November 11, 2020
Interview with David Cooper

Citation:

"Interview with David Cooper", November 11, 2020, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Interview conducted by Miles Pomper with editorial assistance from and prepared for publication by Tricia White.
https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/300058

Summary:

David Cooper is a former US Defense Department career civilian official. He served as a member of the US delegation to ACRS. All views presented in this interview are his own. Nothing represents official views of the Naval War College or the U.S. government.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

English

Contents:

David Cooper, United States

Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on November 9, 2020

Miles Pomper

I think we're all set. So, a couple formalities to begin with, give your full name.

David Cooper

David Cooper.

Miles Pomper

And kind of give a sense of the dates that you were involved in the process and what your role was?

David Cooper

This is almost 30 years ago, so my memories may not be precise.

Miles Pomper

Rough years are fine too.

David Cooper

I was not in at the very beginning, because DoD was not in at the very beginning. It was something that ACDA primarily was excited about, a bit more than State even. Once it became real, then they realized they needed DoD in, so this would have been probably in the, I'm gonna say 1992 timeframe, could have been early as 1991, but probably 1992. So, I was not at the beginning of the formative piece of the process, but at the beginning of the stand-up, where it actually turned into an ongoing negotiation. I was the first OSD Rep and really the main DoD Rep in the process. Joint Staff did have someone there, but I don't even remember who it was, and they were not particularly involved. The State Department wanted the uniformed military there so - Someone turned up, but I don't even remember who it was. If it turns out it was someone important, I'm gonna feel silly, but I just, I can't put my memory on it.

And to be honest, I was very junior at the time. I had just come out of the Presidential Management intern program. I was with an OSD policy office that ceased to exist fairly soon after called European security negotiations, "ESN", and then that was folded into a more general negotiations and implementation Directorate. And part of why I had this was, it was a seam issue within OSD. I was in the conventional negotiations office, but we only did Europe. And then there was a nonproliferation office, but they didn't do conventional negotiations. And so, this was sort of, it didn't really fit in anyone's portfolio. And that's actually how I got this really interesting and challenging portfolio that should have been way above my paygrade. Because it really was a case of "well, what's this? Give it to the new kid. It's Middle East arms control that doesn't quite fit anywhere, but he knows conventional negotiations, and he's eager to do it, so we'll let him run with it." And it was supposed to be kind of a very minor part-time portfolio around my regular work, but it grew into something pretty significant by the end.

Miles Pomper

So, when you started working with the team, what was your sort of first impression in terms of the issues you're going to address and the people you're going to work with?

David Cooper

This was a very small U.S. delegation, small U.S. interagency process. You had Bob Gallucci at State. He was Assistant Secretary for PM, he was the senior head of the U.S. side of the process. He was the head of the U.S. delegation. Remember, well I'm sure you remember, but this was still a U.S.-Russia co-sponsored initiative. Bob and his Russian counterpart, whose name I don't remember but who was very impressive, were the co-chairs of the process. Bob was in that sense - I actually may have misspoke, he may not have been head of the U.S. delegation, he was basically the co-chair of the process, and then I think it might have been Bob Einhorn one rank down who was technically the head of delegation, although I could have that wrong. But the day-to-day lead at State was a guy named Fred Axelgard. He was kind of the State Department lead. He had Laura Sopuka - now Laura Cressey - was his action

officer. And then Roger Cressey was basically Bob Gallucci's front office assistant. He would be a good person, if you haven't talked to Roger, I can kind of give you the working level perspective, but he was kind of in with Gallucci. He wasn't involved in all the meetings, only the senior level meetings, but he would have a good idea of the front office over at State. And then so the last part of the equation is at ACDA. You had Jennie Gromoll and Mike Yaffe.

And that was it. I mean, in the core team, Laura didn't come along very often because she was the AO and Fred liked to do the traveling. The core team was basically me, Fred, Jenny, and Mike. And Jenny and Mike often wouldn't go together because they were both from ACDA. Sometimes they would, but sometimes they were swapping off. I mean, what I'm trying to convey is for a lot of these things it really was three or four of us.

Miles Pomper

So, pretty intimate.

David Cooper

A pretty small group. Yeah. And I also don't know if you're trying to get in touch with the foreign participants.

Miles Pomper

Yes.

David Cooper

If you're just – so, I mean, again, lots of people involved, but just to tell you who I see as the key people you want to talk to? Nabil Fahmy from Egypt was a - now, obviously he went on to bigger and better things, but he was a very forceful presence in the process in terms of heads of delegation. He was a very forceful head of delegation. And then just to put this on your scope, Ariel Levite from Israel. He was not the head of delegation. But he really was one of the most important figures. He was sort of a, he was like an MoD consultant, or something. I mean, he was kind of like the academic who was brought in, but he played an outsized role in almost playing a Track II role within what wasn't obviously a Track II process. So just to throw those two out to say those are critical people.

Miles Pomper

Yeah, we're talking to both of them and have known both of them for a long time. Nabil actually was a colleague for a few years.

David Cooper

Oh, okay. Great.

Miles Pomper

Yeah. Well, you sort of mentioned them, did you know one of those people beforehand, or?

David Cooper

No, no. I mean, this was, again, like I said, I was thrown in, because no one else at OSD kind of cared about it. And then once it kind of became a big deal, I was partnered with another guy, a political appointee in OSD, who wanted in, and I cannot remember his name, he did not last long. It was right at the beginning; it was the turnover to the Clinton administration. Now I can give you an idea, because I was already involved for a bit before then. That would have been in the 1992 timeframe, because I was probably involved for about a year before then. My involvement would have been kind of from early 1992, forward. And he came in, he had had some campaign role, and now he wanted to do Middle East peace process. And so he attended some of the high level political meetings while I kept working the nuts and bolts working group process.

Miles Pomper

And you mentioned pretty small group, and you were kind of the DoD representative, what was the sort of relationship between the DoD, and State, and ACDA on this issue?

David Cooper

The relationship was actually pretty good. I mean, normally there's, on any arms

control delegation, there's normally a bit of tension between the OSD folks and the ACDA folks, with State kind of in between. This was kind of unique, because we were fine with it. I mean, none of our stuff was in play. The usual tension is always: State wants to negotiate, and thinks we should compromise and we should give away this, and we should give away that, and the OSD response is, "Oh, wait a minute, that's our stuff. It's great that you want to get a deal, but you're negotiating over our stuff." So, and I mean, I always used to make the analogy with State people: imagine if we were having negotiations over consular agreements, but I was in charge, from DoD, and I was saying things like, "you know, it seems reasonable to me, I mean, they only get to arrest people under this rank, that doesn't seem such a big deal to me." You'd be going, "Whoa, whoa." There was normally that kind of tension. But that wasn't really the dynamic in this case. To the extent there were any tensions, it was more personal. It was more just, I mean, Fred was really, really - like I said, this was kind of his career, make or break. And so, he was a little intense sometimes. But really no interagency tensions in the usual sense.

Because normally the State Department's motivation was to get to a deal, and DoD's motivation was to not get to a deal that hurt our stuff. In this case, you didn't have any of those normal tensions. I mean, it was a very positive process, because we were trying to help them sort things out between themselves. We were really playing a mentoring honest broker role within this process. In that case, you know, it was – actually, I think I ended up playing a positive role, because a big part of what I could bring to the table is to say, look, I've done this kind of negotiating, where our stuff was in play. I understand why this makes you nervous, and here are the sorts of things you should be thinking about, in terms of how to make progress. But nonetheless, in other words, we were sort of mentoring them on negotiating this stuff, and as the DoD person, I was able to kind of engage with the MoD people and say, "It's okay, you're nervous about that, you should be nervous about that, they're nervous about it too. Here are the techniques you can use to try to over overcome that."

In that sense, I think the relationships were good. Perhaps the only tension was that Fred Axelgard was really a regional expert who was focusing on the political vibe, whereas I was focusing on what you needed to have effective multilateral confidence building measures. And that was actually one of the reasons that I and the ACDA folks got brought in. Because at some point, someone was like, "Well, wait a minute. It's great that you know the countries and you know the region, but if this is going to be a multilateral negotiating process, you actually need some people who understand what that involves and what the options are and how to move that forward."

So that was another source, I wouldn't call it tension, but there was certainly – you know, was this a regional political initiative with some arms control and confidence building overtones, or was this a sort of arms control, confidence building negotiation, with regional political sensitivities that needed to be navigated around? And I think different people involved - in one sense, you could say what I've just described is two sides of the same coin, and it is, but - different people were kind of coming at it from those different perspectives. Let me say, I think that is the tension with Fred. Fred was saw value in getting any agreement on anything as a political step forward. And we were like, "No, that's not right! We understand the political imperative to get an agreement, but if you have them agree to something that is not workable, or that is lopsided, or that is whatever, it can do more harm than good." You don't just want to, we got a piece of paper and declare victory, because you need something that's going to be something that's going to get their toe in the water and have that be an okay experience, and then move forward on. So there was some tension in the U.S. delegation along those lines, but in retrospect I would say that it was constructive tension balancing two legitimate perspectives.

Miles Pomper

Well, in terms of building on that, and some other people I've talked to said, you mentioned, part of the early part of the process was educating people in the region on some of the other arms control and confidence building processes, particularly in Europe. And they said they kept getting the reaction, "Well, that's all well and good, but that doesn't work in the Middle East."

David Cooper

That's exactly what the reaction was. And we had to work very much to say, "Europe has been doing this for, at that point, 20 years, and they are in a different place. And the situation is different, so we're not talking about replicating what they're doing in Europe, what we're talking about is drawing on the techniques and trying to tailor them for the needs here." But to be honest, a big part of it - and this is where Fred was correct - a big part of the early process was just trying to get them - I mean, we weren't going to get any agreements early on. What we were trying to do was get them to go to dinner together. And that was a huge effort, because no one would go to dinner with the Israelis, obviously.

Then it was just, try to get them talking, try to throw specific problems out that they might talk about at coffee break. And then they were talking, so I mean, it really was that level of - and I mentioned that later on, I sort of drew on this experience in leading PSI efforts. And what I meant by that was, it was the experience of: you were having relatively frequent meetings with a relatively small group, not a small group, not like 20 people, but a relatively small group of like, under a hundred. And the big way forward was building personal relationships, trust relationships, and also frankly - and this is something that I've said to people and they've kind of raised their eyebrows - making it fun. Like, having these meetings be in some great places like Antalya, Turkey and having the hosts do lots of social events, and, in other words, ACRS suddenly, even the folks in my office, I got it because I was the kid, but suddenly I was going to all these really cool places, and they were like "Well, wait a minute. Yeah, that sounds like fun." So it was that idea of, there is something to be said for, you put in a lot of social events, you have the host really bend over backwards to make it a pleasant experience, and it, over time, leads people to start seeing each other as human beings and start dealing with each other - I mean, everyone had their guidance, everyone had their parameters, but by the fourth or fifth meeting, it's the same people, and you start to get comfortable with them.

Miles Pomper

What was in Antalya in Turkey? What was the meeting there?

David Cooper

Antalya was - we basically started breaking off technical working groups. Because of course, every delegation had a political minder who was making sure everyone was sticking to their political guidance. And, at the high-level delegations, at the plenary meetings, there were the senior people, and everyone in the delegation was sort of mindful of that and toeing the line. Breaking it off into expert working groups, not just on site, but independently stood up expert working groups where you had more junior people working more specific issues for a more significant duration of time and without the more senior political people kind of looking over their shoulder. In Antalya, what we did is, the Turks were eager to play a leadership role in ACRS. At that time, this was at the very beginning of them thinking of themselves as a Middle Eastern. We had just had - the Islamist party was just coming to power. They were involved in the European security negotiations, as part of NATO, they really wanted to be involved in this.

We basically had them run a breakout group on information sharing. We had several breakout groups. The information sharing breakout group, this was going to be basically the CSBMs breakout group, and they understood what was required of them and did a brilliant job. The lead Turkish official, I cannot remember his name, he was basically the head of their arms control bureau and had been their CFE ambassador. He hosted it, and it was in Antalya at the Sheraton Voyager resort, which is this spectacular seaside resort. And we did that on two different occasions. And that was actually one of the only agreements that ever came out of ACRS, and it was an information sharing CSBMs.[1]

That was at our second meeting I chaired. We had two working groups, we had information sharing, and then we had, I think, unusual military activities. I chaired the information sharing subgroup, whatever, it had a name. And basically, we had some meetings, I brought in Ambassador Lynn Hanson, who at the time was our, he had been CFE negotiator. And he did a great job because again, the problem is, I was very young, and in the Middle East that's a problem, and I was realizing that was a problem. We flew him into Antalya, and he basically said, "I'm the guy who negotiated CFE, I'm the Alpha Dog of all this in the world. And David's my guy, so you

can listen to him, he's my right-hand man." Which was not even remotely true by the way, but he was trying to give me a boost. Then he also promised them, "I'm going to be connected to this. And you guys, if you can't do this, you can't do anything." He gave them kind of a pep-talk. "We did this stuff with the Soviets, at the worst point of the second Cold War. You don't need to like each other to do this kind of stuff." And then he kind of flew off, and that really resonated with them. I mean, he was kind of basically telling them, this is not "you're all friends," it's "you're not friends, but you're going to do some sensible things to manage your 'not being friends'."

Miles Pomper

And so, this agreement that you talked about, information sharing, of course. is a term that could cover a lot of things. What actually was in the agreement?

David Cooper

Fred Axelgard did some great work after the formal meetings at the head of delegation dinner to convince everyone to try to make some tangible progress. He left me a note under my hotel room door that said, "if you present a draft agreement to them tomorrow morning, they'll think about it."

Apparently at sort of the delegation head dinner of this breakout group, they decided – well, how do I word this, and I wasn't there, I'm getting the second hand - the dynamic apparently was, everyone was nervous about this, because they didn't really understand it. No one wanted to agree to anything, and everyone was afraid that anything they might agree to, no matter how simple, might be a trap that they'd get blamed for. But what they all agreed on at dinner was, well, let's let the kid draw something up on his own. And then we'll all look at it and see what it looks like.

So literally late at night after I got back to my hotel room - and this is of course when word processors didn't exist, this is like, 'you write it and then you type it' sort of days - I got out my Vienna document, and I went racing through it, copying down the parts that seemed the most anodyne, dropping out anything that seemed too complicated, and filling in a few flourishes that I made up off the top of my head and came up with an ACRS information sharing agreement. And so, it was just, if you go back to your Vienna document in those days, and I think that was VD92, and I had actually been involved in those negotiations to some extent, it was part of my portfolio, so I kind of knew that like the back of my hand. It was the basic stuff of notification of major military exercises, basic military data exchanges, basic, I don't remember what was in the darn thing. But again, if you go back to VD92, just imagine me going through, and again kind of just crossing out anything that was too darn complicated, pulling out the anodyne bits, and then typing it all up into kind of a pretty short, as I remember, it was like, three or four single spaced pages.

And that's what it was, everyone looked at it, everyone said, "Well, we can't agree to it now, but actually, there's nothing in here that seems, you know…" And we all had to kind of hold their hand and say, "It's true, it's as anodyne as it looks. There's no tricks here. There's no tricks here at all." And so that was then circulated as a - they wouldn't agree to it in principle, because they were too low level, and that was too frightening. But we circulated it as basically a working draft for review, and then that was agreed in principle at the Tunis plenary. There was even a press release. That was the Tunis plenary, I still have the clipping, "New arms control agreement agreed here." It wasn't actually an arms control agreement, but whatever. And then, of course, the whole peace process dragged ACRS under soon after, and that never got anything, but it was actually agreed by head of delegations, in principle.

Miles Pomper

You wouldn't happen to have a copy of it, would you?

David Cooper

No, I mean, it's… no.

Miles Pomper

Because we're also collecting as much archival materials.

David Cooper

Yeah, I have a copy somewhere in my scrapbook of the AP article announcing it, but I do not have a copy of it. But again, I can tell you it really was the anodyne parts of VD, whatever that was, but I think VD90 or VD92 pulled out, strung together. And like

I said, I had a few flourishes to make it look Middle Eastern, and that was all it was. And then everyone chewed on it. For the next entire day. We made anodyne changes to the anodyne documents, so everyone could feel that they'd pawed at it a bit. And then that's what went back to capitals for review.

Miles Pomper

Well, we may come back to you for a copy, or at least the date of that AP article, just to make sure we get that in the archives.

David Cooper

Yeah, I've got that out - It's probably in my office, which is under quarantine now. But I know I have it. And it was just, it was one of these short little, it was like a five paragraph, minor breakthrough announced at obscure Middle East negotiations.

Miles Pomper

Well, it's also, I mean, part of the thing is that it's interesting that there was any publicity, because part of the thing was that, I think, a lot of people didn't want that, right?

David Cooper

Well, that was a big piece. The fact that they got agreement in principle, but the big debate at the Tunis plenary was whether to acknowledge it to the press. And the argument there was, "look, you've made a positive step, why wouldn't you announce that positive results are coming out of this?"

Miles Pomper

Well, I guess it's the Middle East, right? I mean.

David Cooper

Well, but remember who wasn't there. I mean, we didn't have any - the Syrians weren't there, the Iranians weren't there. I mean, we only had countries that were willing to sign on to the Madrid process in the first place.

I mean, if you think about it, that was leading into the Israeli-Jordan peace treaty. That kind of thaw between the Israelis and the Jordanians was happening throughout our process, you could watch that happen. You had the Egyptians and their odd, cold peace relationship with Israel, and that was very much there. And then everyone else was kind of letting the Jordanians and the Egyptians kind of take points, as it were.

Miles Pomper

Well, could you talk a little bit more about that in terms of the Jordan peace treaty and how it affected the dynamics of the process?

David Cooper

See, ah, again. This is where the 30 years ago - and I haven't, I can't even remember whether that happened during the process, whether it was after, if it happened during the process, where? But I guess all I can tell you reliably is that over the course of the process, the Jordanians and the Israelis were clearly becoming more comfortable. Being in proximity and discussing this. I mean, I distinctly remember, there was one point where, and I don't remember where they did it, we thought they were going to go out to dinner together, and then I don't think they did, but they've been discussing it. And even that was seen as a huge thing.

Miles Pomper

But I mean, towards the end, I mean, obviously one of the sticking points that derail the negotiations were Egyptian insistence on talking about Israel's nuclear weapons program. Did you see that, was there kind of ups and downs in that relationship and the importance of that issue over time, or is that kind of a constant?

David Cooper

No, I think that was kind of a constant, and my perspective is just sort of, there were certain issues that were not going to go anywhere that everyone needed to have their say. And the issue is, as long as no one walked out after one side or the other had their say, then it could be duly noted that everyone had had their say, and we could move on to focusing on things like anodyne information sharing. I mean, what we were really trying to drive them towards, so the main lines of effort were, our information sharing, our CSBMs working group.

Another main line of effort was search and rescue cooperation. We were trying to find - because search and rescue operations could involve military cooperation, but also involve civil agencies, it didn't have to be military - and so what we were looking for was where could we get the lowest possible hanging fruit and focus on that? We weren't going to solve Israel's nuclear weapons, or creating a WMD free zone, or anything like that. We were trying to - now, and that's again where the tensions with Fred Axelgard came in, because Jennie, Mike and I were all of one mind that, yeah, we want to find low hanging fruit. The tension was just, but it's got to be, it's got to be fruit. I mean, it can't be something lying on the ground and rotting. I mean, low hanging is one thing, but it's got to be meaningful, and it's also got to be workable.

I argued very strongly from a DoD perspective that the worst possible thing we could do would be to sign folks up to something that wasn't going to be workable, that they didn't understand what they were signing up for, and that then didn't work and/or that someone came to regret and felt like they'd been snookered. That it was better to have nothing - despite Fred's pushing, "We've got to get something, we've got to get something" - than to have something that would actually end up being counterproductive over the longer run.

Miles Pomper

And then, kind of following up a little bit about something you said earlier about the, you know, the split that happened at one point between the conceptual basket and the operational, which - I guess is kind of this conceptual stuff was dealt with at the plenaries.[2] And the operational in these working groups. It was interesting, what you said about that being driven by sort of the level of the people involved. Was that the main motivator, you think? Or was it, you know, what was kind of behind that?

David Cooper

I mean, I'll be honest with you, the danger of something like this, in retrospect, is it can make it seem like we were a bunch of geniuses who had this big plan. And I think it's much more accurate that we were feeling our way forward. And that the Turks really wanted to do something, they were offering to host a meeting. We thought it would be helpful to have working groups that started specializing in certain of these things too. And again, that was part of the educational piece of this, you wanted to get folks who started looking at CSBMs versus search and rescue and what not, so that we could start to get those kind of specialist teams. I mean, I think my perception on the less political is probably a retrospective perception. I'm not sure we were thinking in those terms at that time, "let's break them off from the political people." I think that's more me retrospectively saying that it was, in effect, helpful along those lines, but I think the idea at the time was simply, "let's get some more intense work done on some more specialized nitty gritty areas."

Miles Pomper

And was your sense, in terms of the U.S. role here - and obviously the U.S. organized it, co-chaired it - did that change over time?

David Cooper

This was really a U.S... it was co-chaired with Russia coming out of the Madrid conference, obviously. And remember, this was just, ACRS was one little working group out of the Madrid peace process.

I mean, the multilateral working group was really a sideshow to the bilateral efforts, like that led to the Jordanian peace treaty and everything else. You've got to remember the time though. This was right at the fall of the Soviet Union and right after Desert Storm. I mean, the Russians were co-chair, but this wasn't their priority. But they remained actively engaged at the political level. I mean, as a matter of fact, I'll always be grateful to ACRS, because as a result of it, we were the first U.S. delegation to go to Moscow after the bombardment of the [Russian] White House. If you think about that, though, we were there because they're hosting an ACRS meeting right as they're having basically a civil war. I mean, we were the first thing to roll in, and that the Russians hosted after that. Again, in those days, it's hard to overstate. The US worked very hard to make it a co-chaired process. But that was a period where the U.S. was really driving the train.

Miles Pomper

What was your sense, and I guess, it used to be the Russians, but in terms of relative to the countries in the region, was it still really the U.S. driving things forward? Or was it, did others step up within the region or take some ownership?

David Cooper

That's, I think we could not have made the progress we made if, as I said, the Israelis, the Jordanians, the Egyptians for all of their hesitance, and others, I think, weren't taking ownership of the process, or we wouldn't have made that kind of progress. I mean, in the end, America at that point was in a position to sort of convene everyone, and the people who were there were going to show up if America convened them. But I don't think we could have made the kind of... and I don't want to overstate the progress we made, I mean, a lot of it was intangible. I've described our little CBM, because it was tangible. Most of it wasn't the little CBM, most of it was intangible in improving the relationship among delegations, in terms of being willing to engage in increasingly substantive discussions. That, for the most part, went nowhere.

But again, welcome to multilateral negotiation. I mean, this is not where to go if you want to see quick movement. From my perspective, I believe that it was an instance where there was definite momentum on the vibe. And, if you're from the GAO asking me, "Well, how do I quantify that?" I'm like, "I can't do it." I'm just telling you from my perspective, the vibe was getting better, and, I believe, again, it was the collapse of a larger process that dragged down ACRS, not ACRS failing on its own. Now, it might well have failed on its own, if given enough time. But at the time, its failure, though, wasn't because it had reached the end of its logical road, it was that the larger political forces were dragging it down. That's my perception.

Miles Pomper

Do you mean basically that the peace process kind of hit a wall, or?

David Cooper

Yeah, the peace process hit a wall. And, again, the multilateral working group was never supposed to, and was never going to be at the vanguard of any of this. The idea was, there was the larger peace process, and the multilateral working group was supposed to be trying to figure out, if we did have peace, how could you fill in and start bolstering it and leveraging it to start getting some confidence building measures, some search and rescue cooperation agreements, that kind of thing. That was never going to be, that was always going to be in the rear, following up, not at the front, creating.

And so, when the peace process hit a wall, ACRS kind of hit that wall, because, you know, that's all that could happen. Now, I should also say as a caveat, I was not there till the end. There was a point where, when it became clear that ACRS had kind of lost its mojo because of the wider peace process, DoD made the decision to pull out and basically said, "You don't need our actual negotiating experts anymore because you're not actually negotiating and making progress," and so it was sort of - it was a bit of a tense thing. I know that Fred was pretty upset, and I understood why, and actually on a personal level I was pretty upset too because I was invested in this process. I had a conversation with him, and I basically said, "Look, it's not me. My organization is just saying, you know, this is one of like seven portfolios I have. And they're just saying, it can't be a priority now. If things get going, give me a call, I'll run it up the flagpole and come trotting back." So that was kind of how DoD - we didn't, we just kind of eased out of it when progress stopped.

Miles Pomper

And, one of the questions we ask people is, what do you see as the successes and the shortcomings - and you're kind of talking about this mood as basically, I think, a lot of the success that was at the time. But, how much of that kind of lasted? And what sort of lasting benefits, if any, did that mood have in terms of people getting along and working with other delegations and so on?

David Cooper

So, again, because I got pulled out, I am not the person to ask though. Mike Yaffe was in 'til the bitter end. I think he kept doing it after they stopped meeting just in case they started meeting again. So, he'd be the person to - I mean, that was his full-time job. Because it was ACDA. They could throw someone full time, so Mike would be the

best person in terms of kind of that longer term. I mean, obviously, I don't know if I can judge whether it had any lasting effects. Even just as an anecdote, in the mid 2000s, I was the U.S. rep. on the second UN panel on missiles. And my Egyptian counterpart had been on Egypt's ACRS delegation. So, this is more than a decade later, and we immediately recognized each other. Like, we walked into the room and kind of immediately walked up to each other, and it was definitely a bonding thing, we went out for a coffee in the delegates lounge and indulged in ACRS reminiscence. So again, that's a pretty thin anecdote, but my point is this was over a decade later, and there was still this sort of positive memory of having been in this, what at the time seemed like a pretty special process.

Miles Pomper

What about now, I mean, part of the reason we're doing this is also, what are some lessons for the future, or what can be done in the region, and so on? Now, how would you sort of answer that question, if you were gonna try to do this today, what might you do differently, or how would organize things?

David Cooper

I mean, the thing is, even at the time, I remember thinking rather cynically, gee whiz, if you all work really hard, maybe someday you can get to the point where you can have your own Vienna document, and look how well that's done in Serbia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. And confidence building measures are just that, it's very easy to get overexcited about them and to think that they're going to somehow solve things, and they never do. That's not their role. It's also possible to be overly dismissive of them and think that because they can't solve things, that they're worthless. And the truth is sort of a 'meh' thing in between, and that is that they're not solving things, but they can contribute in small ways to confidence, but also to relationship building.

And I mean, after 30 years of doing this stuff, 20 involved directly in negotiations, and now 10 as an academic - thinking and writing and researching about it - my view on confidence building measures is that their biggest utility is as a gateway drug to more significant arms control. That they allow for negotiations that are so relatively anodyne that they get people used to the idea of negotiating. And they also, there's a whole literature on this, I don't want to go all academic, but there's a whole literature on - one of the benefits of arms control, right up to strategic nuclear arms control between the U.S. and Soviets, wasn't the agreements that came out of it but was the negotiating process leading to an understanding of each other's perceptions, concerns, doctrines. And I think they can have that positive effect.

And I think we saw that in ACRS. I mean, people had to express, "well, here's what I don't like about that idea." "Well, what would you like instead?" "Well, I don't think I'd like anything." "Well, come on, if you can have it any way you want it, you get to write it, it can be whatever you want, what would that look like?" It's hard not to respond to that. But now, suddenly, you're being asked a substantive point of view. And even if two sides, I mean, I've long argued that in any negotiating process, each side is coming in with wildly self-serving and lopsided proposals. But there's value in that, because if you look at what the other side wants, what their wildly lopsided and self-serving proposal is, and my own wildly lopsided and self-serving proposal, you start to define the parameters of whatever the competition is, or whatnot, and that itself is setting up something useful. Now again, that's not sexy, and that's a problem with all this, none of this is sexy, this is just trying to get more habitual things going.

So, I don't know if there are any lessons. I mean, there may be? The Abraham Accords are a similar point in terms of a pivot. You have a new administration coming in who will be presumably be looking, "Well, we want to do something new." It could be that you kind of take one part Abraham Accords as a substitute for the Madrid conference and then try to start coming up with this sort of thing with whoever's willing to be in the room. The other lesson I would say is - and again, this is kind of from subsequent experience too - invite who's willing, and then invite anyone who's not willing, let them come as an observer. And tell them if they ever want to move from the back bench to the table, they're welcome to, but they're welcome to sit in the back bench as an observer. And then again, the other piece of this that's so hard to convey is, you need to convince everyone to send their A-team. And by that I don't

mean seniority, although perhaps I do, but I don't necessarily mean seniority. I just mean, send their smartest, top people, and hope that they're being sent with a mandate to see what you can make of this. Now, they may be being sent with a mandate to throw spanners in the works.

But again, none of this drives the politics, the politics drives this. But if you do have kind of favorable political alignment, a process like this with the right personalities, the right combination of personalities, the right mandate, and enough political support from above to give them somewhat running room, can, I believe, be valuable. Again, I would almost say, think of ACRS - the best analogy I can give you - think of it as a Track Two dialogue that wasn't actually Track Two dialogue. I mean, that's what, in essence, we were trying to set up, where we're going to go on a journey of discovery together. And if you're uncomfortable where we're going, then we won't go there. But let's feel our way forward. And see if, together, we can't come up with something where everyone is okay to go there.

Miles Pomper

One thing you just said, you mentioned about, "invite everyone and, whoever comes and if they want to just observe, so be it." I mean, one of the things that didn't happen in this process - or did happen is that some of the countries weren't invited. I mean, Iran and Iraq and Libya, I guess. And then the Syrians chose not to come, but do you think that was smart not to invite those other countries?

David Cooper

Yeah, no, I do. Thank you for clarifying. When I said, "anyone who doesn't want to come," what I meant is anyone who you wanted to come who didn't want to come. You invite the Iranians or the Syrians or whatnot, and you're not going to have - you're not gonna have a process that has any chance of moving forward. I mean, to be honest, again, the whole point of the Abraham Accords is, you've essentially, you're getting a strange kind of Arab-Israeli peace, coalescing around, everyone realizes, wait a minute, why are we fighting these guys? We've got a common problem here, and I think that's what you would need for leverage. I mean in the end, what you'd be leveraging, what I had in mind was more, the Saudis or Oman or whoever wasn't ready to go quite that far. This could still be a way. The Biden administration's gonna have to figure out, I mean, no one's doing anything until, is Biden going to try to swing back to a rapprochement with Iran? In which case, that's going to be an entirely different dynamic than if he decides to build on the Abraham Accords and kind of stick with, isolate Iran, build a Sunni-Israeli... no one knows the answer to that right now.

Again, all this must wait until those big political dynamics start to come into view. And then you can start to say, "well, given this big political dynamic, what little mechanisms can we do down here and send people like Fred Axelgard, David Cooper, Mike Yaffe and Jennie Gromoll in to do stuff?" I mean, that's not the driver.

Miles Pomper

Right. For sure. So, is there anything that I haven't asked about that that you think I should have?

David Cooper

Always a great question. I think you've covered it. And again, I apologize, because I've said some things and then you've asked me, and I've been reminded, I really haven't thought about this stuff for almost a quarter century. I do think that the informality of it was a big piece of its success. And the fact that it was allowed to be - not allowed to be... - that it was kind of set up on a different track from the highest-level political stuff. I mean, even our plenaries were still only - I mean, Gallucci was only an assistant secretary. Nabil at the time, I forget what his title was, but I mean, these were still mid-level officials, not very senior officials. And then we broke off our little working groups, separate from the plenary so that we could get down to working level officials. And I think that is a key part of the recipe, because you need to allow those things to marinate without that high-level political stuff. I mean, it won't work without the support of the high-level political stuff, but you need to kind of give them a little running room in terms of an informal process without strict - and we went in there with, the guidance was very vague.

We went in there with kind of, "See what we can do, let's see if we can't push this

forward a little, let’s see if there’s not...” And I think that really is - the answer here is that the magic of something like this is, you let that informality and the fact that it could go anywhere, and people are trying to, because then they might find something. And also - and this is the last point, and I’ll let you go - but you also then have people who, as they do move forward, are invested in the process, are going home to capitals and defending the process. “I don’t know about this.” “No, this is okay! Look, we spent two days working through this sort of stuff.” And you only get that if you give people a little running room. But again, especially in the Middle East, that is not the idea of “Well, let’s send them in and see what happens.” That’s not a comfortable or normal dynamic for them.

Miles Pomper

Well, thanks. This has been great. Thanks.

David Cooper

Take care.

[End of transcript]

[1] Interviewer’s note: Agreements concluded and approved, but not formally implemented, included: a draft Charter for a Regional Security Center in Jordan and two affiliated institutions in Qatar and Tunisia; the establishment of an ACRS communications network; agreements on military information exchange including exchange of certain unclassified military publications, exchange of biographical sketches of senior military personnel, and an agreement on pre-notification of certain military activities; and a number of maritime CBMs, such as “Framework for Maritime Search and Rescue Cooperation” and “Guidelines for Operating Procedures for Maritime Cooperation and Conduct in the Prevention of Incidents on and over the Sea in the Middle East”.

[2] Interviewer’s note: ACRS plenaries functioned as a “general assembly” of sorts, whereas the conceptual and operational baskets functioned as working groups. As such, in the plenaries, both conceptual and, at times, operational issues were being discussed.