October 28, 2020
Interview with Peter Jones

Citation:

"Interview with Peter Jones", October 28, 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/300067

Summary:

Peter Jones is a former Canadian diplomat. He served as a member of the Canadian delegation to ACRS.

Credits:

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

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Peter Jones, Canada

Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on October 28, 2020

Miles Pomper

So, how are you?

Peter Jones

Okay, I'm fine. How are you?

Miles Pomper

Good, good. I guess a couple of formalities before we start. If you could give your full name?

Peter Jones

Peter Leslie Jones.

Miles Pomper

And we could talk about when you were involved in ACRS and what your role was, and so on?

Peter Jones

At the time ACRS happened, I was in the foreign ministry here in Canada, which was then called the Department of Foreign Affairs. It's now called Global Affairs Canada. I was in the arms control and disarmament division in the International Security Bureau. My job was essentially looking after regional arms control processes. In the late 80s, early 90s, it was felt that with the Cold War ending, there were going to be regional arms control processes breaking out all over the world. And so I was assigned to do that. I had shortly before been involved in European arms control, specifically the Open Skies treaty. I was involved in the negotiation of that and Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. So, they redeployed me when the Cold War ended, and all that wonderful East West, Soviet arms control stuff came to an end. And the regional dialogue that came up quickly was ACRS. I got involved in just after they created the multilateral track of the Madrid peace process. Canada was asked to be one of the mentors within the arms control group. Canada was also asked to lead the refugee group, but that was a separate group of people in the foreign ministry. But in the arms control division, we were asked to be the facilitator or gavel holder or leader, whatever we call it those days of the maritime work that went on within ACRS. And that's when I got involved.

Miles Pomper

And what was your sense of what Canada, particularly, hoped to achieve through the process?

Peter Jones

I think a variety of things: First of all, to be a good ally of the Americans and others who were running the peace process; to be seen as a country that would pitch in and help and do a good job when asked. So that was one aspect of it. And then in terms of the Middle East as such, we had for many, many years been involved in peacekeeping in the region, and generally wishing to be seen as a kind of a helpful country that would, when asked, do its bit to try and prevent war in the region and stabilize the region. I don't think we had particular national objectives vis-a-vis ACRS as such. Other than, of course preventing war in the region, which was a general objective. But I think it was more the general, Canada had a perception of itself and still, to some extent does, as a helpful fixer, a peacekeeping nation, a mediator, one of these countries, like the Scandinavians, that sort of does these things in the world. And then, as I said a moment ago, in service of this desire to be seen as a good ally of the United States. Relations between the Bush administration and (Brian) Mulroney were particularly good, they were very close friends. And so, generally speaking, we wanted to be seen as a good ally, but at this moment, that was even more so because of the personal relationship that existed at the highest level.

Miles Pomper

And I mean, you sort of alluded to it a little bit, but what do you see as the kind of

global and regional events that enabled this process to start?

Peter Jones

You mean, the Madrid process generally?

Miles Pomper

Yeah, the Madrid process. And then I guess, the idea of arms control and security here in the Middle East.

Peter Jones

Well, the Madrid process unfolded at the end of the Cold War, and also in the context of the promises that America had made to the Allied Arab states that went in with it in the first Gulf War. When the first Gulf War happened, America wanted Middle Eastern countries to be allies in that fight; Egypt, Saudi Arabia, others, and one of the promises, if you will, that was extracted by those countries from America was that there'd be a serious push to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute when the Kuwait war was over. And so, to some extent, that was what was going on. It was also the case, of course that Arafat made one of his biggest mistakes when he supported Iraq. And so he lost support from Saudis and others. So the PLO was in very dire situation, and it needed to change. And I think that's one of the reasons Oslo happened. And the Madrid peace process overall was really a combination of those factors. The multilaterals came about, in my recollection, because there was a series of bilateral talks between Israel and the neighbors, the Palestinians, the Jordanians, Syrians, etc. And there was a feeling in the region that there was no real role for the other regional countries in this and they wanted one; they wanted to be supportive of it. And so this idea of the multilaterals, and the idea was that it was the bilaterals trying to solve the issues of Israeli Palestinian, Israeli Arab dispute, while the multilaterals were trying to envisage what will be the Middle East of the future, and how do we go forward; the idea being that even if the Israeli Palestinian dispute was settled tomorrow, there would still be a bunch of issues in the region: environmental issues, social issues and security issues. And so ACRS was one to five multilateral groups, as you know. Unfortunately, there was a relationship established between the multilaterals and the bilaterals. And it became the case that some Arab countries weren't willing to make progress on the multilateral track unless the bilaterals were also going forward. As long as the bilaterals were going forward, that was fine. But when Netanyahu came to power, and the bilateral stalled, the multilateral stalled as well.

Miles Pomper

And you mean by that some Arab countries, the Egyptians or others?

Peter Jones

Primarily, yeah, the Egyptians. They lead that, you know, they lead that. I think a number of Arab countries would have actually quite liked ACRS to go on. And some of the other multilaterals, they found it useful, frankly. But nobody was willing to break ranks on this idea that in the absence of progress on the bilateral and multilateral go forward.

Miles Pomper

And I mean, you said you'd worked on Open Skies and other U.S.-Soviet agreements. And obviously, the U.S. and the Russians, were the co-chairs of this working group. What's your sense of, I mean, I've heard from others that, you know, especially after the first meeting or two, the Russians weren't very involved in the process?

Peter Jones

That's my impression. I think they sent some good people, I remember. I have forgotten the names now. But I remember that they were very, very skilled arms control security negotiators. They'd been through it for decades. And they made good substantive contributions, in that sense. But I didn't get the feeling that the Russians had a particular oar in the game. I mean, they were willing to be helpful. So at that point, the Americans were really running it. And I sometimes wondered if the Americans had not been seen as so dominant, if perhaps things might have gone differently, because when people began to chafe a bit at whether ACRS should go forward, which wasn't unique to ACRS, but when it happened within ACRS, it was really only the Americans who were pushing it forward. I wonder if they built an effective international coalition of countries outside the region who were pushing this

to go forward if it might have been different. It might have had some impact, I don't know. But the nature of the American leadership at the point that they made the ACRS delegation was very much you know, we're doing this we're doing this, we're doing this. You guys are helping us. That's great. But we're doing this. And that sort of that's the way it was. But, at the same time, they didn't seem to invest all that much in the multilaterals overall.

Miles Pomper

And was your, I mean, you said you'd been working in Europe primarily and other regions. And this was kind of your first time stepping into the Middle East. Had you met some of the kind of key players before or does this where you met them and if so where?

Peter Jones

I met them in ACRS and some of them became very close friends. My work experience on arms control within the Foreign Ministry had been the multilateral European arms control negotiations; Open Skies, the CFE. I had also been involved in some work at the UN. I served as Canada's delegate to the First Committee one year, which is where the arms control resolutions are debated within the General Assembly. I had also served on the Canadian delegation to a UN study on verification; a study of experts on verification. So my background was the UN and European multilateral arms control. And that's what I had done my academic training as well. And so really, my first experience in the Middle East was with ACRS.

Miles Pomper

And of some of the people you've met, sort of, from this process - who really kind of stood out to you?

Peter Jones

You mean in the region? The Israelis were very impressive. Arms control was new to them. They obviously hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about arms control, it hadn't really been a significant priority up to that point. They had a grasp of the issues of disarmament, i.e., the NPT and all their arguments as to why Israel shouldn't join it, they understood that, but the kind of nitty gritty of counting tanks and setting up zones where you don't go that was new to them. They worked at it hard, and they engaged experts and they found some good people. I liked the Jordanians, I worked with, some of them became close friends. Jordan had made a mistake leading up to Madrid. They wouldn't say so, but they made the mistake of not taking a firm position on the Kuwait war. And therefore, they were seen as having to some extent backed Iraq. And so they were in the doghouse regionally. They were struggling a bit in terms of acceptance from the Saudis. And of course, the Bush administration wasn't happy. Canada got along quite with them well, because we understood why they done it. We didn't agree with them, but we understood it, but they put some good people into ACRS, and they had a desire to make it succeed. And of course, during ACRS they did sign their bilateral treaty with the Israelis.

So they made an effort to bridge some gaps. The Egyptians, I found, were, and this was also, I found when I worked at the UN and the First Committee and multilateral arms control, I found Egyptian diplomats to be exceptionally good at kind of conference gamesmanship. You know, the whole business of rewriting the resolution, so it blames the other guy, and, and working the room, but when you then said, "Well, yeah, but what did you accomplish in terms of your strategic objectives?," they kind of look at you blankly. And I always used to say to them, "Okay. You can stop ACRS if you want, but how will that be your strategic objectives?" And they would say "No, no, no, no, we know, the NPT and the Middle East weapons of mass destruction free zone. That's what we want." But if you stop ACRS, it doesn't matter, you know. But they said, "We've got to make a point here." They were, they were very, very skilled diplomats, but I found sometimes they didn't ask the higher order strategic questions and a number of Egyptians that I got to know afterwards, because I then I left government and I went into the whole Track II world working on regional security issues at SIPRI in Stockholm and ran a project on Middle East regional security, and I found them to be, "yeah, oh, yeah, it would be useful to have something like ACRS right now". Of the other countries of the region, they sent people to ACRS, you know, and they sent some good people, but I didn't find that they really sort of invested in

it. I mean, if the bilaterals have moved along to the point where they were, you know, politically acceptable, they would have been willing to sign regional security agreements, but they didn't. They didn't. They weren't pushing one way or the other. It was really the Israeli, Jordanian and Egyptian delegations to ACRS that that really ran the show and pushed it and did the heavy conceptual lifting.

Miles Pomper

When you mentioned about the Egyptians not looking at their strategic interests, I mean, was it, were they playing domestic politics - just kind of what they're used to, and this is the lines they're used to doing - or what was their motivation for?

Peter Jones

Probably a bit of both. You know, they are not so much now, I don't think, but they were then acutely conscious of this leader of the Arab world title which they had for themselves and wished to maintain. So bringing together a coalition of the Arab countries to demand that Israel or the United States do this or that suited them very well. And then when it didn't happen, and they didn't get what they wanted, then they were like, Oh. You know what I mean, the whole leading the Arab world was an objective in itself. And this was, this was a way to do that. And I think that the individuals involved who are, as I say, very good diplomats. But I mean, they had this sort of reflexive attitude to the issues, you know, you'd see them in ACRS, and then you see them a few months later in the NPT RevCon. And they were, “Here's our playbook.” Fine, I mean, that countries do that. Most countries have blind spots and all the rest of it or interpret their interests in ways that others find a little mystifying, and we do it, everybody does it. But on this one, I, I wonder if they didn't shoot themselves in the foot, because I did hear you know, in later years, as I was doing Track II work on regional security, the Middle East at SIPRI and elsewhere, people sort of wistfully saying it would be useful to have some official group now talking about these issues. Well, you killed it. Yeah. Anyway, there we are.

Miles Pomper

So, you know, talking in about the U.S.-Soviet, NATO-Soviet experience. Obviously, part of the, you know, early meetings, especially for ACRS, were kind of educating people on that experience, and bringing them up to speed and not using that as a model for the Helsinki process. It's kind of a model for what you wanted to do in the region. Do you think that was an effective way to structure things?

Peter Jones

Um, I think in retrospect, the really heavy reliance on Europe as a model may have been a mistake. There were regional security processes in Asia, and Latin America. And I think more could have been done to look at them. I think part of the problem was a lot of those who were sent into work on ACRS like myself, we came from Europe, so hey, you know, that's what you know. But it had a couple of problems, a couple of weaknesses. One was the glorification of Helsinki. I recall the Saudis quietly coming along and saying, “You know, the purpose of Helsinki was to destroy the Soviet Union; to get the human rights thing on the agenda and to use it as a stick to beat and we're not interested in that.” And we would say, “Well, no, no, no, no, this is just a model of a mechanism” They liked the Asian model which didn’t talk about internal issues. That's the model we like. So, the European experience, in that sense, was resented by a few, not that they wouldn't have accepted Europe as a model. But I think it should have been Europe as one of several models being considered by ACRS. It wasn't, it was just Europe, Europe, Europe, and Helsinki, Helsinki, CFE, Open Skies, this is what you want to do.

The other thing was that we, I think, forgot that by the time we got in Europe to seriously talking about actual arms control, decades had gone by, and we had been talking, you know, MBFR, and, and all this stuff for years and years and years. And so there was a cadre of people who knew this stuff cold; they knew how these things on site inspections, and all these other things worked. And that didn't exist at all in the Middle East. And I think we had this vision that you could run a couple of seminars on the European experience, and then these Middle East guys would be good to go; you could start talking about how you put tanks in storage and verify that and all this sort of stuff. And no, there was not the cadre of people in most of the regional countries who really knew what this stuff was about. And so I think that a bit more of a

discussion on what a security model for the Middle East would actually look like would have been a good idea. And then arms control would flow from that. Once we understand what we mean by these things, then we can start and maybe we don't need to count tanks. Maybe we don't need to create exclusions zones. We don't need this or that maybe we need other kinds of agreements, but we really just assumed this is what we need. And so when I left the government and I went to SIPRI in Stockholm I put together a group from the region to start working on these things. Most of this work was, “Let's just not talk about counting artillery pieces, let's talk about regional security.” What we mean by that? And I wish ACRS had done more of that. And I wish it morphed into that. There was some of it in the so-called conceptual basket, but the way that ACRS was structured, and the whole normalization question, of course, people tended to equate the idea of creating a regional security system with normalizing relations with Egypt [*editorial note: meant Israel*].

Miles Pomper

In that sense, do you think that the kind of, the list of countries that were involved in the process was the right ones? I mean, there was obviously some countries that weren't invited that, you know, were involved in some of the wars you've talked about, and I guess the Syrians chose not to participate.

Peter Jones

Yeah. Well, I've written in various articles that one of ACRS’ problems was it was not inclusive, and some countries opted not to join, like Syria and Lebanon, and other countries were just not invited. I mean, Iran, Iraq and Libya. And how do you have a serious discussion about regional nuclear free zones, if you don't invite those countries? You can't do it. And so I think that setup made regional security discussions in ACRS formally linked to the Arab-Israeli peace process, but in fact, regional security is about so much more than that. Creating a dynamic where only certain countries get invited, and others don't does not make for a successful regional security process. That is anything other than inclusive. And, and it doesn't mean to say that everybody joins in the first instance, but everybody should have a seat at the table. Everybody's allowed to join when they wish to. The fact that there was no seat at the ACRS table for certain regional countries immediately limited what it could do. I wish it could have evolved into something more broadly based with a broader agenda, perhaps it would have in time. But when it was going on, it was it was a creature of the peace process. If one was doing it again, I would invent ACRS as a kind of a standalone dialogue in itself.

Miles Pomper

Well, speaking of that, I mean, you know, there was a, there were some high points, I guess, in terms of the peace process. During this time, I mean, the Oslo talks and declaration of principles between Israel and Palestinians, and then the Jordan peace treaty. How did those affect the ACRS process?

Peter Jones

Well, when we were beginning ACRS, the first few years, it really did look like there would eventually be some kind of Israeli Palestinian agreement. And so, to the extent that Arab countries weren't willing to actually formally sign some of the agreements we achieved in ACRS, they always said, “Yeah, but we're just putting on the shelf until there's an Israeli Palestinian (agreement) and then we'll sign these things.” So one had a sense that we were working towards agreements that would ultimately be signed, and that there would be follow on work and that this was a hopeful and interesting time and a good many of the Arabs and Israelis were just fascinated to meet one another. I remember, when we had the ACRS, plenary in Doha. The Israelis were just interested in being there, you know, just going to the Gulf, something that they never thought they'd ever get to do. And we had an ACRS plenary and a working group meeting in Jordan, this was before the bilateral peace treaty, but after the process began, and the big point of the Israelis was they all got in the bus and went down to Petra, the afternoon, they were just fascinated. And so it was a hopeful time and many of the Arabs were also saying, you know, we don't regard Israel as a threat. Our threat is Iran, and we want to have a discussion about Iran. So they were quite happy to talk to the Israelis. But then Rabin was assassinated and Netanyahu took over and the bilaterals slid and, you know, the various agreements weren't

implemented, which was the fault of both sides, Israelis and Palestinians. The mood soured and it was very much trying to keep this thing alive and then I sensed that we were talking about specific ideas for CBMs, and stuff like that, but nobody really expected these to be signed anytime soon. So instead of this feeling, yeah, we're going to negotiate these things and put it up on the shelf, and within a year, we'll take them down and sign them and start working at them, the mood changed.

Miles Pomper

And was that also reflected in the, what was the kind of link that you felt between the, the CBM groups to kind of work in groups within the process and the plenaries, and so on?

Peter Jones

There was the conceptual basket and the operational basket and the operational basket was the CBMs. And conceptual basket was more, to the extent there were discussions of regional security and the nuclear issue, all that stuff. We had an agenda in the conceptual basket, which was designed to produce agreements. And we did and, you know, we produced CBMs in all the different conceptual baskets, largely based on the Cold War experience, but nevertheless, adapted to the region. We produced written agreements that could have been signed and put into effect. And I think the idea was that this was meant to create impetus and, you know, show that things could be done and...

Miles Pomper

Operational basket, you mean?

Peter Jones

The operational basket, yeah. So that we did that. And, but then there began to be more and more of a trade-off between the operational and the conceptual baskets. So we had all these trade-offs between the operational versus the conceptual. And the argument of some became, “If we're not making progress in the conceptual, we're going to slow down the operational.” That was a position that Egypt and others took, and primarily over the nuclear issue. And then you had the trade-off over the broader question of the bilaterals versus the multilaterals. And so every meeting became this fine-grained debate. Have we made enough of the meeting this few millimeters of progress on the bilaterals will justify multilateral session? And, and you know, the mood soured.

Miles Pomper

Why were the conceptual and operational basket? Where was that split between those two?

Peter Jones

In looking back, I think, to some extent, it was just for convenience, though maybe that is not the right word. Don't forget that the numbers of people in these countries who dealt with arms control was pretty small. Most of the foreign ministries didn't have an arms control section, right? They didn't, they never needed it. They might have a few diplomats assigned to the NPT or whatever. But that was part of the general, the UN section. So there were just too many meetings for too few people. And there was a desire to begin consolidating things so that people could catch their breath. So that was a practical reason. But I think also, there was a broader reason, which was, again, to try and create a group that can begin to do things, that can begin to show some impetus to show that that dialogue and agreements are possible, versus these other issues, which everybody realized, would take a long time (NWFZ). And so that was a perfectly reasonable thing. But of course, what happened was the people like the Egyptians could say, “Yeah, well, we're not gonna work over here as hard if we're not making progress here.” And so it set up a trade-off, which I don't think was ever intentional, but that was the outcome.

Miles Pomper

And, you know, you've mentioned the Egyptians and obviously, the, you know, one of the explanations that people give for the failure of the talks was, basically, the Egyptians not being satisfied with the lack of progress on the Israeli nuclear file, right. Is that basically your interpretation as well?

Peter Jones

It's one of them. I think at the end of the day, we have to remember that ACRS failed a few months before the rest of the multilaterals. But it would have failed as they all failed, right, they all failed over the normalization question and the fact that the peace process kind of ground to a halt. So yeah, ACRS failed a little sooner, but it would have. Some further work went on. We had some meetings and this group that I led at SIPRI, was seen as being intrinsically linked to what had been ACRS. I mean, many of the participants had been in ACRS, this working group that I created on regional security. Others kept going with a few meetings on maritime safety issues in the region. I can give you the name of the guy who ran those (David Griffiths), even after ACRS stopped and so little bits and pieces went on as well as little bits and pieces of the other multilaterals. The desalination work of the environment group went on because people found it useful, you know, but the multilaterals as an institution failed. And I think ACRS would have, even if it hadn't been for the nuclear issue. But the nuclear issue was a particular problem at the time. But if the Israeli Palestinian process had been going forward by leaps and bounds, with the real prospect of a state of Palestine, if the logic of Oslo was moving forward I think ACRS would have probably kept going; we would have found ways. There would have been contention and the Egyptians would have said, “No, no, no, not until the nuclear issue is resolved.” But the other Arab states would have said, “No, come on, let's, let's keep going.” So I think it was, it was the fact that the peace process as a whole was grinding to a halt, which really affected the mood most.

Miles Pomper

Was there any impact in terms of, you know, the difference between the ACRS and the multilaterals, and other multilaterals, on the NPT review conference? And the timing of that?

Peter Jones

Well, I mean, that would affect ACRS. And that's why I think ACRS failed a few months before the rest of the multilaterals failed. But that didn't affect the other multilaterals run on an issue that sort of caught up with...

Miles Pomper

The fact that that was happening and made ACRS fall a little bit earlier?

Peter Jones

I believe so, yes.

Miles Pomper

Why exactly what was?

Peter Jones

Well, I think the Egyptians just dug in their heels. And, you know, they said, “We have this NPT review conference coming up. And years and years and years of resolutions on the Middle East weapons of mass destruction free zone, nothing's happened. Now we have this ACRS process, which has been going on for a couple years. And, you know, the Israelis are refusing to make progress even there.” And so they introduced the language into various ACRS documents, which the Israelis said they couldn't accept. And the thing just kind of ground to a halt, it was never actually formally declared over. There wasn't a formal last meeting. It just became more and more impossible to hold meetings. And so, as far as I know, I haven't gone back and checked, as far as I know, did the other the multilaterals. They, conceptually at least, still exist. They've never been declared over. But people just stopped coming.

Miles Pomper

And what was your perception? What were the dynamics between, you mentioned the core states - Israel, Egypt, and Jordan - and the Gulf and Maghreb states?

Peter Jones

The dynamics? I think for the Gulf and the Maghreb they were involved in the Israeli Palestinian dispute, from the point of view of Arab solidarity. You know, “We must defend our Palestinian brothers and sisters.” But they did not, in my view, regard Israel as an existential security threat, and probably never had. “Public opinion in their countries regarded Israel as a big threat, but they didn't.” So it was more of a political issue of Arab solidarity for them. And to some extent, there was a desire that

within ACRS, we try to find ways to discuss issues which they thought would be more relevant. You know, for the good for the Gulf countries, Gulf security. I thought ACRS should have evolved into kind of subgroups, you know, a subgroup on the Gulf, the Maghreb, the Levant to discuss the unique issues within those regions. But that would have been difficult because, of course, the Gulf subgroup wouldn't have included Iran and Iraq, which would have been necessary. If ACRS is ever to be re-started, or something like it, it has to be restructured to respect that and have those kinds of subgroups, as well as a broad region wide group.

In terms of the three what I call the key delegations (Israel, Egypt, Jordan), to some extent, it was personality driven. I mean, these were strong, vibrant people who were going to these meetings from these three countries and they were each interested in showing the others how clever they were and you know, taking a leading role. But this is not unique. I mean, I saw this in Europe all the time. I mean, you know, those arms control talks. I was involved in Open Skies for several years and you know people; there's a competition to be the smartest guy in the room. So you know, that wasn't unique to ACRS. That happens all the time, and it can produce creativity; it pushes one another along, kind of thing. It can also get a little destructive when one of the groups of people who think of themselves as the smartest guys in the room are there to slow things down. So that happened too.

Miles Pomper

Following up on what you're just saying a little while, you know, if you were to restart these talks, how would you structure you mentioned this, you know, general group and full region, and then it's kind of subgroups? How else, you know, did you think this format of, you know, particular working groups and for the plenary that kind of structure work? Or how would you, how would you think about organizing it?

Peter Jones

Well, the first thing I do is I think about it thematically, rather than structurally; you know, what needs to be discussed? And then what's the best mechanism? And I think what needs to be discussed is a broad discussion of what regional security means in the Middle East. That may be a discussion which leaves classical arms control behind. I mean, I think, now, 30 years later, security in the region is about the environment and youth unemployment, extremism, and all this kind of thing. And I think some discussions on those issues are at least as important as discussions on how we reduce the number of tanks in the region, and all this kind of stuff. So, I would have a much bigger discussion of what are the key issues and what sort of structures will be useful? The other thing I would do is I would try to slow things down. ACRS became a little bit obsessed with agreements and with achievements, and every meeting had to have something to sign to show we done something, you know. When you look back on the broad sweep of regional security discussions, not just in Europe, but elsewhere, they need years and years of talking during which they're educating one another about their perspectives and their concerns, and so on. And so a little bit less of a focus on "Well, this meeting, we've got to finish up, you know, draft six of this particular agreement." I would spend much more time on what are the key issues, and what do we need to talk about? I'd also make it much more inclusive, to the extent it possibly could be made inclusive. I think that one of the problems we have is that, of course, the Iranians won't sit down with the Israelis, but any discussion on regional security isn't going to work without that. So in my Track II, Track 1.5 work, I always bring in Iranians and Israelis. And maybe we need to think about it as a kind of multi layered discussion. And I've written about this multi layered approach; some Track I, some Track 1.5, some Track II, depending on the issues. So geometry variable is the term that's often used, and so structured that way.

Miles Pomper

I mean, some people have suggested that, you know, if, say, Vice President Biden is elected, and the US gets back into the JCPOA, or some version thereof, that it would make sense to have some kind of regional dialogue that kind of parallels that, I mean, what's your sense of that?

Peter Jones

Well, I think an original dialogue, absolutely. Whether it should be tied to a particular agreement or not, such as the JCPOA or anything else? I'm not sure. I have to think

about that, but I think the Middle East needs to talk about regional security for its own sake, not as an offshoot of the Israeli Palestinian issue, or the Iran issue, or, whatever the case of the Arab Spring or whatever; just as its own discussion. So a discussion of regional cooperation, regional dialogue. However, it's structured. And I, I also wonder about the extent to which it should be led by the U.S. I think the U.S. is indispensable. It's not going to happen without but the old structure of 'the U.S. invites everybody, formally convenes the process, sets the rules – well, I think the region should do more of that; should lead more. You know, and they need to discover. We (Europe) went through a multi decade process of understanding these things, making mistakes, learning by trial and error, and it's all very well to just say, look, you know, you Middle Easterners can avoid those 20 years, here are the answers, let's do it. But they won't internalize those things unless they, to some extent go through it themselves. And, and so we need to give them the chance to do that. And they need to lead it a bit more, I think,

Miles Pomper

I guess I've heard from a few people. And speaking of that, you know, the kind of regional security part of the ACRS title seem to do better than the arms control part of the title. And part of it, I think, was kind of what you're saying that, you know, they were like, "well, all this U.S.-Soviet stuff is very nice, but it doesn't work in the Middle East."

Peter Jones

To the extent the regional security side did get better, there were more discussions. There was a statement of principles on regional security, but it was held up at the last minute by the Israeli Egyptian dispute, but it's still there. It's not a bad statement, it could be dusted off and serve as a basis to begin. But there's been other work done since then on, on those issues that also can be part of this. of this work at the Track II level. But yeah, I think that's where it should begin.

Miles Pomper

And I guess, you know, what would you say, you obviously studied this a lot - what were the successes of the process? And what were some of the shortcomings?

Peter Jones

Well, I think the success, to some extent, was the fact that it happened. I mean, you know, that you could get together a group of people from most of the Arab world, most of the region, not all, unfortunately, and the Israelis, and you could have some interesting and serious discussions. And you could achieve some agreements that, even though they were never signed formally, were useful. And so you saw that that could happen. And you also really begin to get a sense that regional security is about so much more than the Arab Israeli dispute. There's so much more to it. And I think, so I think those who took part in ACRS, came away with a different view of the region. I know, I did, because I didn't have them going in. But most of the people from the region I talked to, were also very affected by ACRS, and sort of saw it as being very, you know, sort of a highlight of their careers, in the sense of what might have been and why it was happening. It was very interesting.

The failure? Well, I think, again, the failure to divorce it from the Arab-Israeli process. And, you know, the, and maybe that wasn't a failure, because it was designed to be part of that process. But maybe, maybe when the multilaterals, were dying, the inability to say, look, these are issues that go beyond the Arab Israeli process, they need to be discussed. In one or two of the multilaterals they did do that; as I say, the environmental work on desalination, that actually continued. There's a desalination center in Oman, which, which came out of the Environmental Working Group. But again, that was one that was seen as being well, this is just useful, regardless of the politics, we need to work on this. And we all have something to contribute. ACRS never quite made it to that level, unfortunately.

Miles Pomper

And I mean, obviously, you were talking a lot about the that your work in Track II and Track 1.5 meetings after that. How, you know, how, how much do you think they were kind of accomplished or useful? Obviously, there wasn't an alternative, but you know, how much of that advanced things?

Peter Jones

Well, it's like Zhou Enlai's question, when he was asked to assess the impact of the French Revolution, he said, it's too soon to tell. I tend to believe that if and when the day ever comes that some discussion of regional security at the Track I level ever happens, things like the SIPRI report and, and other things that were done on this will be useful. There is a compendium of concepts and ideas and discussions that are out there. And there have been other projects as well since then, which have furthered that at work and continued to develop the ideas. And that's going on now. People are talking about it now. So I think that it's all useful, and it's all shows that it can be done. When the political environment is ripe for it to begin there will be a group of ideas that will help the process begin, perhaps more quickly than it might have otherwise. I think that's probably the utility of it.

Miles Pomper

And we talked about, you know, political conditions being ripe. I mean, obviously, one of the positive developments in the last few months has been these normalization agreements between Israeli.

Peter Jones

Maybe, maybe, we'll see. I think the issue there is what the UAE and others say they've accomplished in return for this normalization with Israel, is the Netanyahu shell the annexation of the West Bank. Maybe. But Israel has just put it in abeyance for now; not abandoned it. And so my concern is that either Netanyahu or an even more right wing guy, when he finally ends up in jail, where he belongs, there'll be more other who will say “Right, we'll just go ahead with annexation.” And then those things will crumble because the Arab states will say, “Well we can’t, we can’t maintain relations.” I think that if history shows that these agreements, and now potentially with Sudan, were the beginning of an implementation of what we've known all along as the Arab Peace Initiative that will be great. Just the Arab Peace Initiative is structure that, you know, you sign an agreement with the Palestinians, and then we’ll recognize you. Now we’re getting “We'll recognize you, in return for you working on something with the Palestinians.” I mean, it's taking the Arab Peace Initiative and changing it slightly, but it's still the UAE still saying we couldn't do this, if you annex the West Bank. So if history shows that this is the beginning of the kind of the great, the grand deal, which we've always known is the two state solution in return for normalization, then great. I mean, this won't be the way we thought it would happen. But, on the other hand, but if history shows that, that this was, you know, the Israeli right wing trying to pocket recognition, but then go on with the annexation program, it will set things back. But the other thing is a lot of these agreements that we're seeing, and, you know, these agreements came out of decades of backchannel secret talks between Israel and the Saudis, and all these Gulf countries, is that they are more about Iran than anything else; about their common threat perceptions with regard to Iran. So, in many ways, if Iran becomes a more aggressive country that frightens its neighbors even more, then they may all just be driven into the arms of the Israelis, whether the policy is going to stay in or not. So that's another dimension to this, which could mean that there'll be an Israeli Arab Peace, but no Palestine.

Miles Pomper

In terms of any, you know, procedurally, do you think any, you think there's any inclination to, at least while waiting to see how this goes forward with the Palestinians, to look at some process with those countries or the region or?

Peter Jones

Probably it would have to take place on the kind of Track 1.5 level for now. And that's fine. Useful work can be done there. I'm not sure at this moment, if a Track I process would be possible if you want to bring in the Saudis and the real big hitters. I wonder; maybe it could be but I wonder. But I think there could be dialogue in the meantime, some sort of structured dialogue, along this idea of geometry variable, with maybe a few countries are willing to talk at the Track I level and others willing to send serious people to a kind of Track 1.5, which is associated with the official process. And here is one of the things that I found; that the region is quite interested in was the Asian model, which is where you have this as a Track I dialogue on regional security issues.

But below that they also have some structured Track 1.5, CSCAP, the ASEAN Regional Forum, which meet regularly to talk about issues Track I isn't yet ready to talk about. These develop ideas, which then get passed up to Track I. I think a lot of effort needs to be thought about how we can develop something like that in the Middle East.

Miles Pomper

I'll talk to you about some of the people that we mentioned, the email and so on, but I think those are most of the questions I had. Is there something that I haven't talked about that you think's important?

Peter Jones

No, I think that's good.

[End of transcript]