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Interview with Anna George

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Summary:

Anna George is a former Australian diplomat. She served as a member of the Australian delegation to ACRS.

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Anna George, Australia**Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on December 1, 2020****Miles Pomper**

Thanks again for doing this. As I said, this is for the Wilson Center and for our Center for this history project. Some formalities to start, if you could give your full name and talk about what your role was in ACRS.

Anna George

My name is Anna George, I was working with the department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia. And my role at the time, when I was asked to become involved in the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS), I was also working on chemical weapons issues. I was based in Canberra and I continued doing that dual role all through my time associated with the ACRS. I also had to continue the ACRS work when I was posted to the Hague working on the same chemical weapons issues at the OPCW. My ACRS role was over probably a two-year period and went from '94 through 1995. And I attended several meetings which we can detail as we go through this process. Would you like to have some of the context of why Australia became involved in the project?

Okay, prior to my involvement, our Geneva disarmament representatives had been observing ACRS and actually I think they attended the Moscow plenary and maybe one other. Geneva had been watching what had been going on there and were interested from our own foreign policy perspective, but also to see if there was anything that could be contributed from the Australian perspective. And at this time the foreign minister, Gareth Evans, decided, there was a whole series of issues of peace building interests that Australia should pursue. I think it's worthwhile saying why we had the credentials to go into ACRS and why we were asked to participate. For example, our reputation in terms of nonproliferation, disarmament, etc. was well known. We were good multilateral players and seen as experts in several key areas. And as well as that, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans wanted his Foreign Ministry to engage and reset foreign policy to take account of the 1990s, post-Cold War situation - of redefining how Australia could contribute to promote ongoing peacebuilding. Evans had engaged in writing a book which was called "Cooperating for Peace, Global Agenda in 1990 and Beyond," known in the Department as the Blue Book. And that was the process that defined where Australia's foreign policy should be in terms of developing agendas to promote peace.

This approach was integrated right into our policy development. These strategies had informed part of our thinking before, in many ways, because we were good multilateralists and disarmament experts. But this was a definitive process that looked at how we could more actively to build confidence and regional security. So that was the sort of second agenda going on, but the other part was that Australia has and had, at that time, a lot of experience at developing Regional Security initiatives in our own region. And this had been done through a concerted effort by the Labor government at the time, which was, I believe, broadly politically supported. This included developing consensus for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the economic side of engagement with our region, which was a massive achievement. And I should add that the dialogue within APEC actually goes right down to almost desk level between different countries because the integration is very strong at the economic level. But on the security side, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was promoted. The form it took encouraged regional dialogue and trying to develop participation in an environment where the players in our region have very different views on how you build consensus, how you go forward, how you integrate. Different from the European, NATO or OSCE model. So the ARF was quite a different and much more soft footed approach that could promote outcomes. That was the background to our experience and why Australia could perhaps bring a different agenda to the arms control dialogue in the Middle East region.

Miles Pomper

And what specific contribution were they looking to Australia for in the group? What did Australia seek to promote, in particular - any particular confidence building

measures or approaches or security measures?

Anna George

We were approached to take forward regional security centers. Abdullah Toukan, the Jordanian king's scientific advisor, had a very well-developed approach to this, he was very keen for our engagement. Egypt was also keen for our engagement from our nonproliferation credentials. I presume the dialogue at the high level between the US/Russian Chairs and Israel and the other key parties had also taken place before we could be invited into that process. But we were certainly welcomed into ACRS and particularly with the encouragement of Jordan we developed a concept paper on introducing a Regional Security Centre (RSC), to develop a roadmap on how we could enable that development within ACRS. I took that agenda to the conceptual basket meeting in Paris. The paper was a DFAT paper, which also had input from our Geneva Post and Connie Peck, the Foreign Minister's advisor on Conflict Prevention issues (she also worked on the Blue Book with the Minister). The Paper was an integrated approach on how this RSC concept could be developed in ACRS. We presented that paper in Paris.

The conceptual basket was a very closed sort of environment because there were two baskets - the conceptual basket and the operational basket - and I'll just point out, but I'm not sure if some of descriptions might be quite right in the ACRS writings because I'm sure the conceptual basket participation was really just confined to the Middle East players and the Chairs. The operational basket was where the mentors such as Canada, Turkey, The Netherlands and then Australia were the four countries that ended up being the key mentors developing confidence building measures. Other countries came in and out and made presentations at different times. So that's what I understand from the ACRS framework. I didn't go to all the meetings, but it was really that group, the four countries, that had carriage on the confidence building work - Canada Naval Activities; Turkey Information/Military Exchanges; The Netherlands OSCE Communications Centre; Australia Regional Security Centers. These confidence building activities could later be folded-in various ways if/when the concept of formally establishing Regional Security Centers was agreed.

Miles Pomper

You can talk about what these centers were intended to be or what the concept was?

Anna George

At the time, Australia proposed the roadmap for a regional security center. And we presumed it would be in Amman because of the leadership of Jordan. And then over time, it somehow evolved, and I think that dialogue would have taken place very much between the key parties in the region. The approach was: Qatar and Tunis and Jordan expressed interest in hosting individual RSC. So surprisingly, we had three centers being proposed that could facilitate confidence building measures, regional dialogue, and training courses. And a type of blue-print of the type of RSC activities that could be taken forward was developed at the last of the ACRS meetings in Jordan but that was just before the arms control process effectively finished/stalled when Rabin was killed.

As background: When we were having dialogue on regional security centers it was more broadly about what could be operationalized in the centers. And this was developed over time, it was an evolving process that had to go through a very sensitive political dialogue that was much broader than the issue of developing regional security centers. The ACRS' Chairs - US and Russia - but the US delegation in particular, really managed that very well. There were two main contributions made by Australia. One was presenting the RSC concept paper that provided a way forward for the regional parties to say, okay, we can go ahead with that, it's non-threatening, it's facilitating, it provides confidence measures, it's not tapping on any red buttons that we don't want to push at the moment. This Regional Security Center concept took form through the various '94/'95 operational basket meetings as the dialogue continued with the other three mentor countries. The other paper Australia developed was to be presented at conceptual basket meeting June 1995 in Helsinki.

Given our IAEA expertise, we had been asked to look at developing a paper on peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The type of development work that is undertaken

through the IAEA development agenda. And again, we had considerable expertise on that issue so the paper was developed. I took it to Helsinki. Our IAEA expert from Vienna with development expertise came through as well, and we prepared to present that paper. And from Australia's perspective, it had all been agreed with all the parties and we were happy to go ahead with that. However, when I got to Helsinki it was made very clear that Egypt was not happy and had not agreed to this process. Now how we got to that position, I don't know. But it was very obvious that we were in a position where we did not want to impose anything on the process, our role there was to facilitate an outcome, a peaceful outcome. And so, in brief consultation with Canberra I judged that we would not push the agenda beyond what was politically feasible. I discussed the matter with Nabil Fahmy who was the head of the Egyptian delegation and said that we would never ever want to interfere in any of the processes that made this whole ACRS agenda work. However, we'd prepared the paper, would it be acceptable if we presented it and just laid it on the table, no discussion. And that was what happened.

So that paper was presented, no discussion, I presume it's somewhere in the ACRS archives. But that was as far as we went with it. And so these were the two formal Australian papers. The other part, of course, was the final paper that came out of the ACRS operational basket process that would have gone forward to the next plenary, to be hopefully accepted. That paper contained a list of the types of activities that could take place under the Regional Security Centers. It detailed all the different educational training, confidence building measures, there was a whole lot of good interactions proposed that really can develop peacebuilding in a fundamental way. Worth noting, one of the other things that the ACRS process enabled was, for the first time I think, many military representatives came from all the different regional parties, and they would be in an environment that was very conducive to informal discussion. It's probably worthwhile recognizing, and I think one of the successes of ACRS was that the mentor countries had a real contribution to make creating that facilitating environment. Facilitation was one of the key aspects that the US and Russian Chairs really wanted to happen and was what the mentors provided, often in very sensitive situations and out of the way quiet venues.

We all consulted, worked, ate, talked, often in a closed off venue the whole time, so everyone was exposed to each other for long periods, which itself is a really good confidence building measure. The operational basket mentors - Canada, Australia, Netherlands, and Turkey - were there to help facilitate that process. And it really worked well. The individuals from each delegation involved were very few, the personalities involved were, I think, quite special including Jill Sinclair and her naval colleagues, the Turkish representative and the Netherlands group from the OSCE. Diplomacy was played out through a lot of socialization, was a lot of laughter, fun, interaction, and building up confidence and ways that only social interactions can do but it's never recorded. It's never seen as part and parcel of the formal process, but it provides the underpinnings for a process to develop. That said, I also have to say the seriousness of the issue was always played out when it had to be recognized, and particularly in plenary sessions and Tunis plenary was one such example. It was the only plenary that I actually attended, and the level of participation, which was of course high level. You had at the Tunis plenary, David Ivry was there from Israel, Prince Turki was there from Saudi, the high-level participation from regional players, it was a serious political agenda. It was real, and it played out in different ways, managed by the co-chairs. And in that sense, the other players outside the region really just had to stand back. And let it all happen within the context of what the Middle East players were going to allow to be taken forward.

Miles Pomper

And this paper that you mentioned, the sort of final paper on the security centers that was brought to a plenary was never voted on or just stalled before the process ended?

Anna George

Well, because the last ACRS conceptual basket meeting was in Amman, and after that the proposed RSC activities would have been taken to the next plenary but I'm not sure when that was scheduled, but, because Rabin was killed ACRS just stopped. Everything formal came to an end. There was no capacity to take any of those RSC

developments forward. And that was one of the tragic outcomes from the murder of Rabin. However, I see that others who have written about the ACRS process, they really don't posit Rabin's death as blocking progress in ACRS. Everybody in that process I was involved in was devastated. It was like this agenda had been developing over many, many years, many months, many meetings. It had been curated and nurtured and really nurtured by the Chairs, and many of the participants. And there were a lot of hopes and dreams that it could go forward because you could see developments at every meeting, some of them that you would never have thought could take place. But it was done within the context of a safe environment where there was no reporting, it was done within a confidence building framework, with trusted interlocutors, and I mean that's what Chatham House has been doing for many years providing that environment but this was even more so evolving in a much more closed environment, not open to outsiders, media, whatever, I mean, Australia never issued any public media advice on ACRS.

And I have to say, I've been really surprised that the reports I have read really did not pick-up Australia's contribution at all, which was introducing the concept of regional security centers, taking it forward, providing the facilitation process, managing it, taking it forward at those stages right through from the 1994 Paris meeting and including Tunis meeting '94, Antalya '95, Helsinki '95, and then Amman '95. And all of that was the development and the strengthening and the widening of what was initially one security center non defined through to something that was going to be a really substantive peacebuilding effort with three Centers. So, I personally was incredibly saddened. And I felt so much for all the participants who had engaged and developed their government's agenda and they saw change happening. And that's really, almost a unique process in international relations to see change happen in quite a short time.

Miles Pomper

You posited such a clear break with Rabin - because I've sort of heard two kind of macro theories about why the process didn't work. One of the people were like, "well, it was never going to work because the Egyptians were so insistent upon the Israeli nuclear weapons program, the Israelis are never going to talk about it." And the other is more of a broader piece where the peace process was kind of, you know, ACRS only tracked the peace process, the peace process was slowing down even before Rabin. And so, you know, then it kind of was almost inevitable that as the peace process occurred.

Anna George

From my perspective, perhaps because I was very involved in ACRS, I would never describe it as that because you could feel different things happen at each meeting, you could feel a lessening of politically holding back and the enthusiasm that key officials developed. Now these key officials were at a high level within their bureaucracies whether it was defense, or foreign ministry, and the leadership of Jordan was really substantive. Yes, Egypt had its agenda and that agenda would always have been there and still is. But some things may have got through and there are different tracks. You have this regional security center concept that can be accepted as three centers, the actual building of the centers is another process altogether, however, you can tag the event as 'regional security event' that were taking place, for example, the naval confidence building measures from Canada and they did a wonderful job contributing.

You know, all of those activities can be tagged and taken forward, so you don't have to say this is the Center, we've got this formal structure now. What you could do was, say this process has been agreed, three countries are committed and when the process gets to the stage when it can be established to actually physically build centers in their capitals, but in the meantime, all this work can take place. And there's so much that can be done that does not butt up too harshly against the political priorities. So many things could happen that would appear to be, you know, visits to various regional areas, dialogue happening, military exchanges and formally and informally, and also many activities/consultations were already happening. So, given the interest demonstrated by those three countries in the region, the imprimatur to take that process on would have been very important and for their relationships with the region.

I think one of the things that ACRS did, which was an unexpected outcome, was that it wasn't just Israel and the Palestinians and some key players, the region itself was gaining from this process because of the capacity to have informal dialogue. And, you know, something that's really not often openly witnessed in peacebuilding is how important military ties are, in whatever form. Training, military exchanges formal and informal dialogue. I've met people who've been involved, including in the arms control agenda who had initially had contact with Australia, through its military training initiatives. And so it's another form of not just peacebuilding, but providing a sense of how people think, why they think that way, and how you can interpret these agendas. It is an educational process, whatever form of interaction. And I think the Middle East Arms Control talks actually broke new ground. And, of course, you'll never see what happened there and you'll never be able to see the humour or the unexpected responses or the closeness that can develop out of these interactions, and the hopes and the dreams.

The meeting in Jordan came after the Jordanian-Israeli peace agreement. We met at the Dead Sea. And it was quite an incredible atmosphere, because for the first time the Israeli delegation comes across the Allenby Bridge, the first time, legally, into a country, into the Dead Sea venue and there was a euphoric atmosphere in the large Israeli delegation that they were in Jordan. And after the meeting, the Jordanians had organized a trip down to Petra. Most delegations went to Petra including the four mentor delegations. It was amazing because Petra is not only a beautiful place, but symbolic for the region. I flew out through Tel Aviv so travelled back with the Israeli delegation via the new access at Aqaba which had not yet been opened properly, it was just a temporary structure erected on the Israel side. So these were historic changes and it was special to participate in that process. As a diplomat, I've been very privileged to have had that experience. And the whole ACRS process - the facilitation role, the number of interactions with the region, the role played by the key players (and you will be speaking to many of them) really, I think made a difference. We did not get there but that that process was important. And served as a useful peace building lesson for many countries.

Miles Pomper

Well, it was interesting about the three centers I found, I mean, because a lot of the discussion was, you know, as you said, sort of the central players in the region, Jordan, Egypt, Palestinians, Israel, but here were two countries that were on more of the periphery of the region, different parts that wanted to be involved and were interested. How did you see kind of the relation between those groups, the Maghreb, and the Gulf states and kind of the central players? And how did they get along? And how did these particular countries come forward to offer to host these centers?

Anna George

We were not part of that dialogue of making that agreement, that came out of the dialogue between Middle East parties. So it wasn't a case of you know, put your hand up and saying, I want one too. It wasn't like that at all. It sort of developed behind the scenes and (endorsed at Tunis) we just accepted that was an amazing outcome, fantastic, plenty of work to be done, no competition, there was so much to be done. And the parties can work out which areas of strength they have and what they want to take forward. So really, it was about getting the concept of what could be fitted into those regional security centers. Now, I did see a report indicated that agreement and the papers are there somewhere but I haven't got any access to any of that now, and it's 25 years ago so I can't remember the detail but it was all about good confidence building measures, building security, building exchanges, putting people together and also the concept of trying to fold in the conceptual basket work easily into that process.

Egypt was going to have the communication center, and so everything would have gone, if it had gone to plan, all the announcements, the meetings etc, going through that regional security communication center, the naval confidence building measures could take place, of course, the disaster management, there was a whole lot of things that could be done, posited within the regional security center concept, but taken forward in different ways individually, and I presume, including across the regional parties as well. But we never got there, we just got the framework, which was incredibly important to get. Unfortunately, well, wasn't just unfortunate, it was a

tragedy, absolute tragedy that Rabin was killed. And I later met a couple of the delegates in different places where I was working, and everyone was devastated. And many, just dispersed out of the process, I don't think you'd be able to find many of the original negotiators actively involved now. In fact, I'd be really interested to see who you, and perhaps you are going to have that dialogue later, who you've been discussing ACRS with. Jill Sinclair was an amazing...

Miles Pomper

Yeah, I talked to Jill recently.

Anna George

...Yes, she and her delegation were splendid. And the also Turkish delegate, and I can't recall his name, he was also just such a great person to have in that role, he single-handedly did so much. And there were really two very good Dutch mentors came through from the OSCE communications area, they too were great colleagues, all of them. And it wasn't just because we were there, the contributions were excellent. I was sent on my own almost all of the time, which was really interesting and challenging when it's such an intense situation, and also out of the scope of our embassies, unable to get instructions. But Australia was totally committed to ACRS. And it was done very quietly, we never pushed it too much, we took it as far as we could. We did not promote our activities, or ourselves in that matter, we just didn't, and hence you don't see any record of anywhere. Because it's never been formally written up.

Miles Pomper

We'll be able to fill that function. It's interesting what you said, because some of the other countries, the Canadians and Dutch and others, they either had exhibitions of things or they hosted people in their country, I'm guessing just because it was you, you didn't do something like that in Australia or even say an ASEAN or something like that.

Anna George

Um, no although there was an academic/NGO focused event in Australia but it did not feed into negotiations. Overall, we recognize that we had participated, I think as well as we could have possibly done in the circumstances and successfully formally introduced an approach which reflected our own diplomatic/security priorities. Our contribution recognized that we operated in a very different 'security environment' to the Europeans or to the Americans. The high-level commitment of Australia's foreign minister, who at that time, as you can see from his intellectual contribution to peace building - Cooperating for Peace, Global Agenda in 1990 and beyond - had been presented at the UN. And that approach was embedded in the Australian government's agenda and it was a privilege to have not just a positive but intellectually clever approach redefining peace building following the Cold War. And it complemented our broader role as players within the multilateral system and what the UN might achieve. So I was actually very privileged to be able to serve at a time when such approaches to peace building were taken for granted and never questioned as been anything but relevant and important.

Miles Pomper

And I wonder for you if Australia got a different reception than some other countries because, I mean, part of the process, which is I guess before you got involved sort of earlier on, a lot of it was kind of taking lessons or teaching people about what happened, say, in the US-Soviet conflict, the Helsinki agreements and so on, seeking to apply those or at least use them as kind of instructive to the region. And a lot of people told me that the feedback they got from a lot of the countries was, "that's fine for you but that doesn't work in the Middle East." And I wonder if you had a different, you know, given Gareth Evans's sort of different approach to these and experience in other regions, if you got a more positive response to your approaches because of that.

Anna George

I think we did. I mean, Abdullah Toukan, you have to really say that he was an amazing player, intellectually extremely capable, he had a vision, he wanted us there, seriously wanted us there and I think we provided the balance that was

needed. The fact that we were asked to present the conceptual paper to develop an ACRS Regional Security Centre and later trusted to develop a paper on peaceful uses of nuclear energy, which, when you look at the subject matter was really, really sensitive. And that we were asked to take on that task on the understanding that this had been agreed by all key parties. We were very conscious of what that meant and treated it with the sensitivity and the gravity that was needed. I understand that no other country had been asked to open a debate on IAEA related issues.

As background, there was dialogue in the UN because the NPT review had taken place beforehand in May, so there was bilateral dialogue with several parties attending the UN. And to implement this process Australia's paper was to be presented at the Helsinki operational basket meeting. I went to Helsinki very, very cognizant of how sensitive this could be. We considered that we had developed a paper that could provide a neutral basis and a development context that might politically go forward. Maybe not too fast into the process, but the fact that was being done was significant. However, after arriving in Helsinki Egypt expressed the view that there was no agreement to have such a dialogue. I then had to very quickly, in an environment that had no capacity to receive substantive briefing from Canberra, to quickly assess how to approach this political impasse. I advised Canberra on a possible face-saving way forward for all parties and was given the imprimatur to negotiate with the parties. The Egyptian delegate reluctantly agreed. And the presentation took place in a very quiet environment, perhaps even cool. And it was done: the paper was presented, it sat on the table but there had to be no discussion of it. That paper is still somewhere in the system and will be in Australia's DFAT archives but I don't know where the ACRA records are kept - in the State Department or with the other regional parties. I really don't know that background detail.

Miles Pomper

Part of the reason for this project is there aren't actually a lot of records out there.

Anna George

Yes. And you have to be very cognizant that parties may still engage in that process with the aim of developing peace in that region. So I'm not surprised that those aspects remain closed away, because you can't replicate that particular environment. These were moments in time, in history, that maybe different outcomes could have evolved, but they didn't, so now, those who are in the position to make decisions now have to find their own way forward. The lessons learned from the ACRS process: I think, some key things. Firstly, to develop approaches where you're never talking just about what you've done (i.e. NATO or military exchanges), but the facilitation process behind it and why it worked in particular circumstances and to present also the political difficulties, it is not simple, it's not easy. Australia worked for many, many years and still does to be more closely integrated into our region in a manner that is non-confrontational and facilitates the priorities of the regional parties. So as a middle power, that's a challenge. And that process, it doesn't change overnight. It's about a lot of things, it's about the caliber of your diplomacy, it's about the caliber of your politicians, it's about the circumstances of the time. And the timeframe after the end of the Cold War. Just as the Chemical Weapons Convention was facilitated by the historical moments of change and is the strongest and best arms control non-proliferation treaty that will be agreed upon, from my perspective, because it came out of a period of time that facilitated that process. And, you know, putting things into the broader context is always important. The lessons learned are really about methodologies used, but also personalities matter, the diplomatic process has to include an approach that brings out players with capacities, with negotiating capacities, and with personalities that can soften the process and facilitate the process.

Miles Pomper

If ACRS did succeed in that, how did it succeed in kind of bringing out these personalities or softening it?

Anna George

I think one of the interesting things I found from the Middle East arms control talks was the role of the co-chairs, the US was a facilitator. And the people in the delegations came from different departments and they really facilitated the process,

they managed it very, very efficiently, of course, that there was a lot of facilitation and the US was in quite a different negotiating pose. It operated in a different environment, because it was trying its best to facilitate. And it's an overused word, but they certainly were doing that: guiding, facilitating, watching out for points that ACRS could fall off the track. The Russian co-chairs were not as engaged because of their own domestic political agendas - there were too many other things happening. It wasn't so much a competition between those two chairs. And I think there was a level of goodwill and hope. Partly because the Cold War ending provided that opportunity for a global 'development agenda', the focus was on all sorts of different ways of moving forward, instead of the Cold War framework.

I think, from a diplomatic perspective, so many were looking for change and hope out of that process. And that was a really unique time in history. That politically it all fell apart, in so many ways is in a way to the shame of all of us that the 'peace dividend' was squandered. So it was a time of hope, that also permeated through ACRS. It was a time when new leadership emerged, like the Norwegians, the Oslo Accords, amazing, amazing diplomacy, the Madrid peace conference, these were really important moments in history. And without the ending of the Cold War the arms control area (i.e. CWC) would not have easily got off the ground. So it was building on a lot of important players who took the chance to try to build a better world forum that takes you away from conflict. That it failed in the end because we had Yugoslavian breakup and had all sorts of other conflicts happened since then. But that was a time of hope. Efforts for future peacebuilding will have a different set of political parameters to operate within.

Miles Pomper

Well, that sort of gets in my last couple of questions. One of the reasons for this project is to say, okay, going forward are there things we can do? Is there a possibility of peacebuilding or confidence building measures in the region? You know, if you're going to try to do something today, how would you do it? How might you structure it? Is there anything that could go forward? I mean, particularly in light of some of the recent agreements between Israel and some of the Arab states that have normalization and so on.

Anna George

I think it's very difficult now being outside foreign policy development as I left Foreign Affairs and Trade late 2006 and am engaged in other areas like looking at the problems with antimicrobial resistance, which has its own set of problems, and is a security issue. So, now there are many, many ways of building collaboration from mutual security perspectives. And with this Covid 19 pandemic, if we cannot build from what's happened - processes, strategies, interactions, that show our common concern - because none of us get out of this lightly. We've lost so many people globally. So perhaps, this pandemic, and the associated problem with antibiotics becoming ineffective, and the fact that so much will end if you cannot find ways forward, (by preserving the existing antibiotics, because any new antibiotics will also become resistance) so these are security strategies and maybe the new agenda is the public health agenda.

What do people want? If you're talking about peace, but your population has been killed by something a government can't control, you're not going to have much ballast for many other economic developments in your own country, so I think governments now have an interesting set of challenges, many of which they never thought of before. The development challenge has always been there, but this is an agenda that actually hits developed countries as well. And the only way out of it is the global approach for developed and developing countries. And we've just shown in the West, how pathetic we can be at times, how inefficient we can be, how it has disrupted lives, and trade, and opportunities. So perhaps the new agenda going through is we get this right, and it may flow on to other areas. But that still doesn't take care of the very highly political agendas that are almost cemented in and will be highly problematic to change easily. But new coalitions can move around and evolve. And maybe that's it, as you were hinting - new coalitions with the dynamics changing in the Middle East - some aspects halted or stopped or promoted, etc. But I'm not part of that diplomatic agenda now.

Miles Pomper

Is there anything I haven't asked about that you think I should have?

Anna George

No, I don't think so. I mean look, there are memories that I maintain in my head about ACRS but I've probably been focused here on the politics and descriptions of how people interacted. It was a process that had many ups and downs, but mostly ups, and mostly everyone working towards an end game. And just how good is that? How many times in your diplomatic career can you be part of something like ACRS? And my diplomatic career was mostly as a multilateral negotiator - arms control, trade, social development. I worked on all the social development issues in Vienna including Commissions on status of women, disabilities, AIDS and UNRWA and all of these issues also have their little moments of positive change and political blockages. You just have to be prepared to respond appropriately when the political opportunity arises. And I think, from my perspective, Australia's role, although not lauded, not out there in any public form was significant. We were operating from a peacebuilding framework that worked for us at that time. Developing support for Regional Conflict Centers was a specific contribution from Australia that fitted into our broader national security interest and complemented our own ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) regional security interests. I'm very satisfied with that aspect of my career including my contribution, experience, and the interactions with the people involved, it was a privilege to work with them, all of them.

Miles Pomper

Well, I'm glad we will be acknowledging Australia's role at least. It'll be there in some history.

[End of transcript]