Mr. President, disturbing

events taking place around the world

pose grave challenges to our U.S. strategic

interests. In Pakistan and India,

nuclear weapons are being developed,

assembled and tested, escalating an

arms race in the region. In Indonesia,

the collapse of the rupiah has caused

an economic and political crisis that

has reverberated throughout the international

financial markets. In China,

missile proliferation looms ominously

as evidence suggest that China conspired

to sell entire missiles to other

nations. And, in the former Yugoslavia

province of Kosovo, NATO defense ministers

have launched air exercises in an

effort to convince Serbian dictator

Slobodan Milosevic to halt his crackdown

on the separatist ethnic Albanians

in what has become Europe’s

most threatening security crisis since

the 1992–95 Bosnian war.

These are just some of the more

widely known international crises—requiring

U.S. vigilance to protect its

strategic interests. But there are lesser

known struggles in remote and distant

lands that have significant implications

for U.S. foreign policy. One of

these that deserves our attention is the

conflict in the Republic of Georgia and

its small break-away region of

Abkhazia. In the wake of the recent

armed insurrection in Abkahazia, U.S.

efforts to ensure Georgia achieves and

sustains political independence and

economic stability must be enhanced.

Of all the newly independent states

to emerges from the breakup of the

former Soviet Union, Georgia is considered

the most pro-western nascent democracy.

Since its independence in

1991, Georgia has faced and begun to

surmount formidable problems of economic

collapse, civil war, separatist

conflict, rampant crime, political infighting,

and human rights abuses.

Much to Russia’s chagrin, Georgian

President Eduard Shevardnadze has exerted

strong leadership by moving

Georgia away from Russia’s sphere of

influence. He has pursued an independent

foreign policy, ushered in democratic

and market reforms, and

achieved annual growth rates of 10 percent.

Moreover, Georgia is a NATO borderland

and at the entry point to the

emerging new ‘‘Silk Road’’ that traverses

Central Europe to China. This

commercial route will eventually encompass

oil and gas pipelines, roads,

railroads, bridges, airports and communications

networks. It will completely

alter the region’s economic and political

landscape. Because Georgia is situated

at a critical juncture in the corridor,

stability in this state, and its

neighbors, is essential. There are signs

of a Russian strategy to keep the region

frozen in instability, thereby discouraging

commercial investment, and

ultimately forcing nascent democracies

and their resources back into

Russia’s tacit control.

The small, breakaway region of

Abkhazia has been Russia’s best available

instrument to diminish Georgia’s

accomplishments and to imperil its remarkable

gains. Numerous and compelling

reports, including eye-witness accounts

by Georgian refugees, suggest

active Russian involvement in arming,

training and sustaining Abkhazia’s socalled

freedom fighters against Georgian

nationals.

In this context, I am very concerned

by indications of Russian activities and

covert aggression aimed at eroding

public support for President

Shevardnadze and his administration. I

regard Georgian independence from

Russian hegemony as a critical first

step toward stability in the region.

I strongly encourage the administration

to end its neglect of this situation

and become actively engaged. The administration

should state unequivocally

that it stands behind the leadership

of Georgian President Eduard

Shevardnadze; that the stability and

survival of an independent, democratic

Georgia is in our national interest; and

that the U.S. will consider all appropriate

measures necessary to help build

closer economic and political ties between

Georgia and the United States.

Finally, the administration should call

the Russians to task for engaging in

activities that would re-subordinate

Georgia to Moscow’s rule.

Moreover, Congress should move expeditiously

to secure enactment of the

‘‘Silk Road Strategy Act of 1997.’’ This

legislation is designed to promote sovereign

and independent democratic

governments; assist in the development

of infrastructure necessary for communications,

transportation, energy and

trade on an East-West axis; and promote

market-oriented principles and

practices among Central Asian and

South Caucasus countries. Passage

would help curb Russian hegemony in

the region and contain the spread

northward of anti-western Islamic extremism.

The legislation is designed to

assist all the nations of the region—Armenia,

Azerbaijan, Georgia,

Kazakhastan, Kyrgyzstan,

Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and

Uzbekistan.

Russia is again increasing its grip on

the region and working to keep these

countries from maintaining their independence.

Iran continues to exert influence

to foster anti-western attitudes.

It is critical that we help these countries

look westward to contain extremist

forces hostile to U.S. interests—and

this is a good place to start.