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Oral History Interview with Adolfo Taylhardat

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Adolfo Taylhardat

Venezuela

Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco by phone on 20 February 2017

Michal Onderco:

Thank you very much, again, for accepting the invitation and I want to start by asking you about the sort of situation in Venezuela prior to the conference. What were the main discussions that were going on within the Venezuelan policy circles about the conference?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

As you know, among the non-nuclear powers -- non-nuclear countries and the Non-Aligned, there was a general view that the nuclear countries have not honored the commitments they have assumed under the NPT. Concretely under the preamble of the NPT. This issue was constantly expressed by the non-nuclear countries and the non-aligned in different fora. Particularly in the Conference of Disarmament, in the Review Conferences, and also in the First Committee of the U.N. [General Assembly]. Venezuela was one of the countries that maintained this position and very frequently claimed that the nuclear countries had not complied with their commitments. As the Review and Extension Conference was approaching, the United States launched the idea of indefinite expansion of the NPT. I, myself, considered that this was, like, even a blank cheque to the nuclear weapon states. Because that way they would not be pressed by the non-nuclear countries to comply with their commitments. That led me to conceive an intermediate position in the sense that I proposed that instead of extending the treaty indefinitely, it could be extended for 25 years. Twenty-five years is the time according to Paragraph 2 of Article 8 of the treaty when the issue of extending or not extending the treaty should be considered.

In fact, the 1995 conference was held after the 25th year of entering into force of the treaty. Besides extending the treaty for only 25 years, I proposed that we should continue with the five years review, that are also foreseen in the NPT. This opinion, this position, I had expressed at the Conference on Disarmament on various countries sympathize with it. But also, the Venezuelan government agreed to it and authorized me to promote it as a Venezuelan official proposal, and to take it to the Review and Extension conference in 1995.

Michal Onderco:

What did you envision to happen after those 25 years?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, it was a vision that another conference should be held to decide whether the treaty would continue in force or should be discarded.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah, how was your proposal different from, for example, the proposal of countries like Mexico who supported a rolling extension of the treaty?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, several countries of course, prefer to maintain the present situation in this. What you meant is what makes Mexico favor the rolling?

Michal Onderco:

Yes.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, in fact, my position, my proposal was a rollover of the treaty every 25 years.

Michal Onderco:

There were two basic proposals. One was sort of -- it was called a positive proposal, so every 25 years there would have to be an extension to continue. Or there was a negative proposal which said every 25-year the treaty would draw over unless there would be a decision to stop it. And which one was the one that you preferred?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, the second one, in fact, that's -- the treaty would remain in force for 25 more years and on the 25th year, there could be a decision to --

Michal Onderco:

Stop it?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

I'm trying to find the right word. The treaty would not continue to be enforced.

Michal Onderco:

Oh okay. Did you inform the United States about this policy? Or did you discuss this policy with the United States?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

No, it was a public -- it was a public position and in fact, although there was no formal proposal, it was known as the Venezuelan proposal. I mean, in the sense that -- it was not formalized in the sense that it had not been presented and submitted in writing. But publicly in the preparatory meetings for the Review and Extension Conference I voiced this proposal. And also in my interventions during the Review and Extension Conference.

Michal Onderco:

I will come back to this and I will come back to the conference in a second. But I want to ask two more things. One is before the Conference, the U.S. government has approached many countries trying to persuade them to convert to the indefinite extension.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

Did that happen to Venezuela as well?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes, well in fact, the ultimate result of the Venezuelan proposal was due to the ferocious pressure that the United States exerted on the Venezuelan government. Both through the Venezuelan embassy in Washington and also on the foreign ministry in Caracas. But not only the United States, there was also pressures being made by Canada and Australia on the Venezuelan government.

Michal Onderco:

And what sort of pressure was this? Was this a threat to cut the aid or -- what sort of pressure? What sort of threats were made? What kind of pressure was applied?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, I mean, there was -- there were no threats, of course. But the presented reason memoranda to the Venezuelan government indicated that the United States submitted this proposal. And in fact, there was at a certain moment the Venezuelan government considered that to continue maintaining the Venezuelan proposal would impair the Venezuelan relations with the United States, which indicated that there was a suggestion in that sense by the United States on the Venezuelan government.

Michal Onderco:

I will come back to this point when we talk about the conference. I want to ask one more thing.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

Shortly before the conference, it emerged that there was a clandestine nuclear program in Iraq.

And in some countries, it eroded the trust in the NPT regime. Did Venezuela consider NPT regime as being trustworthy before the conference?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, I don't think that the -- that the events in Iraq really had an influence on the conference nor on the Venezuelan position with regards to the NPT Review and Extension Conference. I mean there were, of course, indications or assurances by the United States that there was an Iraqi nuclear program. I must say that I personally never believed that, as was afterwards demonstrated. But in the Venezuelan position, this situation in Iraq did not have any influence.

Michal Onderco:

Before the conference you personally were also part of the PPNN.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes. Yes, I was member of the PPNN.

Michal Onderco:

Can you tell me more about your cooperation in the PPNN and about how that influenced your view of the NPT?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, my colleagues in the PPNN knew what was my position. Of course, none of them shared it, but I had explained them the content of the proposal by Venezuela. There was no reaction to the Venezuelan proposal in the sense that none of the other members of the PPNN indicated any view in favor or against the Venezuelan proposal.

Michal Onderco:

But did you feel that people within PPNN were mainly interested in getting NPT extended indefinitely?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes. Yes. That is my impression. Most of the other PPNN members were from Europe and the United States. I mean, the member countries of the PPNN were mostly European countries that in the end tacitly share the views of the United States, the proposal by the United States.

Michal Onderco:

And did you ever feel any sort of discrimination because you didn't share that?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

No, not at all. Absolutely no. I mean, in PPNN -- in the PPNN every member had freedom to express his view. But I never felt any kind of discrimination from any of my colleagues in the PPNN.

Michal Onderco:

What was your impression of the PrepComs? Did you think that the indefinite extension is going to be successful? Or did you suspect that it may actually end up a different result?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, how should I put? In the PrepComs, there were the two main positions on the extension of the treaty. I mean, the United States and the countries that shared the U.S. position, and the rest of countries non-nuclear and non-aligned, which did not share that view. I mean, which continued to consider that the nuclear countries had not complied with their commitments.

Michal Onderco:

And whom did you see as most likely to be your allies at the conference? Did you, for example, expect that you would find a lot of common ground with other non-aligned countries?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

I wouldn't say there were any allies. There were countries, which share the Venezuelan position, but as it happens in any international conference, each country has the right to, let me try to find the correct word, to share the views of another country. I mean it's normal that when a proposal is submitted in any international conference there are -- there are all the countries, all the governments that may share that view. But that doesn't mean that there was any kind of alliance.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah. Let me move now towards the conference itself. And I want to start by asking, at the start of the conference, how did you see the chances of your position?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, I continued to promote the Venezuelan proposal. And there was expectation to know what would happen in the Bandung Non-Aligned conference that was going to be held in those days. And as it's well known, there was an original proposal submitted to the Non-aligned in which there was a paragraph referring to the Venezuelan proposal. But this paragraph was not maintained. I mean, it was not sustained. In the final paper issued by the Bandung conference, there was no mention of the Venezuelan proposal. After that, I realized that there was no future for the Venezuelan proposal. And I, myself, told the Venezuelan government that we should not continue promoting the Venezuelan proposal and that we should try to discreetly, slowly, gradually withdraw the Venezuelan proposal.

Michal Onderco:

Why wasn't the Venezuelan proposal mentioned in the NAM statement?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, there was no support for it. There was no support for it. And that meant that the proposal, it don't have any future.

Michal Onderco:

Were there any countries who you expected to support it and who later decided not to support it?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, there were some countries, as I told you, had indicated that they agreed with the proposal, the rollover proposal by Venezuela. In Bandung, there was a strong majority of countries in favor of the maintaining of the previous status of the conference. In fact, there were countries in the non-aligned countries, which submitted some of their own proposals. There was Mexico, South Africa. And many non-aligned countries, which maintained a different position to that of the United States.

Michal Onderco:

How did you -- how did you see the proposals of South Africa?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

They had their own view. They had their own proposal. They were in favor of maintaining the current -- the status of the conference -- of the NPT [unintelligible]. That is to say to maintain the same situation and they did not share the indefinite extension.

Michal Onderco:

They didn't share the indefinite extension?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, Mexico and South Africa and many non-aligned countries did not share the U.S. proposal for the indefinite extension. They were -- they were ready to maintain the same status, as before the Review and Extension Conference.

Michal Onderco:

I agree with you that after the 4th PrepCom, the South African delegation maintained a position as you just outlined. But then it opened the conference by saying it will support the indefinite extension, and it came up with a proposal for the principles and objectives. How did you see that?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, as I said, every country is free to express his views, maintain his position. But in the non-aligned Bandung conference, South Africa submitted a proposal. But the situation was that the non-aligned Mexico, South Africa submitted a different texts at the Review and Extension Conference. In addition to that, the proposal by the United States that was filed by Canada.

Michal Onderco:

And what did you think about the principles and objectives?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

What did I think about what?

Michal Onderco:

Principles and objectives document that was submitted by South Africa.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

I must confess that right now I don't remember exactly what was the situation with South Africa. I mean, I don't remember that they had expressly said that they would support the indefinite extension. My memory is that they were not supporting the indefinite extension and that they were ready to maintain the current status of the treaty at the time before the Review and Extension Conference.

Michal Onderco:

Did you see a big difference between how countries, including the non-aligned countries, behaved in open discussions and how they behaved in closed discussions?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, most of interventions were in favor of maintaining the status of the NPT. In the end, of course, many countries joined the U.S. proposal; also Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean joined the U.S. proposal.

Michal Onderco:

And why do you think they joined the U.S. proposal?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

That was the situation, it was at the end of the conference. There were a number of countries that had already -- that were already co-sponsoring the U.S. proposal.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah. Was Venezuela also approached and asked to co-sponsor?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, of course. The -- in the -- in the pressures that were being exerted over the Venezuelan government. The request was that Venezuela would sponsor the U.S. proposal and this proposal -- I mean, this pressure was -- did have success at the very end of the -- of the conference. Just before the time for submitting drafts for solutions approached and the Venezuelan government, on the May 5 instructed the Venezuelan Permanent Mission in New York to sign the co-sponsoring of the of the Canadian text.

Michal Onderco:

At some point during the conference, you were withdrawn from delegation?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes, you see, after the instructions were given not directly to me, but to the Venezuelan Permanent Mission in New York to proceed to co-sponsor the Canadian text. I decided to relinquish my position as the head of the Venezuelan delegation to the conference. I considered this was -- how should I put it? I was put in a very awkward position, very uncomfortable position. Because I have recommended the Venezuelan government -- I mean, I have realized - I was convinced already that the Venezuelan proposal did not have any future, but that we should not co-sponsor. We should withdraw from the Venezuelan position gradually in order not to put Venezuelan government and myself in a difficult position.

Michal Onderco:

Who decided to overturn your advice?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, the Venezuelan government, the foreign ministry, the Venezuelan foreign ministry gave the instructions to the Venezuelan Permanent Mission.

Michal Onderco:

Were there any consequences for you personally afterwards?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Not really, because by that time I was not a member of the Venezuelan government. I had already the -- in 1994, I have submitted my request for pension, to withdraw from the Venezuelan Foreign Service. But nevertheless, in 1995, in view of my knowledge and my prestige in the disarmament issues I was invited to assume the chairmanship of the Venezuelan delegation to the Review and Extension Conference.

Michal Onderco:

Were you, at the time -- were you during the conference also taking part in the small negotiations chaired by Ambassador Dhanapala.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes, yes. I was personally involved. Dhanapala was a very old friend of mine in Conference on Disarmament, we were very good personal friends. We always had very good relations. And during the conference, I was invited to participate in what was called the like-minded countries convened by Ambassador Dhanapala.

Michal Onderco:

And how do you remember those meetings?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, they were, I would say, very cordial, everyone expressed views. There was no pressure on any of them from the President of the conference. I mean, he seemed he wanted to know the views of the different delegations on the issue of the extension of the treaty.

Michal Onderco:

You said before that at some point, it became obvious that there is not enough support for the Venezuelan position.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Right.

Michal Onderco:

And that your advice was to sort of quietly withdraw.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Right.

Michal Onderco:

What was the second best outcome that you wanted to achieve? If you couldn't achieve the Venezuelan position, what did you try to achieve?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, after the failure of the Venezuelan proposal I didn't look for any other objective to achieve. I mean, I accepted the situation as such and I was ready to withdraw, as I said, quietly and gradually accept the fact that the Venezuelan proposal had not been carried on.

Michal Onderco:

How do you remember the attitude towards the non-members of the NPT and the conference? Personally, did you at that time expect that NPT may, for example, welcome new members in the future?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, yes, the treaty is open to adhesion from any country. I mean, the -- I have not followed the situation with regard to adhesion to the treaty. But I assume new countries have adhered to the NPT.

Michal Onderco:

But at the time, in 1995, there were still at least two very important Latin American countries which were outside of the treaty and that was Brazil and Cuba.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes, Cuba and Brazil.

Michal Onderco:

Well, they signed the NPT three years later, but did you expect it at the time that Brazil would join in?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes. I didn't see any reason why Brazil would not join the NPT.

Michal Onderco:

Immediately after the conference was the government in Caracas happy with the outcome?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes. Yes. I mean, they were satisfied. I mean, Venezuela is not a nuclear country, therefore it's not a priority issue for the government. They were satisfied with the result because they seemed to join the majority I mean, the consensus of the conference with regards to the indefinite extension.

Michal Onderco:

And what were the expectations that Venezuelan government had at the time? For example, regarding the future disarmament steps?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, I think there was no change in the view of the Venezuelan government. Venezuela has continued to be a member of the disarmament conference. I must confess that after the -- after the Review and Extension Conference, I did not continue to be directly involved, nor follow, the evolution of the Venezuelan position. I assumed that the Venezuelan position was -- in general was the same as had been maintained during the membership of Venezuela, the Conference on Disarmament, and also in the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Michal Onderco:

So after the conference and -- did you return to the retirement after the conference?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes. I mean, my chairmanship of the Venezuelan delegation was only temporary commitment. The fact that I presided over the conference did not mean that I have rejoined the Venezuelan Foreign Service nor the -- the government of Venezuela understood that it was only a temporary position that I held. And I must recognized that I felt honored and I was very happy that the Venezuelan government had given me this temporary mission to be the chairman of the Venezuelan delegation to the conference. That didn't change in any way my situation as a retired officer.

Michal Onderco:

So you personally -- what did you think about the result of the conference?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, I'm very sorry that my proposal did not go through, but that doesn't mean that I have any bad feelings about the result. I mean, as a diplomat -- in multilateral diplomacy, sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. But that doesn't mean that you have to maintain hard feelings about that.

Michal Onderco:

Did you -- did you -- did you think that the decision that was made at the conference was a bad one? You personally.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Yes. As I said at the beginning, I considered that, by extending indefinitely the treaty, the nuclear powers are free not to comply with the commitments they assume under the treaty. And this is the sense that for the nuclear countries, there was always a possibility that the treaty would not be continued. This is rather complicated for me to explain. The review conference would allow us an occasion to request and to try to force the nuclear countries to comply with their obligations of the NPT. Now they are free to continue their nuclear objective indefinitely. The review conferences were always an opportunity for the non-nuclear countries to demand the nuclear countries to comply with the treaty. Now as they have the assurance that the treaty would not be discontinued, now they feel free to continue with their nuclear programs.

Michal Onderco:

And there are some who say that, for example, the fact that the United States and Russia pursued bilateral disarmament steps shows that they are interested in nuclear disarmament. What would you say to people who say this?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, that is one view. But, for example, if you remember what President Trump suggested recently, that they would resume their nuclear [testing] programs -- that confirms my view that without a limit on the NPT or rather with an indefinite validity of the NPT, the nuclear countries may -- whenever they want - resume their nuclear programs.

Michal Onderco:

Before we end, I want to ask you if there is something I should have asked about and I didn't.

Adolfo Taylhardat:

Well, what I will say is that I -- the reason I relinquished my position as chairman of the Venezuelan delegation to the conference is because in the end I felt betrayed. I had already proposed the Venezuelan government to withdraw gradually from the proposal that had not been officially presented, but had been publicly expressed. The reason why I proposed that we should move slowly and gradually is because I considered that having been the proponent of a proposal. And I, myself, having been the intellectual author of that proposal, we should not co-sponsor the U.S., the Canadian solution. But, when I received the instruction -- not me, but when the foreign ministry instructed the Venezuelan Permanent Mission to co-sponsor it, I felt -- I must confess, I felt very odd. I felt betrayed, and that is what led me to relinquish my position as head of the Venezuelan delegation.

Michal Onderco:

Did you ever regret that decision?

Adolfo Taylhardat:

No. No, I think I did the right thing. I have never regret it. I mean, I think -- and I still consider that was -- as a result of the situation and the facts and the events, that was the correct way out for me in this case.

Michal Onderco:

Thank you very much for the interview. And thank you very much for your insight.