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EDITORIAL

Let My Textiles Go

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It sure was nice to see the United States trade representative, Robert Zoellick, joining his Israeli and Egyptian counterparts this week in signing a historic pact to increase economic cooperation between those two Middle Eastern countries. The agreement gives Egypt duty-free access to some parts of the United States textile market if those products include some Israeli content. So it forces Egypt and Israel to work together.

Congress voted to authorize this arrangement back in 1996, but the three sides dawdled for eight years before signing it. At first, the Israelis complicated things by alienating the Arab world with military incursions against the Palestinians. The Egyptians, of course, were in a snit about said incursions. Then, when the two sides finally decided to sign the pact earlier this year, the Americans added their own obstacle. The Bush administration at first refused to go along, citing concerns that the proposed arrangements could hurt the eternally coddled textile and apparel companies in the United States.

But finally, after cutting back the number of Egyptian special trade zones that can take advantage of the agreement, the United States approved the deal, which establishes free-trade areas in Cairo, Alexandria and the Suez Canal zone. Egypt and Israel will soon begin shipping cotton underwear, knit shirts and pants to America, duty-free. The pact's signing was accompanied by the ubiquitous protests from the usual hard-liners in Cairo, voicing the usual complaints about having to work with the Zionists. We hope that they'll be drowned out when Egyptian workers see their exports - and incomes - increase. It's a small step for Target and Victoria's Secret, but potentially a giant step toward peace in our time.