

Senator Urges Russia, U.S. to Rid Syria of Chemical Arms

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U.S. Senator Richard Lugar

U.S. Senator Richard Lugar, a veteran disarmament campaigner, has urged Russia and the United States to put aside their differences over Syria and work together to remove its stockpile of chemical weapons.

In Moscow for talks with Foreign Ministry and Defense Ministry officials, he said that the proposal was his own and had not been officially sanctioned and that the initial response from Russia had been cool.

But Lugar, a Republican from Indiana who is serving his final term, said the two former Cold War enemies could reap benefits in other areas, such as political and trade relations if they joined forces to reduce Syria's stockpiles.

"I've suggested that we ought to be thinking ahead, about two great powers with great respect for each other, and considering tackling the problem of the chemical weapons of Syria," Lugar, the senior Republican on the U.S. Foreign Relations Committee, told reporters at the

Ritz-Carlton hotel.

Referring to the results of efforts to rid the world of nuclear weapons as the Cold War drew to a close and after the Soviet collapse, he said: "It's set the stage for the development of trade ties."

Cooperation to reduce Syria's stockpile would mark a step forward for Russia and the United States after months of disagreement over the 17-month-old uprising against President Bashar Assad.

Moscow — which has a naval maintenance facility in Syria, sells arms to Syria and wants to keep a foothold in the Middle East — has repeatedly opposed efforts backed by Washington to tighten sanctions on Damascus and remove Assad from power.

Lugar, 80, said a senior Defense Ministry official had responded to his proposal on the elimination of chemical weapons by saying Syria had not signed an international convention intended to prevent the development and production of chemical arms and Russia and Washington did not own the arms.

The senator responded: "But it is also not very clear who in the course of events will own them. ... Everyone sees these weapons as having a potentially adverse influence on the course of peace and stability in the Middle East."

Syrian Foreign Ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi acknowledged last month that the country had chemical weapons, saying it would not use them to crush rebels but could use them against forces from outside the country.

Russian officials later said they had told the Syrian government that it was unacceptable to use or threaten to use chemical weapons.

Lugar visited Moscow on Monday and Tuesday to try to ensure the extension of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program, which he helped launch in 1991.

The project, intended to dismantle nuclear and chemical weapons in the former Soviet Union, was last ratified by Russia in 2008 and is due to expire in 2013.

Aides said it had resulted in the deactivation of more than 7,650 strategic warheads.

Lugar is also visiting Ukraine and Georgia. Aides said this could be his last working trip to Moscow, two decades after his first visit to try to reduce weapons stockpiles.

A 35-year veteran of the Senate and a leading foreign policy voice, he was defeated in the Indiana Republican primary in May.

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