey's history as a secular democratic state that respects the rule of law, but is also a majority Muslim nation, it plays a critical role ... in helping to shape mutual understanding and stability and peace not only in its neighborhood but around the world.”

Few countries play such a crucial role in such a diverse set of important areas. How many countries have borders with as diverse an array of countries as Turkey – Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. With its combination of strategic, economic, and cultural links, Turkey's influence touches such vital concerns of both our countries as the stability of the Middle East and relations with the broader Islamic world, relations with the Caucasus and Black Sea region, the transit of energy from the Caspian Basin to Europe, the security and development of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and the maintenance of strong ties to Europe and the Trans-Atlantic alliance. The geography that I have

just mentioned spans some of the most sensitive and significant parts of the globe and in every one of these areas U.S.-Turkish cooperation can be a force for progress.

This is also a timely moment to be addressing the U.S.-Turkish relationship because the dynamic nature of Turkey is attracting the world's attention in new ways. Domestically, debates about civil-military relations, and about the role of religion in society, have generated enormous interest abroad, and are followed closely in the United States. Economically, the last decade has seen Turkey display one of the highest rates of economic growth in the world – making Turkey one of the 20 largest global economies. In foreign affairs, Turkey has pursued an active foreign policy that has seen it interacting more intensively than ever with countries all across its neighborhood and beyond. Whenever and wherever I travel, which is a lot these days, one of the sentences I hear most often is “Ahmet Davutoglu was just here.”

Let us be frank: the dynamism we see in Turkey has raised questions in the minds of some observers about where Turkey is heading, and that too is a reason why this is a timely topic. It is worth addressing these questions squarely. Though phrased in different ways, the questions all eventually boil down to a single concern: Is Turkey turning away from the West? We do not see it that way. Turkey is an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic alliance and has been for decades.

Throughout that time it has always maintained strong relations with its neighbors to the west as well as its neighbors to the east. It is also reaching out in new ways. Turkey has always had multiple identities. But what binds the United States and Turkey together are shared interests, shared values, and a commitment to partnership. We believe that Turkey is and wants to remain anchored in the Euro-Atlantic community.

However, the fact that some have questioned the strength of our ties does highlight an important issue. The relationship, which was much easier to justify when we faced a shared Soviet threat, requires hard work and attention – on both sides. Today, the global challenges we face are more varied and diffuse than they were during the Cold War. In this new environment, those of us who believe in the relationship have to make a special effort to explain the enduring value of the partnership between the United States and Turkey. Indeed, that enduring value is something I want to underscore today. On nearly every vital issue we face, the United States benefits from having Turkey as an engaged and supportive partner. The reverse is also true: on nearly every issue that is critical to Turkey's future, the United States plays an enormously important role as a trusted friend and ally.

The United States and Turkey may no longer be fighting the Cold War or containing Iraq, but we are working closely together in a number of important ways. In Afghanistan, the United States and Turkey are working together to offer

a better life to the Afghan people by giving them the training and tools they need to build security and grow their economy. The United States and Turkey are working together closely on an action plan for joint assistance to the Afghan people. So far we have worked together with Turkey to develop key economic sectors in Wardak, and soon we plan to begin cooperative projects on infrastructure and health care in Kabul. Turkey is a major contributor of forces and expertise to the NATO mission in Afghanistan and its soldiers support the Afghan security forces' effort to secure the capital region of the country.

In Iraq, the Turkish government's commitment to high-level strategic cooperation with the government in Baghdad, as well as the improvement in its relations with Iraqi Kurds, have been positive contributions to Iraq's stabilization. The Iraqis just completed national elections with very robust turnout. Now the negotiations on forming a government are about to begin. It is important that all those with a stake in Iraq's path to stability allow the Iraqis to make their own decisions and encourage their Iraqi leaders to support a process that will lead to formation of an effective government. Iraq is now Turkey's second largest export market after Germany and the two countries' growing economic and commercial relationship is yet another reason it is in Turkey's interest to build a mutually beneficial relationship with Iraq. The United States and Turkey are also

cooperating closely on counter-terrorism, both to fight international terrorist groups like al-Qa'ida and to battle the PKK terrorist organization in the region.

In addition, Turkey is in the process of negotiating its accession to the European Union. While we recognize the decision is not ours, the United States continues to strongly support Turkish accession and urges Turkey to continue the democratic and political reforms necessary to complete the membership process. Further progress on promoting human rights and religious freedom, including important steps like reopening the Halki Seminary, will move Turkey's EU prospects forward. These reforms do more than further Turkey's EU accession bid – they also make Turkey an even more democratic and modern nation. The EU has its own part to play. It can help ensure that Turkey's progress continues by making clear that the door to the EU will be open to a Turkey that fulfills the requirements for EU membership. We remain convinced that a Turkey that meets EU membership criteria would be good for the EU, and that Turkey's effort to meet those criteria is good for Turkey.

Turkey is already playing a crucial role as a transit hub for energy to the rest of Europe – heating homes, lighting offices, and powering industry across the continent. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which came online in 2006, delivers one million barrels per day of petroleum and in 2007 the South Caucasus pipeline began bringing natural gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey. What these various

projects and a variety of proposed future initiatives show is that Turkey will be an integral part of meeting Europe's energy needs and providing for Europe's energy security.

While Turkey plays an active role on the world's stage as a European power, it has also been equally active in reaching out to its immediate neighbors. We are supportive of the Turkish government's concept of pursuing a policy of "zero problems" with its neighbors. This is a lofty and admirable goal. Bringing it to fruition, as everyone recognizes, will require difficult compromises and brave leadership.

Turkey's work with Armenia to normalize relations demonstrates both the promise and the difficulty of this enterprise. It holds out the prospect of positive transformative change in the region. The steps taken so far by both countries have shown vision and courage. Last October, in the presence of Secretary Clinton, the foreign ministers of France, Russia, and Switzerland, and the EU High Representative, the Turkish and Armenian Foreign Ministers signed protocols on normalizing and developing their relations. We believe that the implementation of these protocols – leading to diplomatic ties and open borders – would be a historic development that would benefit both countries and contribute to security and economic prosperity throughout the region. We appreciate the effort that has been made so far and urge both countries to ratify the protocols without preconditions

and as soon as possible, a point President Obama made on the phone to President Gul just two weeks ago. Let us not squander the historic progress already made. Ratification will bring valuable benefits to both Turkey and Armenia. All who are invested in the process must do their part to ensure that it moves forward.

Let me address in this context the resolution recently considered by the House Foreign Affairs Committee. As President Obama has said, our interest remains a full, frank, and just acknowledgement of the facts related to the events of 1915. But the best way to do that, we believe, is for the Armenian and Turkish people themselves to address this history as part of their efforts to build a future of shared peace and prosperity. As both Secretary Clinton and Secretary Gates have indicated, further Congressional action could impede progress on the normalization of relations and for that reason we oppose this resolution.

Another regional issue where Turkey can play a productive role is Cyprus. The United States continues to encourage the negotiations between the two communities under the auspices of the UN Secretary General. Turkey and Greece can also play constructive roles in helping the Cypriot parties toward a lasting solution to their differences. We welcome as well the positive dynamic in the relationship between the Turkish and Greek Prime Ministers – something that Greek Prime Minister Papandreou, who was just on this stage, spoke about when he was in Washington last week. We commend both Cypriot leaders for their

efforts and urge them to seize this window of opportunity to pursue negotiations leading to a settlement that reunifies Cyprus into a bi-zonal and bi-communal federation. Prime Minister Erdogan's recent and very constructive comments to the Cypriot press endorsing such a solution were very welcome and should help bring this outcome about.

These are all issues where Turkish leadership can be constructively applied to bring about a more peaceful and prosperous neighborhood. But it is important to remember that while the concept of "zero problems" with neighbors is a good one, it should not be pursued uncritically or at any price. As one of the world's leading states, Turkey has international responsibilities that extend beyond its immediate neighborhood. With respect to Iran, while the international community has sought to present a single, coordinated message to Iran's government, Turkey has at times sounded a different note. We know Turkey shares our concerns about the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran and is supportive of international efforts to reach a diplomatic solution to concerns with Iran's nuclear program. But we also believe it to be vitally important that we avoid actions that could potentially undermine or complicate our shared goal of a peaceful diplomatic resolution of this issue. We do not believe that Turkey's decision to abstain in the IAEA last November helped this goal and we hope that Turkey will join the broad group of

nations in the UN Security Council who are seeking to hold Iran to its IAEA and Security Council obligations.

Nor should improved relations with Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbors come at the expense of its historic allies such as Israel. We are hopeful that Turkey and Israel will work to reinforce these ties, even as Turkey develops its relationships with other states of the region. Turkey has long had good, even special, ties with Israel, and this has given Turkey an important opportunity to support peace in the Middle East – a cause that we all support.

We in the United States also pay close attention to developments within Turkey. Obviously, decisions about Turkey's political future can and must be made only by Turks within the context of Turkey's democratic system. But as a friend we care about the ongoing development of successful, open democracy in Turkey. The process of reform and modernization that is so vital to Turkey's future remains an important priority. Turkey's leaders recognize this and have taken bold steps to foster a more cohesive country. The Democratization Project, which aims to protect the rights of Kurds and other minority groups, is a major step in Turkish history. We applaud this initiative and encourage Turkey to continue to move forward. The success of this effort would go a long way in securing Turkish democracy, promoting reconciliation in Turkish society, as well as advancing Turkey's case for EU accession.

But Turkey must also be careful to ensure that its hard-won successes in building a secular state and strong democratic system are sustained into the future. Media freedom is one of the bedrocks of a democratic society and no actions should be taken that appear to undermine the ability of the press to do its vital job. The rule of law is another essential element of true democracy and for that reason it is important that investigations or court proceedings, especially on politically sensitive cases, must be open and fully respect Turkish law. The ability of political parties to function freely is crucial as well – in a democracy, political parties should not fear being closed down. The citizens of Turkey deserve nothing less. The development of democratic politics is one of modern Turkey's greatest achievements and dealing with difficult issues such as these in an exemplary manner will demonstrate to its people and to the world the strength and vitality of Turkish democracy.

Let me end where I began: by describing what it is that I believe binds the United States and Turkey together. When you consider all of the things I have talked about today – from Afghanistan to the Middle East to the European Union to energy security – it becomes clear that the alliance between the United States and Turkey is founded on a firm base of diverse and deep shared interests. And when one considers so many of the pressing challenges in the world today, it

becomes equally clear that U.S.-Turkish cooperation can be a force for immense progress.

But our relationship is based on much more than a calculation of interest – it is rooted in shared values and a shared vision. The United States and Turkey have made a choice to establish a partnership, and with that partnership comes important responsibilities on both sides. As two large countries with broad and diverse interests, we will not always see eye-to-eye on every issue but we must never forget the larger outlook that we share. A vision of a democratic Turkey, with a vibrant economy, integrated into Europe, and with good relations with its neighbors, is a vision that has motivated generations of Turkish leaders. It is a vision we share too, and we want to help Turkey achieve it.

Thank you.