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Interview with Daniel Poneman

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Summary:

Daniel Poneman was director of Defense Policy and Arms Control at the National Security Council. He served as a member of the US delegation to ACRS.

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Daniel Poneman, United States**Oral history interview conducted by Miles Pomper on Zoom on October 2, 2020****Dan Poneman**

It's not going to be very long, Miles, because as I said my ACRS involvement was quite limited, whereas my involvement in the Arms Control in the Middle East initiative, which addressed major weapons systems imported into the region, was quite substantial. But anyway, let's go.

Miles Pomper

So, you were starting to talk about how you got involved in ACRS.

Dan Poneman

So the Gulf War interagency coordination was really primarily run from the NSC by Senior Director Richard Haass. Of course, in interagency bureaucracies every issue has got a functional side and a regional side. But in practical terms, at the level of senior director and special assistant to the president, it's usually one person in the lead.

Miles Pomper

What was your role at the time? Sorry.

Dan Poneman

I was a director in the Directorate for Defense Policy and Arms Control, the functional side of the issue.

Miles Pomper

At the NSC?

Dan Poneman

Yes. At the NSC on the functional side the senior director was Arnold Kanter, who sadly passed away in 2010. And the deputy director was John Gordon, who sadly passed within the last few months. But the Gulf War process was really led by the Near East Directorate.

That was run by Richard Haass. In Richard Haass's office, the three people working on this subject were Sandra Charles, David Welch, who later became Assistant Secretary for Near East and also ambassador to Egypt, and then Bruce Riedel, who was the Iran specialist. And, basically, they ran the interagency process for the Gulf War. Our directorate coordinated but we were not in the lead.

When the Gulf War ended, I drafted a memorandum to General Scowcroft saying now that we've had this big victory, we should capitalize on that by proposing a number of useful nonproliferation initiatives. So we proposed five or six initiatives.

One of them might have been a nuclear weapons free zone. One of them was to take all the export control regimes and try to unify the standards across MTCR and the Australia Group, and COCOM, because they had different standards, and some were stronger than others. And we thought this was an opportunity to reform the whole system. On the export control initiative we coordinated with the International Economic directorate, led by Eric Melby, and I worked closely with Rich Barth on that. And one of the initiatives was arms control in the Middle East, the big P-5 initiative that became known as "ACME" to limit large arms from going into the region and destabilizing the region by having a proliferation of advanced armament, like tanks.

Miles Pomper

Conventional weapons?

Dan Poneman

Yeah. And that was a P-5 initiative.

I still remember it to this day. When the memo I wrote to General Scowcroft came back it was very exciting for me, as a junior staffer, to see in General Scowcroft's familiar handwriting: "Go for it!" across the top. And that memo did in fact lead to this Arms Control in the Middle East initiative. It was reported in the New York Times,

and I think President Bush announced it in a speech in Colorado Springs. Then there was a big ACME meeting in Paris. And they got some ways down the track, but there were a lot of rivalries among the arms suppliers, and governments at the end of the day were not willing fundamentally to limit arms exports into the region, so it kind of petered out. I don't remember the end of it.

For me, one of the more interesting things was that, when the things started in the ACME initiative, we were dealing with the Soviet Union. This is the first time I ever ran into Sergei Kislyak, who was working on arms control at that time. I remember him pulling us aside at a coffee break and saying: actually, I'm not representing the Soviet Union, I'm representing the Russian Federation. And we thought "is this some kind of a joke?". We thought of the Russian Federation and all of the SSRs as Potemkin villages. Something that's not real. Right? So that sidebar comment was my first indication that the Soviet Union was about to crash and burn. But then this ACRS thing got started. And on that one, Richard Haass' directorate had the lead. And I was the representative from the functional bureau. So I didn't, to be candid, have all that much to do with it.

We did have very good cooperation with Russia at that time. There was a channel set up with Dennis Ross, who was the head of policy planning at State Department, and his Russian counterpart, Georgy Mamedov. So they had an important dialogue with a broad agenda, and I remember a very large delegation of Americans and Russians getting on a bunch of helicopters, maybe 20 Russians and 20 Americans, and we all flew up to the Army War College in Carlisle. While we were up there we had extensive strategic dialogue, and there was really a very good and strong rapport between the Russians and ourselves at that time.

Miles Pomper

And what was your sense? I mean, you said you weren't that involved in the project. Do you have in any sense of kind of the interagency on this process? How it was working well, or not working well?

Dan Poneman

On ACRS, I remember the interagency process working well. There was a very good working relationship at NSC between Kanter and Gordon and Haass, all working with Scowcroft and Gates. From the Russian side, Ed Hewitt, who tragically got sick and passed early, and Condi Rice, also worked very well with the team.

Miles Pomper

And were you involved in the Madrid conference at all?

Dan Poneman

No, I was not.

Miles Pomper

You're right, we may be fairly short here.

Dan Poneman

Sorry.

Miles Pomper

You were only in there for a little while, but you're someone who's been following this a little bit, or was a little bit and then maybe sort of from a distance later. Did you get any sense of what are the long term lessons that we have to draw from this, I mean, in terms of, what kind of successes what kind of shortcomings what we might think about for the future?

Dan Poneman

The most striking moment actually - it was exciting enough that I remember it 30 years later - was when we first got into that room where they opened the plenary session. I don't remember the name of the room, I think it's the Loy Henderson or the Dean Acheson or something, where the delegates sit around a big horseshoe conference table and the interpreters sit in rooms behind big glass windows up above. Delegates were seated alphabetically, so the name plates were set in place, with Israel sitting next to Jordan and Lebanon, if I recall, and it was wonderful to see Arabs sitting next to Israelis. My takeaway was that the process was more important than the substance, or perhaps that the process *itself* was the substance. Just getting

those people to sit down and talk about nonmilitary issues, and to talk about things like access to water, among people who had traditionally been deeply hostile to one another, was extraordinary. The President was using the historical momentum of the end of the Gulf War to create a new political reality. And not to start by dealing with the hardest issues, but to start with bread-and-butter issues, that everyone cares about, access to water and confidence building measures, struck me as a fundamentally smart thing to do.

Miles Pomper

Obviously, there's been quite a few changes in the region recently, especially with the deals between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain and so on. You think there's any prospect for some kind of movement, something like ACRS or ACME or one of these initiatives in the future?

Dan Poneman

Yes, I actually think that the practical benefits that all parties have seen for some period of time -- in enhanced cooperation, be it economic, be it intelligence sharing, and frankly, the common enmity toward Iran, the classic "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" approach -- all create that kind of prospect for cooperation between Israel and the Arab states in the region. So once they were able to get over the hurdle of the political taboo around formalization of relations that have been evidenced by the Abraham Accords, I think you could do more. But maybe part of the lesson is you don't have to have that formalized a process if people are communicating back channel or through third parties.... and eventually these kinds of barriers to more formalized engagement eventually just erode. And recalling the classic Abba Eban line about, "the Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity." If you miss an opportunity for 30 straight years, even while the realities on the ground profoundly change, then ultimately you may conclude the taboo against dealing directly with Israel may also erode. So, at a certain point, governments will find a way to deal with these bread and butter issues, if there's genuine commonality of interest, and that there's not continued refreshing of the political bile and animus that drives a lot of the conflict. In that case, maybe those issues end up fading and the practical benefits of cooperation would prevail. And I don't know that that would require a formal process, like ACRS or ACME. It may just happen by kind of natural evolution.

Miles Pomper

Organically.

Dan Poneman

Organically. Yeah.

Miles Pomper

Okay, well, I don't want to take up too much of your time. Do you have anything else that you think I should touch on that I didn't or?

Dan Poneman

I know you were focused on the interagency process. I think that the very good personal rapport both within the NSC staff, of Richard Haass, Ed Hewitt, Condi Rice, Arnie Kanter, John Gordon, really helped. To the extent there was success, the very good rapport between State and NSC at the Baker-Scowcroft level and Dennis Ross and the senior directors at NSC, also helped. I do really feel that those were halcyon days of really good interagency cooperation. Many people consider that sort of a golden era in terms of the good functioning of the national security system. And I think that wasn't just on this issue, but I think it certainly included this issue.

[End of transcript]