Obama Brushed off Reid's Plea on Palestinian State

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Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid on two different occasions this year went to White House chief of staff Denis McDonough seeking a public commitment from President Barack Obama that he would veto any U.N. resolution calling for an independent Palestinian state.

Both times, Obama did nothing.

The requests from Reid came as he was trying to line up Democratic support for the Iran nuclear agreement. If Obama explicitly sided with Israel against the possible U.N. resolution, Reid’s thinking went, it would give nervous Democrats cover to back the Iran deal, which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vocally protested.

The repeated requests by Reid and Obama’s unwillingness to make a statement on the issue — confirmed by White House officials and Senate aides — highlights how wide the gulf between the Obama administration and Israeli government has become. It unfolded in the context of a personal relationship between Obama and Netanyahu that’s become highly toxic, poisoning U.S.-Israeli relations more widely.

The issue gained new significance Wednesday as Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas declared that his government was no longer bound by any agreements with Israel, including the Oslo peace accords and other settlements related to a possible two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Abbas made his comments during a high-profile speech at the United Nations General Assembly. Netanyahu is set to address the world body on Thursday. The Israeli leader has repeatedly asserted that he is willing to begin a new round of negotiations with Abbas with no preconditions, though Abbas has rejected this approach as unworkable.

U.S. policy has long been that American officials would veto any Security Council resolution calling for the established of a Palestinian state. That has continued during the Obama administration.

However, the White House was infuriated by Netanyahu’s address to a joint session of Congress in early March, during which the Israeli leader called Obama’s nuclear plan with Iran “a very bad deal.” Then, during his reelection campaign, Netanyahu said he would prevent any Palestinian state from ever coming into existence.

While Netanyahu backtracked on his remarks about Palestinian statehood, the White House said it was reassessing its position on blocking a Security Council resolution.

“The steps that the United States has taken at the United Nations had been predicated on this idea that the two-state solution is the best outcome,” White House spokesman Josh Earnest said on March 19. “Now our ally in these talks has said that they are no longer committed to that solution. That means we need to reevaluate our position in this matter.”

In June, Obama and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power declined to commit to blocking a Palestinian resolution.

Behnd the scenes, Reid — who is Obama’s most steadfast ally on Capitol Hill — first approached McDonough shortly after Earnest’s comments and asked that the president reverse his position.

McDonough said the White House “would look into it,” said a source close to the issue, but took no action.

On the second occasion, Reid, a strong supporter of Israel during his career in the Senate, believed such a declaration by Obama would help assuage nervous Senate Democrats as they weighed whether to back the president on the Iran nuclear deal. Reid was hopeful that he could block the Iran disapproval resolution, but he wanted to be certain he would have the votes in the face of fierce opposition from pro-Israeli groups.

Again, McDonough didn’t quite say no to Reid. He essentially said not yet.

But the answer essentially boiled down to no. The White House said it was opposed to the Palestinians going the U.N. route, but that Obama wouldn’t make a public declaration himself.

Reid’s office declined to comment for this story.

Though Obama finished with more votes for the Iran deal than the White House was expecting, administration officials claimed they were always confident that opponents in Congress wouldn’t succeed in blocking the agreement, despite rabid opposition to the accord from pro-Israel supporters on and off Capitol Hill. West Wing staffers never felt pressed enough for support to consider putting major chits on the table.

Coming out against a potential U.N. resolution calling for a Palestinian state would have required a scramble. Obama administration officials knew how much Netanyahu wanted the symbolic slapdown of the Palestinians, particularly in the run-up to the U.N. General Assembly meeting.

But they still have no plans to do so. Obama’s decision not to go public with the administration’s position, they say, isn’t meant to exert leverage over Netanyahu, as something to trade to get him back to the negotiating table with the Palestinians. Nor, they say, are they holding out on a presidential declaration to preserve a future olive branch to improve a relationship between Washington and Jerusalem.

“The United States has long been, is today, and will remain committed to achieving the peace that Palestinians and Israelis deserve: two states for two peoples, with a sovereign, viable and independent Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace and security with a Jewish and democratic Israel,” said National Security Council spokesman Ned Price. “We continue to believe that Palestinian efforts to pursue endorsements of statehood claims through the U.N. system outside of a negotiated settlement are counterproductive.”

Netanyahu is scheduled to meet with Obama in November, and both the White House and Hill Democrats are hoping for a “reset” between the two leaders.

“I think that’s American policy, and I think it would be helpful if the president would say that,” said New York Rep. Eliot Engel , ranking Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and one of the most pro-Israel supporters in Congress.

“But I am hoping that when Netanyahu comes to Washington in November, that the two of them will have a meeting of minds, because they have to. We cannot pretend that our interests are not helped if Israel’s interests are also helped.”