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Oral History Interview with Tadeusz Strulak

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Polish ambassador and chairman of the Drafting Committee at the 1995 NPT review conference.

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Tadeusz Strulak

Poland

Oral history interview conducted by Michal Onderco in person in Warsaw, 12 October 2016

Michal Onderco:

I want to start by asking you about the deliberations within the Polish government before the conference and I want to start by asking: What were the considerations that the Polish government had going to the conference? What were the main points that you wanted to advance at the conference?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, we were among the most ardent supporters of the NPT which we found to be a very basic national interest, and so we wanted to achieve the extension.

Michal Onderco:

The indefinite extension?

Tadeusz Strulak:

The indefinite extension, yes. We were encouraged by the progress since the end of the Cold War and the dialogue between 'the two'. Therefore we expected that we may reach that goal. At the same time we were conscious of the concerns of the non-nuclear weapons states. First of all, the nonaligned, you know. At several meetings which were held before the conference we voiced that, that something should be done, something essential to reassure the non-aligned about their right to have access to peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and also that it was possible to satisfy their concerns about the nuclear arms race. I may say what I remember from several: the very, I should say, principled position of the United States which, I mean, when this question of satisfying the position of the non-aligned with regards to access to peaceful use was being referred to, [pause] the Americans were not very attentive to that.

Michal Onderco:

You already alluded to the fact that the end of the Cold War was important for your considerations. How did the fact that the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union stopped existing, there was a move towards democratic governments in Eastern Europe, how did that change what Poland wanted, or, how Poland thought about nuclear weapons, or about the NPT. Did they change in any way?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I don't think so. I don't think so. The basic approach continued.

Michal Onderco:

And did the disarmament steps that were taken between the United States and the Soviet Union matter in those deliberations. Such as the START 2?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes, certainly.

Michal Onderco:

The Polish government welcomed these steps?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yeah.

Michal Onderco:

How did the Polish negotiating position evolve? Which were the departments or ministries which were involved?

Tadeusz Strulak:

At that time, it was mainly the Department of International Organizations, later on the matter of NPT and nuclear security in general was taken by the Department of Security Policy, which exists until now.

Michal Onderco:

Was there any involvement of the Parliament, for example?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Not really much, no.

Michal Onderco:

And the civil society? Was civil society active?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Maybe some were, some scientists, yes.

Michal Onderco:

You already mentioned the role of the United States. It's also known that before the conference the United States launched a massive lobbying campaign, sending out the demarches to other countries. Was Poland also on the receiving end of such demarches?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No, I think that, saying modestly, also thanks to me, because I was in contact on this matter with the US embassy. I don't think that they had any doubt of our position.

Michal Onderco:

And at the conference the proposal that emerged that basically advocated the indefinite extension was the Canadian position. Was Poland in any way in contact with Canada before, before Canada proposed that position?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No, I don't think so, no.

Michal Onderco:

So, it came completely as a surprise to you.

Tadeusz Strulak:

Not surprising; it was within our approach, so to say.

Michal Onderco:

Shortly before the conference there was of course the revelation of Iraq's nuclear programme. Did that affect your trust in the NPT?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No, no I don't think so. It was of course received with concern and we supported the decisions of the Security Council, but I don't think it, in any way, undermined our basic position regarding the NPT.

Michal Onderco:

Did it undermine your trust in the IAEA?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No. We were very, even in our statement at the conference, we were very strong supporters of the IAEA and we were supporting the IAEA proposals for strengthening the safeguards including the additional protocol and so on. I myself was involved in that because until 1990 I was our resident representative to the IAEA.

Michal Onderco:

But when Iraq came up, was it something that shocked you, or people within the Polish government?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, it was of course shocking, it was surprising.

Michal Onderco:

And how was the dynamics at the PrepCom before and the different informal meetings before the conference. Can you discuss the dynamic that was going on there?

Tadeusz Strulak:

: There was no special dynamic, it was before this decision on strengthening the review process, or, I should say, the nuclear weapons states especially kept to the letter of the mandate of the PrepCom, just not to bother with something that was a

substantial matter.

Michal Onderco:

And was it already before the adoption of the agreement on the strengthening of the review process. Was the Polish government already in favour of a more substantive review process?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Frankly, we did not discuss the matter very much before that. It came up before the conference and of course we gave it our support.

Michal Onderco:

Yeah. One of the big issues before the run up to the conference was of course the CTBT and the FMCT. How did the Polish government approach these subjects? How did you think about it? What were your main considerations?

Tadeusz Strulak:

We were very strongly for CTBT, and in the CD, where we are also a member, we also supported it very much, we regret that it did not come into force .

Michal Onderco:

What were the main reasons that Poland supported the CTBT at that time?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I think the general reason of doing whatever is possible for nuclear disarmament, nuclear arms limitation, if not disarmament.

Michal Onderco:

Shortly before the conference, you personally were considering running for the presidency of the conference...

Tadeusz Strulak:

That was more complicated, you see...

Michal Onderco:

OK, tell me more about it.

Tadeusz Strulak:

Because at one point, I think it was the Americans, who were trying to convince our Foreign Minister to become a candidate. At the time, he was a man from the new team, to say - the political team after 1989, Mr Skubiszewski, a well known international lawyer. He himself hesitated. In that situation, I did not dare to be a candidate. I was not very keen on that.

Michal Onderco:

Why were you not keen?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Because of this set of circumstances I told you about.

Michal Onderco:

You mean the disagreement between the Nuclear Weapons states and the NAM?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No, I mean the situation with our Foreign Minister. And also I knew that it was always the Non-aligned who were insisting on having the presidency of the conference. It's a great chance for other countries.

Michal Onderco:

I'm asking because Jayantha Dhanapala in his memoires said that there was a competition between you and him to become the chair of the conference.

Tadeusz Strulak:

No, I think it's too much to say that.

Michal Onderco:

So right at the conference were basically three proposals: there was the Canadian position of indefinite extension, there was the proposal of Mexico for rolling extension and there was the 25 year proposal of the 11 like-minded countries. Can you briefly say how the Polish government saw the value of each of the proposals? How did you

approach each of them? You already said that you supported the indefinite extension.

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, we were all the time for the indefinite extension and we thought that it would best guarantee the future of the treaty. Although personally, I've been having second thoughts. I don't know, maybe the rolling extension of 25, 25, 25, would have been better?

Michal Onderco:

Because?

Tadeusz Strulak:

The leverage of the non-nuclear weapons states would then have been stronger.

Michal Onderco:

But who decided within the Polish government that Poland would be in favour of the indefinite extension?

Tadeusz Strulak:

It was a political decision, when we prepared, it was in our statement that was prepared in advance.

Michal Onderco:

So did you come to think of the rolling extension only after the conference? Or also before.

Tadeusz Strulak:

After the conference. Maybe some years after. After what happened in 2005, for example.

Michal Onderco:

Did you see a big difference between the public positions countries took and the private positions that they took?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well it depends, what private positions you have in mind.

Michal Onderco:

Well, both the positions that the countries took in closed room negotiations as well as the private positions of country representatives.

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well maybe there was some give and take. Especially in the group chaired by Ambassador Dhanapala.

Michal Onderco:

In the friends of the president group?

Tadeusz Strulak:

But I must say, as far as the drafting committee goes, it was rather disappointing.

Michal Onderco:

Why?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Because there the countries took very stiff positions. Very stiff positions. Especially after the group chaired by Ambassador Dhanapala started its work, there was no preparedness in the drafting committee for compromise.

Michal Onderco:

So all the negotiation was going on at the friends of President?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes. There was one moment when a draft appeared, with some concessions towards the non-aligned states, it was probably inspired or supported by some people from ACDA.

Michal Onderco:

ACDA?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Arms control and disarmament agency

Michal Onderco:

Oh yeah...

Tadeusz Strulak:

...and then it was quickly disavowed.

Michal Onderco:

So how was the dynamic within the drafting committee? Because you said it was difficult??

Tadeusz Strulak:

There was scarcely any dynamic, one must say.

Michal Onderco:

So can you tell me more? What was going on within the committee? How did it happen?

Tadeusz Strulak:

There was discussion, debate, and positions presented.

Michal Onderco:

And that applied also to countries that later forged a consensus such as Canada and South Africa?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I don't remember the details, you see. But I remember that countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Nigeria, were the champions of the non-aligned in their very principled position.

Michal Onderco:

Do you have any idea regarding why they took a very principled position?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, that's their view and it has been their view all the time.

Michal Onderco:

And they had these principled positions both public and privately? Were they difficult to deal with going closed doors meetings?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, in private, in the group chaired by Ambassador Dhanapala, they agreed to a more flexible position. Even in the position they reserved the right to be reflected.

Michal Onderco:

How did the information from the Friends of President group get to you? How was the communication between the Friends of President and you?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I was taking part.

Michal Onderco:

You were taking part in the group. What was the dynamic in the Friends of the President group? What were the main sticking points? Or what were the main fault lines?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I think it was in a way defined by two interventions: South Africa and Mexico. These two interventions, they opened the possibility for the kind of document which would on the one hand provide for indefinite extension, and on the other satisfy the views of the non-nuclear weapon states, the nonaligned first of all, in other decisions and then not the least the Arab countries. Egypt was one of the most active participants.

Michal Onderco:

So let's unpack these three countries you mentioned. Let's start with South Africa. What were your thoughts on the South African position? Were you surprised they took that position? How would you characterise their position?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, I say that they had in mind the strengthening of the NPT and then they were in a very strong position because they had their history behind them.

Michal Onderco:

So they had a very high moral ground?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes. And Mexico, Garcia Robles being one of the protagonists of disarmament, the Treaty of Tlatelolco. But here I think it was bilateral relations.

Michal Onderco:

With whom? The United States?

Tadeusz Strulak:

The United States. As I saw from some Russian sources, there was a division of work between the nuclear weapon states, for putting pressure or convincing in any way, between the United States and mainly their neighbours in the Southern hemisphere, the British and their former colonies, France for their former colonies, and Russians for Iran, and...

Michal Onderco:

So under whose remit did South Africa fall?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well South Africa...I think I couldn't say.

Michal Onderco: Do you think they were playing their own game?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yeah, I think so. I think they wanted to become one of the leaders of the non-aligned.

Michal Onderco:

Did you see any cooperation between South Africa and Canada?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I can't say that, maybe there was, but I can't say.

Michal Onderco:

You already said that you saw the nuclear weapon states had sort of divided their diplomatic campaign. Did that continue at the conference as well? The persuasion, the lobbying?

Tadeusz Strulak:

The lobbying at the conference?

Michal Onderco:

Yes.

Tadeusz Strulak:

I think it was. I learnt about it, clearly, only after some years, after reading some Russian sources.

Michal Onderco:

OK. And was Poland, for example, ever lobbied? Or was Poland's position so clear that it didn't need to be lobbied?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No, we weren't so much involved. Of course, in our conversations we had contact with many delegates. But you see, coming back to the drafting committee, I even felt there was some, I should say, lack of trust, lack of confidence.

Michal Onderco:

Between whom?

Tadeusz Strulak:

In my leadership, on the part of some non-aligned. I remember some conversations with them.

Michal Onderco:

And what were their main worries? What were the main concerns?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, the language on disarmament.

Michal Onderco:

You didn't want there to be a strong language of disarmament?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No! I was open to whatever could be agreed!

Michal Onderco:

And you thought that a strong language on disarmament could not be agreed with the nuclear weapon states?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

OK. Did it matter who was involved in the Friends of President? Did the countries not involved in the Friends of President express their dissatisfaction with the fact that they were left out?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I did not hear any complaints. At least loud complaints.

Michal Onderco:

How did the consensus emerge within the Friends of President Group?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Slowly, step by step, you know. It was perseverance and patience on the part of Mr. Dhanapala. He was very persistent at the same time. Slowly I remember the Egyptian ambassador, very much one of the protagonists, finally agreed to this text on the Middle East. Which was, I think a *conditio sine qua non* on the extension on behalf of the Arab States.

Michal Onderco:

What did you think of the Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone?

Tadeusz Strulak:

About the situation, or about the discussion?

Michal Onderco:

Both.

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, it is regrettable, you know. The case of Israel could not be "bitten". Because they had definite protection. And in any way, even if it had happened it would not change, even if you had hundred resolutions, they would not give up their nuclear component. It is very clear.

Michal Onderco:

So what did you think of the discussion about it?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, the Arab countries tried their best to use the international opinion to press Israel, so...

Michal Onderco:

...did you think it had a chance to succeed, the project of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I doubt it.

Michal Onderco:

Did you doubt it already in 1995?

Tadeusz Strulak:

It's difficult to reach back to that time, but I think it was surrounded by Israel with so many conditions.

Michal Onderco:

Did the Polish government, in the end, find the agreement that was agreed in the Friends of President group, did you find it satisfactory?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes. I mean up to a point. Accepting that, that was what was possible. But on the other hand it gave some positive impetus.

Michal Onderco:

How did the conference deal with the non-members in the conference? Did that matter at all for your considerations?

Tadeusz Strulak:

You mean....?

Michal Onderco:

India, Pakistan, Israel, Brazil...

Tadeusz Strulak:

Of course a point of view, or a position which was against international security. But on the other hand, look what is happening now with India. I mean, I remember, it was in 2005 during my last presence at the NSG meeting in Vienna. I remember the intervention of the US delegate and they started saying: 'now invitation for India'. They spoke from the point of view of a great power. Not from the point of strengthening NPT regime.

Michal Onderco:

In 1995, did you think that the treaty was going to welcome new members? Did you think the treaty was going to have the ability to extend to new members?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Some new members, yes, for an example, Cuba afterwards. But I don't think it was possible to accept India without India renouncing the nuclear weapons, or Pakistan renouncing their nuclear weapons. They will never do that, especially India.

Michal Onderco:

You already alluded a few times to the difference between the non-aligned movement and other countries. Can you tell me a little more about how you personally, as well as the Polish government saw the non-aligned movement and their preferences in the conference?

Tadeusz Strulak:

You mean in what way?

Michal Onderco:

What were your perceptions of their positions? How did you interpret them?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, we understood their position. Being in their position it is understandable that they want, for example, legally binding security assurances. Which is very clear because they aren't guaranteed by any alliances. So we understood it, but on the other hand, we wanted the conference to accommodate their views, but subject to the strengthening of the treaty.

Michal Onderco:

And you thought their proposals were weakening the treaty?

Tadeusz Strulak:

No, not weakening, but maybe if their result of the treaty was to be one extension in 25 years, then that would be a weakening of the treaty.

Michal Onderco:

So in the immediate aftermath of the conference, how did you evaluate the conference? Did people in Warsaw consider the conference to be a success?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes, yes, of course.

Michal Onderco:

What did you think about the way that the final declaration was adopted?

Tadeusz Strulak:

We were delighted. I personally regretted it very much, because in my report to the conference, I just had to speak about the organization and preparation.

Michal Onderco:

So would have preferred to have had a vote of acclamation or would have preferred to have assent? How would have preferred to have had the final decision taken?

Tadeusz Strulak:

The final document which contained the review of the implementation of the treaty, the decision on the extension, and maybe also some of these decisions which were included in the two documents.

Michal Onderco:

So you felt that the drafting committee was pushed to the side?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes, very much so.

Michal Onderco:

And who do you think was the driver of pushing the drafting decision to the side.

Tadeusz Strulak:

It so happened.

Michal Onderco:

It so happened? Ok. How did you, at that time, interpret what was adopted at the conference? For example, what were your expectations about the strengthened review process?

Tadeusz Strulak:

We were satisfied with it.

Michal Onderco:

But already after the conference there was a disagreement about what is this was going to mean and some countries felt that it was going to be 'more of the same' so it was only going to only be about the procedural preparation, whereas others thought that it was going to be meaning RevCons. What was your expectation?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, I think we should live up to the content of the decision

Michal Onderco:

But how did you interpret the content? The content was strengthened review process?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes.

Michal Onderco:

So that included already having small review conferences are the PrepComs.

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes, some substantive stuff. But, basically, whether a PrepCom succeeds, whether the conference succeeds, it all depends on the international atmosphere at that moment.

Michal Onderco:

So you think in 1995 the atmosphere was positive?

Tadeusz Strulak:

In a way, yes. Because you had the START agreement, a reduction on nuclear arms and the prospect of the CTBT being concluded. Also there were some not very strong, but still, the Security Council's resolutions on assurances. Look at the next review conference. From one to another, it depends on the atmosphere.

Michal Onderco:

Do you think that the individual personalities mattered in the conference?

Tadeusz Strulak:

To a certain extent, yes.

Michal Onderco:

So who were the key individuals, in your opinion?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Certainly Ambassador Dhanapala. I must say the South African representatives, the South Africa delegation and of course the head of the American Delegation, the Russian Delegation which was flexible enough.

Michal Onderco:

You dealt with the Russians on nuclear issues also before 1989. Did you see much change in Russian attitudes over time?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Now certainly.

Michal Onderco:

Now certainly, but were Russians more cooperative in 1995 than they would have been ten years before.

Tadeusz Strulak:

Sure. Of course. It was very close cooperation between them and the Americans on nuclear matters.

Michal Onderco:

But also, was there a difference in the Russian attitudes towards other Eastern European countries?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Other Nuclear countries?

Michal Onderco:

Not necessarily nuclear, but other Eastern European. So, was there more consensus building?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Before, we were predominantly under the influence, you understand that.

Michal Onderco:

So there wasn't much consensus building?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Not that we would have had some basic views against the strengthening of the NPT. It was in their interest, it was in our interest.

Michal Onderco:

But if the Polish position was so strongly in favour of nuclear disarmament, how was that compatible with Poland adopting the Nuclear Umbrella, in 1999 when Poland became a member of NATO? Because some non-aligned countries said that this was a fundamental incompatibility. How can you be in favour of nuclear disarmament if you benefit from the umbrella?

Tadeusz Strulak:

More than that, there was a proposal inspired by Russians of course, by Belarus, to revive the Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Central Europe, which was originally a Polish idea, launched by Minister Rapacki some 60 years ago. Well, we now felt that our security should be guaranteed by NATO. Because otherwise we'd find ourselves in-between, so to say.

Michal Onderco:

Is there something that I should have asked about the conference that I didn't? Is there something that you still is important to say about the conference?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Well, I should say that given the circumstances it was a good conference.

Michal Onderco:

Why do you think given the circumstance, you said a few minutes ago that you thought that the international atmosphere was good?

Tadeusz Strulak:

Yes, but on the other hand, the nonaligned states, their hard centre had still definite views.

Michal Onderco:

So what do you think brought them on board in the indefinite extension?

Tadeusz Strulak:

I think that they thought that, because several steps towards nuclear disarmament took place, that maybe they thought that it would be not right to compromise it, this perspective.