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From: Sullivan, Jacob J <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
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Below is the article I mentioned:

U.S. Revises Tack on Mideast Arms

Washington, Egypt Discuss Plan to Rid Region of Nuclear Weapons, in Effort to Steal Iran's Thunder at U.N. Conference

By JONATHAN WEISMAN, JAY SOLOMON and JOE LAURIA

The U.S. is negotiating with Egypt a proposal to make the Middle East a region free of nuclear weapons, as the U.S. seeks to prevent Iran from derailing a monthlong U.N. conference on nuclear nonproliferation that begins Monday.

U.S. officials familiar with the move call it an important step in assuring countries that Washington—criticized by some for its silence about Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal—will equitably address weapons proliferation across the region, as Iran seeks to shift focus away from its own nuclear program.

Washington also reassured Israel it won't foist a nuclear-free zone on the region until all parties agree to it and significant progress has been made on Mideast peace.

The U.N. conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which is held every five years, is expected to begin with a bang Monday with an address by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has condemned the West for its refusal to disarm and for tacitly accepting Israel's nuclear capability.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will follow the Iranian leader in the afternoon.

The U.N. talks come at a time when Iran is believed to be heading toward a nuclear capability and the U.S. and allies have been pressing for new, tough Security Council sanctions to curb Tehran's program.

"The Iranians are clearly intending to spoil the party," said a senior U.S. official involved in the nuclear diplomacy. The official highlighted the importance of raising Mideast nuclear-free zone issues.

The designation of the region as a zone free of weapons of mass destruction was a nonbinding agreement that emerged from a 1995 U.N. review of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, a 1970 pact to limit the spread of nuclear weapons. That 1995 agreement was pivotal because it won the indefinite extension of the treaty, but no action on the zone has been taken since.

Senior Obama administration officials said Friday the White House is willing to significantly advance a Mideast nuclear weapons-free zone, and would support a conference on the subject at a future date. U.S. officials said talks with Egypt would resume in New York in the coming month. Such a zone is envisaged to include Israel, the Arab states, Iran and Turkey.

"We've made a proposal to them [Egypt] that goes beyond what the U.S. has been willing to do before," said the senior U.S. official involved in the nuclear diplomacy.

U.S. officials stressed, however, that they didn't believe that would happen without first achieving major advances in Arab-Israeli peace talks.

"We are concerned that the conditions are not right unless all members of the region participate, which would be unlikely unless there is a comprehensive peace plan which is accepted," said Ellen Tauscher, undersecretary of state for arms

control and international security. She said the U.S. has also discussed the zone with the Arab League and other members of the Nonaligned Movement.

The diplomacy could raise new tensions between President Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if Washington is seen backing away from its commitment to Israel. Israel has voiced concerns that the U.N. conference could turn into an international forum to corner Israel. Mr. Netanyahu backed out of a nuclear-security conference in Washington in March due to such concerns.

An Israeli official said Friday that his government supports a Middle East freeze of WMD and nuclear weapons, but that "it should be the culmination of a process that begins with bilateral and individual peace agreements between all the countries in the region."

The U.S. and Israel have been locked in a monthslong spat over Mr. Obama's calls for a complete freeze in building new Jewish housing in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. U.S. officials have grown increasingly confident in recent days that ties between the U.S. and Israel have stabilized. Mrs. Clinton said Friday that the Mideast peace process will get on track next week, though not the U.S.-brokered direct talks involving Israeli and Palestinians that the Obama administration wants to see.

Egypt's latest proposal calls for Israel's disarmament "as soon as possible." It also called for Israel's nuclear program to be placed under the auspices of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s atomic watchdog. That proposal won't be accepted, U.S. officials said.

The Egyptian working paper demands NPT signatory states release "all information available to them on the nature and scope of Israeli nuclear facilities and activities, including information pertaining to previous nuclear transfers to Israel." U.S. officials indicated no such demands could be made on Israel.

Arms-control analysts familiar with the talks say the U.S. is likely to propose creating a U.N. envoy given the task of calling a conference of Middle East nations to press forward on the nuclear weapon-free zone.

"They are desperate to buy off Egyptian objections," said Henry Sokolski, executive director of the Non-Proliferation Education Center and a critic of the Obama administration's arms-control approach.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, an advocacy group, said the U.S. acceptance of a special envoy is a significant shift. A U.S. official refused to say whether the envoy proposal, first floated by Russia, was part of the U.S. offer.

The last NPT conference in 2005 ended in collapse. But U.S. officials said they have been laying the groundwork for this conference for nearly a year.

The White House wants rules to ensure that a country that withdraws from the treaty doesn't escape inspections and sanctions. They also want more power for U.N. inspectors and more backing for multinational facilities that could help nations develop peaceful nuclear power.

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