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Interview with Rakesh Sood

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Summary:

Rakesh Sood is a former Indian diplomat. He served as a subject matter expert for the Indian delegation to ACRS.

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Oral history interview conducted by Hanna Notte on Zoom on December 14, 2020

Hanna Notte

All right, this is the 14th of December 2020, and the ACRS oral history interview with Ambassador Rakesh Sood, thank you for doing this and being with us. I want to start with a rather broad question to set the scene. Please explain to us the extent and nature of your involvement in the ACRS process, and maybe more broadly, how India was involved in this process?

Rakesh Sood

India formally established full diplomatic relations with Israel in the beginning of 1992. The decision reflected the changing political realities not just in the Middle East, or West Asia, but also more broadly the end of the Cold War and, of course, the Madrid Agreement. And I think, as a result, it was decided that while we had had a relationship with Israel, Israel had had a small representative office in Mumbai for many decades, but we had not had full-fledged embassies. So in January of 1992, both governments decided that, given the changes that were taking place, both geopolitically, as well as in the region, and the fact that a very ambitious peace process with multiple bilateral tracks and multilateral tracks was beginning, the time was opportune for establishing full diplomatic relations between India and Israel. As a result, we exchanged ambassadors and set up embassies. That was the first decision.

Once that happened, India was invited to join some of the multilateral tracks, and that included the ACRS track. At that time, I was the equivalent of what you would call Assistant Secretary in the US system, or I was Joint Secretary, as we call it, Joint Secretary looking after the Disarmament and International Security Affairs Division in the Foreign Ministry. I had been engaged previously in Geneva with multilateral negotiations, in the Conference on Disarmament on a whole range of issues. And after that, I was also posted in Islamabad in Pakistan, where I was also engaged with India-Pakistan talks involving confidence building measures. So as a result of that, when we exchanged ambassadors, and we joined the ACRS process, I was deputed to represent India as the expert, I was accompanied by my colleague from the West Asia division, the territorial division that looked after the countries of that region. And since ACRS was the subject matter, I provided the subject expertise. And as it happened, since I continued to hold the same position for nearly a decade or so in Delhi, I had a fairly long period of exchanges with the delegations involved in the ACRS process.

Hanna Notte

Great, thank you for setting the scene. And what objectives did India pursue in joining that process?

Rakesh Sood

Well, I think what is important to recall is that India had traditionally enjoyed strong ties with the Arab states in the region. Egypt has been a long-standing member of the non-aligned movement, Ambassador Fahmy was a very close personal friend because we had worked together in Geneva and in New York during the mid-80s when he was also posted in Geneva dealing with the Conference on Disarmament and subsequently in New York, with the Egyptian mission. And when I was in Geneva, I had overlapped with him. And then subsequently, because I also used to go to New York to deal with the First committee of the UN General Assembly that deals with disarmament and arms control and non-proliferation issues, we had been able to continue our relationship. So we were old colleagues who also enjoyed a warm personal relationship, which I must say continues to date. In addition, there were a number of other colleagues from the region, Arab colleagues, who I had known earlier, in New York or in Geneva, given the multilateral setting in which I was working, and many of them were also involved in the ACRS process because many of them had returned to headquarters and naturally they brought in the necessary subject expertise.

On the Israeli side, Israel was not yet a member of the Conference on Disarmament. So I did not have that much of an engagement or interaction with the Israelis. That interaction began when I joined the ACRS process, but very quickly, again, it just so transpired that with Eli Levite, I developed a close personal relationship which has continued to this day, and we have cooperated on a number of projects, even after both of us have left government, and we continue to meet, well, we have not this year, but in earlier years, we have continued to engage and meet and have an occasional conversation from time to time on different issues. So as I said, diplomatic exchanges between India and Israel had been somewhat lacking in the past, this was also an opportunity for me and largely for India to make up for lost time in our relationship with Israel. And the fact that this was going to be an important relationship, I think nobody really knew at that time, that Israel-India relationship would end up over the years to become such a vital and such a robust relationship spanning a wide range of political, economic, cultural, and people to people contacts as it has emerged. And I would like to think that those were among the first diplomatic interactions between the two countries that we were engaging in.

Hanna Notte

That's great, thank you for that. And I want to ask you, when India was invited to join the process, and you made your way to the first plenary, and having an intimate understanding of the arms control and security-related challenges and issues in the region, what were your personal expectations for this process and how far it could go and what could be achieved?

Rakesh Sood

I was not the regional expert, my expertise was more having seen what had happened in the CSCE, in the East-West context and having been involved with India-Pakistan confidence building measures. And therefore, one thing that I was very clear about in my own mind, was that the long-troubled history of the countries in the region - was going to determine the pace and the comfort level at which things would move forward. And I kept spelling that out. I'm afraid that there were many of my Western colleagues who felt somewhat more ambitious, and they were perhaps guided by the fact that the Cold War had ended and therefore the world was now going to embark on a single political kind of track. We do know that at that time, there was the sense of a kind of hubris that existed among a number of Western thinkers. That also came through in some of the exchanges that took place. My approach somehow or the other was always a little more cautious in terms of wanting to understand how the people in the region felt about it. What were their concerns? What were their perceptions? Because ultimately, it is those differences that we need to bridge. And that is where trust needs to be built. So, for me, I was not prescriptive, but more in terms of wanting to learn, wanting to listen and wanting to understand where the Israelis and the Arab delegations were coming from. Not so much in terms of a list of menus being prescribed by the Russians or the Americans or the Canadians or the Europeans.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that. And I want to build on what you just said, with a follow up question: It appears that at the beginning of the process, it was decided to take a somewhat educational approach, bringing outside experts to talk about confidence building measures in the East-West theatre during the Cold War, the Helsinki process. How did you witness that approach? Did you find it instructive and useful? And how was it perceived by the regionals, to the extent that you can say?

Rakesh Sood

Yeah, I think as somebody who had already been engaged with the arms control, non-proliferation, etc. since 1986, I was reasonably familiar with the history of how it had evolved. I was also acutely conscious as to how my own region, namely South Asia, India, Pakistan, was so different. And since I had been engaged with similar confidence building measure dialogues in my own region, I was aware of both the Western background and the Western narrative, because at this time, what we heard about at the end of the Cold War was a Western narrative. My own experience did not necessarily conform to the Western narrative. And I think that is where perhaps listening to the experiences on the East-West was perhaps useful for those who had

not had similar in-depth experience- both region-specific, as well as the East-West context. And for them, it was certainly useful to kick off the process. It would have been more useful if it had also been grounded in the political realities that had shaped the process of the Ostpolitik and the East-West rapprochement, the first beginnings of the CSCE that kick-started subsequent developments that gave it momentum.

Hanna Notte

That's very clear. Thank you. I want to come back to the geopolitical context with one last question. The United States and Russia were the co-gavel holders of the process, though, it then unfolded in a context where the Cold War had ended, and you arguably had this structural imbalance emerging. Did you feel that mattered for the process? And how did you generally see the role of the Russian Federation in the process?

Rakesh Sood

I think it was important to have co-chairs as US and Russia. But it was also quite clear that the Americans pulled more weight than the Russians, in terms of trying to shape the process. And I think that was more a reflection of the fact that Russia had just newly emerged after an extremely tumultuous political process in which the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, emerging in Russia as the successor state, but the wounds of that disintegration were still pretty raw.

Hanna Notte

Okay, great. I want to come back to India's participation in the process. So, your delegation, you included, can you describe it a little more in what capacity and in what role you participated? So you participated as outsiders in the process, did that mean participation both in the plenaries, and in the working groups within the operational basket on the confidence building measures? And can you talk a little bit about what that entailed? Did you mostly give advice to regional parties? Or, you know, how did it look like?

Rakesh Sood

Given the fact that people like Bob Einhorn - again, somebody who I've known for decades and we've cooperated together, even in our post government careers and work together still on nuclear confidence building and nuclear stability measures - I was often invited to share my own experiences (not my perceptions of the Western confidence building measures, because there my experience and my knowledge would be secondhand), but in terms of India-Pakistan. So I would often just put those out on the table, the fact that we had successfully concluded some modest measures between India and Pakistan, and this was an exercise that had begun only very recently was, shall I say, was a matter of some satisfaction and encouragement. But at the same time, there were other matters of concern in the India-Pakistan relationship, which still caused a lot of difficulty and remain major issues in our foreign policy for both countries even today. Therefore, my approach was merely to lay out my own experiences and try and answer any questions as to the background, because not everybody in that room would be familiar with the historical and the political context between India and Pakistan. And I would try to explain that a little, the processes, the decision making, who would take the call, how did we anticipate things, how to handle media, how to handle expectations, how to handle implementation, how important it was that differences that would come up in the implementation of CBMs could not be allowed to vitiate the process, but actually find a channel for resolution where those differences could be addressed, right at the outset itself, without these festering, when countries would start expressing those differences in public through media stories citing unattributed sources. Of course, this was before the age of social media, but nonetheless, the kind of media attention that India-Pakistan talks attracted in both countries, we would have something like 20-30 journalists sort of outside crowding the room, wherever we were meeting, this is in the India-Pakistan context. And that also put a lot of pressure on the negotiators in terms of how to present the outcome.

And in many cases, the outcomes were small baby steps. And in a multilateral setting, it was bound to be even more modest, which is quite clear. Having seen multilateral negotiations from up close, both in Geneva and in New York, I was

acutely conscious of the fact that progress in our multilateral track was going to be exceedingly slow, piecemeal, modest, and halting. And yet, given the long history of the conflict in the region, it was something that was bound to attract a huge amount of media attention. It was very important, therefore, to manage expectations. And that was the kind of experience, that was the kind of exchanges that I would invariably have, whenever I was asked to.

Hanna Notte

That's great. And I want to come in on this notion of managing expectations: I take it very well that you were not brought into the process as an expert on the region. But nonetheless, this multilateral track, and the ACRS working group within that, happened in a broader regional context, where we also had the so-called bilateral track coming out of the Madrid conference and Israel negotiating bilaterally with the Palestinians and other Arab states. And it appears from my conversations so far that different regional delegations had different expectations or understandings as to how the bilateral track would relate to the multilateral track. How did you view that, you know, problem-set at the time and what was your advice on that matter?

Rakesh Sood

My assessment, that I shared with my colleagues, was always that the bilateral track would be the one that would shape the nature of conversation on the multilateral. The multilateral track would always be subservient to the developments of the bilateral track. And that was something that I was totally convinced about. And in my personal interactions, as I developed closer personal relationships with some of the key members and would engage them in personal chats, they would completely endorse this assessment. And they would say that, "Look, okay, we don't think very much is going to happen in this round. You know, we've been having this particular difficulty on the bilateral track."

Coming from the region, they were very closely and intimately involved on the bilateral processes itself. And somebody like Nabil Fahmy, somebody like Eli Levite, while they had expertise on the security dimension, they were also involved in looking at progress across the board, including in the bilateral tracks. So for them, it was a full time engagement. And they would often tell me that they're running into this or that kind of a difficulty. And, they didn't necessarily think that this was an appropriate time, but then so much time had passed, and it's important to retain the momentum, and all of that. So various factors would come into play. And a number of times, we would have a meeting; the meeting would open and the meeting would then break up to allow time for bilateral discussions. And then - because it was decided, through private consultations, that not much is going to be achieved, you know, one or the other delegation would request the co-chairs, that perhaps, instead of engaging in a formal plenary, it may be better to give time to delegations to consult, because there were a number of issues. So accordingly, the plenary would be suspended, delegations will be given time to consult. Often these consultations would take place among the key delegations, so the larger delegations would be obviously the ones from the region because they were the ones who would be doing the heavy lifting - and so we would meet again, the following day in the afternoon, to close the plenary. It was important to show that there was a certain momentum behind the multilateral process. But it was a subsidiary role in the multilateral process to the bilateral tracks.

Hanna Notte

That's very clear. Thank you. Can I ask you...

Rakesh Sood

One thing, sorry. One thing I should add here is that, you see, the other important issue is that decision making in any of these kinds of settings is always a matter of consensus. So clearly, everybody, every delegation has to be on board. And if there was a sense that perhaps one delegation was not on board, then obviously, you couldn't move things forward. So that given the consensus rule, it becomes absolutely vital to accept the reality of the bilateral tracks assuming primacy.

Hanna Notte

Yeah, that's very clear. Do you have another 10-15 minutes? I do have a few questions left.

Rakesh Sood

Okay, I'll try and keep it short.

Hanna Notte

Okay. I do want to come to the issue of arms control in particular. Within the ACRS discussions, we understand that the major stumbling block in the process was on the questions of sequencing, or timing, or the nature of discussing structural arms control. And there, we had a particular disagreement between Egypt and Israel. And at some point in the process, a decision was taken to split the issues into two baskets: the conceptual basket, and the operational basket. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that, the decision to proceed that way, how you viewed that issue, and whether you felt throughout participating in this process, that that major discrepancy, or disagreement, sort of remained static over time, or whether you felt that there could have been an opportunity to bridge the gap between Israel and some of the Arab delegations on that particular issue?

Rakesh Sood

I think that, you know, the arms control approach in the East-West context, because of the notion of parity, always suffered from the disadvantage of looking at arms control in a dimension of bean counting. And so, therefore, to talk about, "How many tanks do you have?" and "How many tanks do I have?" and so we cut our number of tanks by x, so that we now have minus x and this kind of thing; it doesn't exist anywhere else. So obviously, trying to translate those experiences of a bean counting approach into a complex geographical reality like the Middle East, was an exercise that did not have much of a future. So it was quite natural that it be broken up into conceptual and operational baskets. There is no prescriptive textbook of confidence building that is going to apply uniformly. Israel had its own security concerns; it felt that it had multiple potential adversaries, and it had to deal with its relationship with these multiple potential adversaries on bilateral tracks. I was asked to talk about some of the kind of ideas that we had floated in the India-Pakistan context - not all the ideas that we had floated in the India-Pakistan context necessarily saw the light of day between India and Pakistan either, I'm not even suggesting that. But a simple thing like exchanges of military bands. I still remember, people were extremely curious, "What the hell does that mean? Exchange of military bands, why should it matter?" And I said, "Well, you know, most of these regiments, most of these military things, they have their own traditions of music and marching to music." And so, people found that extremely intriguing and it was something different. Or things like sports. I mean, you know, militaries often have their own sports teams. They have some common sports, and they could perhaps engage in some kind of sporting events where they would meet in a totally different kind of a setting. Now, these kinds of ideas are different. It would not occur to the US-Russian in the East-West context. But it led to some interesting conversations in countries of the region.

Hanna Notte

That's great, thank you for that. That's actually something also none of the other interviews have so far sort of brought up. I do want to come back, though, to the question of arms control disarmament, and whether you, how you perceived the disagreement, and whether you ever felt, throughout the process, that a gap could be bridged here? Whether it was fairly clear to you, as the more outside observer, that this was ultimately going to be a stumbling block?

Rakesh Sood

Well, all gaps have to be bridged. I mean, that's part of the process. But you have to have a certain degree of patience, a certain degree of understanding and a certain degree of appreciation of the complexities of the process. And don't forget, there was an 800-pound gorilla in the room, which nobody wanted to talk about, and certainly not in that multilateral setting. And that is the existence of Israel's nuclear capability. But that's an integral part of Israel's security. All other countries were party to the NPT. And there were moves that were taking place at the same time with regard to the indefinite non-conditional extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that happened in 1995. And you know, the ACRS process was not taking place in isolation from the larger political events that were taking place in the field of disarmament, arms control and international security. Now for Israel never having acknowledged its

nuclear capabilities in any explicit form, this was obviously not a subject for discussion in the process. But does that mean that it did not exist in the security calculus of the countries of the region? Of course it did. So when you talk of reaching agreements, you know, you have to understand that there are certain constraints. Now, I can fully understand that Israel did not want to bring in any nuclear dimension and it was not part of the agenda. But then you have to understand that it also imposes a constraint that in terms of reaching an agreement, you have to reach that agreement while working around that 800-pound gorilla in the room.

Hanna Notte

Yeah, thank you for that. That's very clear. I want to ask you a slightly different question. I mean, this was an unprecedented multilateral effort in the early '90s. How did you perceive the atmospherics of the process, including at a personal level, observing how the Israeli delegation engaged with some of the Arab delegations, how outside delegations like the Indian one interacted with others, including the Israeli delegation? I mean, you noted at the beginning that diplomatic relations had only been established quite recently. Can you talk a little to the atmospherics of the process?

Rakesh Sood

The diplomatic relations that I was talking about was between India and Israel. We had had diplomatic relations with the other Arab countries for a long time with long standing embassies in Cairo, in Jordan and, you know, in Damascus, and so on, and all the other Arab states that were represented there, in Turkey, and so on. So it is only with regard to Israel, that we established embassies in Tel Aviv and in Delhi, in 1992. But as I mentioned to you the bilateral relationship between India and Israel has progressed extremely satisfactorily. We were finding a lot of areas of common interest in terms of agriculture, drip irrigation, trade, and, you know, a host of other things. And I think that helped build up a certain relationship. Now, between the Israeli and the Arab delegations, I think there were some extremely good relationships that I observed. People did develop a lot of personal relationships. And as I mentioned, I mean, both with Eli Levite on the Israeli side, as well as with Nabil Fahmy, for example, on the Egyptian side, I still keep in touch and we are now talking more than 25 years later.

Hanna Notte

Very good. And I want to conclude with a big question, or set of two questions, which is now as an arms control practitioner, who has been now working in this field for decades, if you reflect back 30 years ago on ACRS, what were some of the successes and failures of the process? And related to that, as we think about regional security and arms control in the Middle East going forward, in the current environment, whether it's within the effort on a WMD-free zone and the UN-mandated process, or any other kind of process, what are some of the lessons that ACRS can teach us that we might want to heed as we think about a new process going forward?

Rakesh Sood

This was the unipolar moment — so the US's ability to be able to bring together such a multiplicity of actors was in evidence. Would that be possible today, if you wanted to kick start a process like that? I very much doubt it. Given the disarray among the major powers of the world, I think it would be very difficult to imagine. So I would say that the success of the process was the fact that you had a multiplicity of actors present in the same room. And that was because of a unique political, geopolitical moment, or the unipolarity and the willingness on the part of the United States to take that initiative, to invest that political effort. After all, it did require a political effort on the part of the US to be able to reach out to so many players and persuade the leaderships to join in the exercise. That is a political investment that the leaders make. Now, having said that, the failure was that perhaps we were not sensitive enough to the fundamental dynamics that would govern the actual achievements of the process, and when those dynamics altered, the process itself faltered. That is the lesson that one needs to keep in mind. In 1995, what happened in the NPT Conference? As you know, Israel is not a party to the NPT. Now, but in the NPT Conference, the US was extremely keen — as were a number of other countries, including Russia, and UK and France and China and so on — that the NPT be

extended indefinitely and unconditionally. The NPT had originally been designed as a treaty with a 25-year period, and that decision about the future of the NPT was due to be taken in 1995. And so that particular review conference became extremely important.

So there were a number of proposals, and some proposals called for a rollover of the treaty, that means extending it by another 25 years; some proposals, even less, and so on. And eventually, there was a package that was worked out. Now an integral part of that package that was worked out, was the decision on the WMD-free zone in the region, in the Middle East. For those who have followed the NPT debate, they know how crucial that negotiation was in the NPT setting for the Arab states parties to the NPT to lend their support to the indefinite and unconditional extension of the NPT. And for those of our listeners, who have followed the NPT discussions, they know how difficult any movement on that particular decision has been. Subsequent review conferences of the Non-Proliferation Treaty have often floundered on that issue and have failed to reach consensus. Now, does that show how things interlock together and how complicated this interlocking process is? Now, in a different world, had there been forward movement on the weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone in the Middle East, I'm 100% certain we would have seen considerably much more progress on the ACRS, in whatever incarnation the ACRS had been reinvented.

Hanna Notte

Okay. Thank you very much. Thank you very much for your time.

[End of transcript]