Center for Strategic and International Studies

Project on Nuclear Issues

TRANSCRIPT

The Negotiator Files: A Conversation with Elaine Bunn

FEATURING

Elaine Bunn

INTERVIEWED BY

Dr. Amy Nelson

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Amy Nelson:

Great. My guest is Elaine Bunn. And we're here to talk about, Elaine, your long and illustrious career and your involvement-

Elaine Bunn:

Long.

Amy Nelson:

... specifically in two arms control treaty negotiation processes and outcomes; INF and START. Let's start by, could you provide an overview of your role and responsibilities during both negotiations? Where were you seated and what did you do?

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. My INF history is much longer than my START history. My INF history began when I was still in graduate school at SAIS, and I was an intern when actually employed. They call them at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency from '78 to '80. And so that was the period where NATO, SS-20s had already been deployed. Schmidt had already said, "Hm, I'm concerned. I think we need something to couple us." And we had not yet gotten to... While I was there, we got to the INF dual-track decision in NATO.

But remember, I'm an intern, but I did work with people who were very much involved in the negotiations. And I was writing briefing memos for the director for less important visitors and such. So Bob Nurick, Lucas Fisher, those people were very much involved. And I was supporting them.

Then after graduate school, I became a presidential management.... They were then called interns, not fellows, at OSD. And did some rotations, but some of those rotations involved theater nuclear forces, INF, those kinds of things.

And then I landed in a permanent job in the Theater Nuclear Forces Policy Office, working for later Ambassador Read Hanmer. But that time he was just a retired colonel director of the office. During that period, a lot of interaction, both with allies and then a stint on the negotiating team; a six-week stint in Geneva. But mostly my role then was Washington backup, working directions, working cables to the delegation, that sort of thing.

That's '80, '81 to '83-4. We'll fast-forward to the time when I was working other issues, missile defense issues, at the Pentagon and then at National Defense University. But I would tell my kids when we'd go to the Air and Space Museum and there was an SS-20 and a Pershing II, I'd go, "Mommy helped get rid of those missiles." So I identified with the INF Treaty.

Fast-forward to 2013, I come back into OSD as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Missile Defense Policy, where I have civilian oversight of nuclear targeting, interagency things. Also, the INF arms control compliance and New START compliance. Because, okay, that's 2013. New START's, already been signed, ratified, and so forth.

So we're going to fast-forward. And then my role was, oh my gosh, that treaty that I worked on early in my career, it's back with me because of the Russian violations. Soviets to Russians during that span. The Russian violations of the INF Treaty, and dealing with both the interagency and allies on that.

Amy Nelson:

You mentioned you were at SAIS doing a degree. What was your academic background and how did your background prepare you for these positions?

Elaine Bunn:

My academic background was University of Georgia, undergrad in... You could make up your own major in the seventies, and so mine was International Political Communications. Which was political science and journalism, and a little language. French and German. Okay. But it was a made-up major. But I did do my honors' thesis on, "US Information Agency: Information or Propaganda?"

Amy Nelson:

Wow.

Elaine Bunn:

Duh.

Amy Nelson:

Prescient.

Elaine Bunn:

Both. Anyway, it sounds so naive now, doesn't it? And then-

Amy Nelson:

I would say it's back again.

Elaine Bunn:

I worked for a while in state government. And then came back to DC where I really wanted to come anyway, having served as an intern for Senator Sam Nunn in 1974 when he was a very junior senator.

And that's probably part of what got me interested, really interested. I got Potomac fever and I got interested in... He had me going to hearings on NATO because he wanted to get involved in NATO. And taking notes on hearings and writing that up and that sort of thing. So I wanted to come back-

Amy Nelson:

Yeah. Pretty inspiring.

Elaine Bunn:

And so I did come back in '77. Worked at Congressional Research Service as research assistant to Charlie Gelner in arms control. That was great preparation because I got to know the acronyms and some of the people and so forth. And that's actually how I got the internship at ACDA. This was thanks to Charlie Gelner. And I got that while I was in graduate school at SAIS.

Amy Nelson:

And were you among the only women in the space at the time?

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. Let's see. Janne Nolan was at ACDA in a different part of the organization, conventional forces. The organization that Lucas Fisher had MBFR negotiations, Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction negotiations, that later became CFE, basically.

And Jamie Young was part of that, and she was, oh, wow. She was probably in her forties then. I thought she was so old and so sophisticated. So there were a few women around, but not a lot. Not a lot.

Amy Nelson:

And yet it seems like this is always what you wanted to do. You had a sense at a pretty young age.

Elaine Bunn:

I wanted to do international something or other, probably since college. And then the happenstance job off a bulletin board at Congressional Research Service was the entree to-

Amy Nelson:

How fortuitous.

Elaine Bunn:

... the nuclear.

Amy Nelson:

Amazing.

Elaine Bunn:

Well, and Sam Nunn. And the internship with Sam Nunn, yes.

Amy Nelson:

Wonderful. Well, let's go back. You mentioned the dual-track decision. By the time you were involved in INF, the SS-20s had been deployed. Can you talk about that as a motivating factor to bring both sides to the table?

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. The SS-20s, three warheads could reach all of Europe. Couldn't reach us, but they could reach all of Europe. So they were definitely intermediate range. Less than 5,500. I don't remember the exact range, but longer. They were longer-range INF, and we'll get to that in a minute.

And it worried Europe. It worried our NATO allies who were, I guess, 15 at the time. I guess they were only 15. Because the Spanish didn't come in until '86 or so. '83-4. Anyway, so it was a much smaller NATO, less than half the size as it is now. And NATO allies were worried. Germany was on the front lines then. There was still the Warsaw Pact, so Germany was on the front lines.

Other countries were also worried, but I think Germany was the big motivator for, wait a minute, we're concerned that a nuclear war could be fought on our territory without the US coming in. And we want that for the deterrence of... There's going to be rapid escalation if nuclear weapons are used.

And remember how conventionally inferior we were at that point too. So they wanted something on their soil, very coupling, that would escalate very quickly. So this was a big issue in NATO in that '77 to '79 period. And I was a bit player on the sidelines at the time, but very much watching it. I did have a little secret clearance so that I could read the cables and I could do all that stuff, and then try to write up memos for people visiting. Talking points. INF was a talking point for everybody at the time. Anytime anybody met with anybody, INF was part of it. And so lots of talking point memos to be done, even by interns.

Then the lead up to the decision, the idea was we need something to counter this unless they get rid of them. And so that's the idea behind the dual-track decision. And it's part of the foundation for now, the thinking that deployments in NATO require some kind of arms control proposal too.

I'm not sure. I think some people were hopeful that the Soviets would give up their SS-20s. Different people had different views of how far we could get in these negotiations. Some, maybe my boss, Richard Perle, thought, "Nah, we just need the arms control side to get the deployments done." Others, probably at ACDA, thought, "No, no, we can really reduce the SS-20s. And maybe we'll actually deploy too."

And then there may have been some far-thinking people even early on who thought, "Oh, we can get to complete elimination." My thought is that the zero-zero proposal originally, few people thought it would actually come to fruition.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah. And it had been part of the conversation for many years at that point, right?

Elaine Bunn:

Oh, yeah.

Amy Nelson:

Began before Reykjavik.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes. Oh, yeah. Long before '86.

Amy Nelson:

Could you unpack that? Arms control proposals and deployments go together; can you talk about that dynamic?

Elaine Bunn:

Well, part of it is because our allies are democracies. Thank goodness. And oh dear, that adds another wrinkle in that they all have parliaments, national assemblies, named differently in different countries, but they all have legislatures. Public opinion matters, and they stand for election.

And so there was a lot of anti-nuclear feeling in Europe. And yet those in government in positions of responsibility really felt like we had to do something to address the SS-20s. Yes, the Soviets had many other nuclear weapons. But this one, MIRVed, reached all of Europe. Just really-

Amy Nelson:

Frightening.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes, it was really frightening. Very accurate.

So that idea that there were going to be big debates in their countries, I think a number of allied governments felt like they needed it for public. They also were in that place, "we're worried about the Soviets, but we also don't want to poke a big stick in their eyes. We live next to them, so we want to be careful how we do this."

So I think for a number of NATO nations, it was, if we're going to do these deployments, we need arms control. For some of them, it was, we need arms control, and if that means we have to have deployments, okay. And for others it was, we need the deployments, and that means we have to have arms control, okay.

Amy Nelson:

Interesting. So from both perspectives, the dual-track was necessary. For both sets of proponents.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. Now, did I know that at the time? I was studying this, I was writing papers on it in graduate school. I was reading cables during the daytime, during my 32-hour a week part-time job. But part of this comes to me later, having dealt with allies for 40 years.

Amy Nelson:

Can you recall any particularly contentious or memorable moments during those negotiations that you witnessed or were privy to somehow?

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. There was the walk in the woods. Nitze's walk in the woods with the Soviet ambassador negotiator, which hit Washington like a ton of bricks when he wrote in. That was eyes-only and very small groups of people.

But it was clear to me as a GS-11, 12, something was going on.

Amy Nelson:

That had a big impact.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes. And, "Elaine, there's something going on. We can't read you in, but..." But you figure out what's-

Amy Nelson:

Sure.

Elaine Bunn:

And it was very clear that the Defense Department was not happy with what Ambassador Nitze had discussed.

Amy Nelson:

Oh, interesting.

Elaine Bunn:

I can't recall. I really don't recall how State and Rick Burt were reacting to it at the time. But Nitze was a very senior statesman. Very senior. Doing post-World War II bombing studies, he'd been an assistant secretary. Anyway, he was a very well-respected... He'd done the Nitze School. I was a beneficiary of his grants to the Nitze School. But certainly at the Defense Department, there was a lot of unhappiness with the "walk in the woods."

Other periods that I remember personally? For instance, when we went to Greenham Common where some ground-launched cruise missiles were going to be deployed. It was under construction. During that period it was probably, I don't know, '82 or '83. And we had been there for some meetings. It wasn't just to go look at Greenham Common, but we'd been there for some meetings and thought, "Oh, we really should. Let's go see." There's some people with us who were on the deployment side too, so they wanted to see how the construction was coming along.

And so we went to Greenham Common. We have our little car that I'm sure the embassy had put us in to take us up to Greenham Common. And there are the ladies of Greenham Common camped outside. And I just remember being in the back seat at a window and seeing all the signs held up to the window, and then seeing women spitting on the car.

Yeah, it depends on who I talk to. One of my bone fides is, "Yes, I was spat upon by the ladies of Greenham Common."

Amy Nelson:

And the ladies of Greenham Common were "No nukes in my backyard" types?

Elaine Bunn:

Yes. And so that was one that really stuck with me. Obviously, the tensions between State and Defense at that time were very high.

Amy Nelson:

Tell me about that.

Elaine Bunn:

The Richard Burt - Richard Perle dynamics were... I think a book's been written on it. Interesting way to start your civil service career.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah. Right in the thick of it.

Elaine Bunn:

And yet, Steve Pifer, later Ambassador Pifer, Russia, Ukraine and so forth. Steve Pifer and I were AOs who were, at 8:00 PM we were trying to clear the guidance cables going out. We had a great working relationship. Our bosses didn't, but we did.

Amy Nelson:

INF was negotiated pretty quickly. Talk about what we can attribute that to.

Elaine Bunn:

Pretty quickly? Well, '80 or '81, it started... It started in the Carter administration, didn't it?

Amy Nelson:

It started in the Carter administration.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes.

Amy Nelson:

But once-

Elaine Bunn:

Because after '79, it took a little while to get the negotiations going. But by '80, they were going. So then they went until December of '83 when the US actually started deploying. I remember that phone call. I guess it was the airplane, or the cargo plane that was carting stuff in, called our

deputy director. I was there with him that evening when they said, "It's a go. We've gotten the go to go." And so we were at the office late that evening.

And so the Soviets then did walk out of the negotiations in December of '83 when the deployments began. And it took a year and a half. So it took until '85 for them to start again. Then '85 to '87. So I'm sure that 1980 to 1987 is that quick.

Amy Nelson:

No, I would measure it from the end of Reykjavik.

Elaine Bunn:

Ah. Okay. So if you're going to go October of '86 to-

Amy Nelson:

Because the scope was narrow, talking about eliminating intermediate range. Gorbachev and Reagan sit down at Reykjavik. They have this incredibly expansive and freewheeling conversation.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes.

Amy Nelson:

They talk about eliminating all nuclear-

Elaine Bunn:

All... Yes.

Amy Nelson:

... weapons.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes.

Amy Nelson:

Then the talks fail over SDI.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah.

Amy Nelson:

They both walk away from the table and everyone retreats. And then talks resume. Once talks resumed, they went pretty fast.

Elaine Bunn:

They did. You're right. The end game went pretty fast.

Amy Nelson:

Yeah. Could you tell me about that?

Elaine Bunn:

No, because in October of '86, I had my first child. I remember my assistant secretary coming to visit with his wife and also little daughter, talking about Reykjavik while I was on maternity leave.

And then I went back to the Pentagon and then worked at SDI. I worked missile defense and cooperation with allies and that sort of thing. So, no, I can't tell you about that end game.

Amy Nelson:

Okay. What was that like, taking maternity leave in the Pentagon as a young woman?

Elaine Bunn:

I have to tell you that even 20 years later, people would look at me and go, "Oh, you look so slim." And that's because they first met me when I was eight months pregnant.

It was very strange. I do remember one episode there where I was eight months pregnant, and I was briefing a group of Japanese journalists. Because of the MOU we were negotiating with Japan on cooperation on missile defense research and development. Just research and development at the time.

And we were all sitting around in the assistant secretary's office. There was a low coffee table. So my gray jumper and gray jacket that I had made, which I thought looked very professional, were sticking out to here. I was talking along and all these journalists were taking notes.

And all of a sudden I saw their pens stop and they were like this. And it's because that's when Anna decided to go from this side to this side. And so it was like this big gray... That's when I felt like, "Oh, I'm a..." And Japanese journalists were not used to dealing with women a whole lot in the eighties, much less pregnant women. So yeah, you felt it.

Amy Nelson:

And how much leave did you take?

Elaine Bunn:

Four months that time. And remember, leave was six weeks of sick leave. And if you had enough annual leave, you could take that. And after that, it was unpaid leave. So there was no maternity leave.

Amy Nelson:

And then what was it like coming back after maternity leave?

Elaine Bunn:

Well, I remember going away. I was doing cooperation with both the Israelis and the Japanese at that time. The Israelis, we started... Because when I moved offices and they gave me this portfolio, I said, "Well, okay, I haven't told many people, but in October, I'm going to be gone for a while."

And they went, "Oh, these will be done by then." Okay. Well, the Israelis, you can imagine, wanted this agreement really badly because this was the cooperation on Arrow and things that became Iron Dome and so forth. They wanted this agreement. And so that negotiation took two weeks. I was done long before I went on maternity leave.

The Japanese? And this is before '96 when the missile flew over Japan from North Korea; that took two years. So I was doing it before I left, as my belly was going from side to side. And I was doing it when I came back. So at least the portfolio had stayed the same.

Amy Nelson:

Okay. Yeah. Not always the case for everyone.

Elaine Bunn:

Right.

Amy Nelson:

All right, well, back to INF. So once everyone returned to the negotiation table, the talks went pretty quickly. There were a lot of technical challenges associated with verification. Could you talk about those?

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. Well, we had a separate office that worked the verification. Sally Horn, you should also interview, worked on the verification procedures. And I remember working with her about that and on that.

But it was all the, how do you get rid of these things? How do you make sure that the factories that have been making these things don't continue making them? How do you both get rid of, and make sure there are no new ones? And so there was an inspection regime.

I should remember this, how long the inspection regime lasted. But I do know that when I came back to the Pentagon in 2013, it was over and there was no more inspection regime. After both countries were satisfied that both had eliminated all ground-based INF, long-range INF and short-range INF, down to 500-

Amy Nelson:

I think it was 2003.

Elaine Bunn:

Okay, thank you. When I was at NDU, so.

Amy Nelson:

Somebody else's problem.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah.

Amy Nelson:

Okay. So it was negotiated pretty quickly. Verifications were a challenge, and there was a whole team devoted just to negotiating verification, on-site inspection. There was a dispute over which sites would be included, at some point. But ultimately, the agreement to eliminate all ground-based, intermediate-range nuclear weapons or delivery devices.

Elaine Bunn:

Missiles.

Amy Nelson:

Missiles.

Elaine Bunn:

Missiles.

Amy Nelson:

Was-

Elaine Bunn:

Conventional and nuclear, right.

Amy Nelson:

Okay. So tell me more about getting to that specific category. My apologies.

Elaine Bunn:

To the INF category?

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Elaine Bunn:

Oh, the SO. We were worried about the SS-20, NATO was worried about the SS-20, but also some of the shorter-range systems. And so I do remember sitting in my office on the phone with Steve Pifer saying, "How are we going to distinguish between these ranges?"

So there's long-range INF and short-range INF, but there's longer-range, short-range nuclear forces. And there's shorter-range. So we had about three categories. So the negotiators were working off, okay, exactly which missiles are we worried about? We were going, "Which of theirs are we worried about most? Which ones do we think we can negotiate on?"

And they, I'm sure they were doing the same thing: "What are they worried about on the US side?" I don't recall how we got to the 500 kilometer. You can't have anything 500 kilometers or up because we both did. Well, we both had things below that range, and we certainly wanted to capture the SS-20. They certainly wanted to capture the GLCM and the Pershing II.

Amy Nelson:

And the treaty is very specific. It enumerates very specific missiles and their locations.

Elaine Bunn:

Right, it does.

Amy Nelson:

There was a lot of information sharing.

Elaine Bunn:

Right it does their deployment locations. Their manufacturing locations, yeah.

Amy Nelson:

Unprecedented level of transparency.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. An unprecedented level of verification.

Amy Nelson:

So 2003, everything is eliminated, verified. And the-

Elaine Bunn:

No more on-site inspections.

Amy Nelson:

No more inspections. And the special verification commission effectively disbands.

Elaine Bunn:

Right. There's nothing to do.

Amy Nelson:

Which would later be post-hoc invoked to resolve a dispute.

Elaine Bunn:

Right.

Amy Nelson:

Talk about the treaty implementation, post-elimination. And is there a consensus on what folks would have done differently, looking back?

Elaine Bunn:

Because, I really come back into the picture in 2013.

Amy Nelson:

Okay. Well, talk about it from the 2013 perspective.

Elaine Bunn:

Okay.

Amy Nelson:

There are inklings of Russian violations-

Elaine Bunn:

Inklings, right.

Amy Nelson:

... trickling out into the public.

Elaine Bunn:

Very highly classified. Very highly classified. And it's a very small group within the US interagency that is even aware of this. There's a, "Hm, is there some other explanation for this?" We see what became known as the SSC-8. We saw that they were doing things. Intelligence kept briefing the people who were involved, but it was very highly classified.

And so the question in the interagency was: Is there some other explanation for this? Did they make a mistake? Did somebody just not follow procedure? Did the developers do something that if it were us, the Compliance Review Group, the CRG, which I sat on for a while, that looks at

every program the US might undertake, that DoD might ever undertake, that has any possible treaty implications for any existing treaty.

And oh my God, it's scrubbed with a toothbrush. Finer than that. And so if they had something like a compliance review group, is it the kind of thing that just never got briefed to the CRG, because it would've been cut off? So in other words, is there some other explanation? Are they willfully doing these things or is this some random guy in the R&D community who isn't following the rules? What's going on?

So there was that debate internally. Then as evidence keeps coming out and it becomes clearer and clearer that something's going on, and we brief Congress, on a classified basis. And then it comes out in the compliance review report, the unclassified review.

Amy Nelson:

The annual report.

Elaine Bunn:

In 2014? Is that correct?

Amy Nelson:

I think so.

Elaine Bunn:

And then we start getting questions from lots of people. The Hill wants to have hearings on it. That's great. You can have unclassified hearings, but you can't go into very much detail. You go brief allies. So lots of briefings to allies. "This is what we are seeing. This is what we think the implications are. We think they're violating the INF Treaty."

And because of the classification of the evidence and the sources and methods involved, we couldn't share how we knew this, even with allies.

Amy Nelson:

Okay. And were-

Elaine Bunn:

There's one ally we share a whole lot with.

Amy Nelson:

Yes.

Elaine Bunn:

But in general, we couldn't share it with even allies at the TS level. It was very compartmented because of sources and methods. And there were allies who are very dubious.

Amy Nelson:

Interesting.

Elaine Bunn:

"If you can't show me the evidence, why can't you... Show me the evidence."

Amy Nelson:

Because they were so trusting of the Russians, or they didn't want to believe it? Or they didn't want a problem in their backyard?

Elaine Bunn:

I think because of the bag of sugar. I think because of Iraq in... Yes. I think 2003 and... Yeah, I think 2002-2003.

Amy Nelson:

The burden of proof was on the United States.

Elaine Bunn:

The burden of proof was on us. Because they weren't just going to take it, "Well, we've got intel that we can't share with you." They weren't taking that.

Amy Nelson:

Right. Fool me once.

Elaine Bunn:

Right. So we had a whole lot of back and forth meetings. A lot of my trips then, they were either to assure allies on extended deterrence dialogues or they were on the Russian violation of the INF Treaty. That was a lot of the travel I did, was to go...

Amy Nelson:

I can imagine.

Elaine Bunn:

And then here in the US, I remember several round tables that we held with think tanks. And they had all these great ideas about, "Well, maybe they were really testing a SLCM, and that would be okay under the INF Treaty."

And you just had to say, "No, we considered that alternative. That's not what's going on." But you couldn't share very much. It was very frustrating.

Amy Nelson:

And I imagine this whole time the US is approaching Russia and saying, "Could you please talk to us?"

Elaine Bunn:

Oh, yes. Rose Gottemoeller was... We were back and forth with the Russians. And primarily what they want to know is, "How do you know that? What's your evidence?" I think they thought there was a...

Anyway, I am still unclear what I can say, and therefore I'm not going to say a whole lot. But I think they were pressing to figure out what we knew and how we knew it. And I'm sure they were doing investigations in their own country. I know that the Trump administration did end up declassifying some things and convincing allies. I don't know exactly, though. Again, I'm not comfortable enough with what I can and can't say.

But eventually, allies were convinced that the Russians were violating the INF Treaty. Even after they were deploying the SSC-8. I tend to refer to it as the SSC-X-8, because it was experimental for a long time during the period of '13 to '16. But eventually it was pretty clear that they had deployed it. And then it became, how do we know they tested this in such a way that was...

But now I think it is much more accepted and believed by allies that, yeah, the Russians... And it's clear to me. I have no doubt that they violated the INF Treaty. For me, it was this thing that I worked on at the beginning of my career, this thing that I was so proud to tell my kids, "Mommy, help get rid of those missiles." I was angry about it.

Amy Nelson:

A lot of people were. Absolutely. It's a strong INF community.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes, there is.

Amy Nelson:

Too.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes.

Amy Nelson:

Very proud accomplishment. People who devoted years to the process, spent months on end in Geneva. A really tight-knit group.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. Well, we knew that they were those in the Russian military who never liked the fact. We heard it from '87 on, that there were those who didn't like it.

I'll wait for your other questions before I-

Amy Nelson:

I was going to say, tell me more about the Russian perspective on the INF Treaty.

Elaine Bunn:

I was in the negotiations just for one session in Geneva in the '82, '83 period. Anyway, six weeks in Geneva, face-to-face with the Russians. Hearing what those people in the delegation, that I was coordinating guidance for, what they were hearing. And what I was reading in their reporting cables too.

There, being a woman really did.... I felt... I think I was the only. We may have had a CIA person, a woman. Anyway, on the Russian side, nobody. And they had, I swear it's a negotiating tactic, which was the first person who has to get up and go to the bathroom. I swear they didn't drink for a day before they went into these negotiations because they could just sit there and talk and talk and talk for hours and hours and hours on end. Not eat, not drink, not go to the bathroom.

And so I adopted after the first day, when by golly, as a younger woman, I wasn't going to be the first one to have to get up and go to the bathroom.

Amy Nelson:

For sure.

Elaine Bunn:

So then I just restricted my...

Amy Nelson:

Your intake?

Elaine Bunn:

Intake. Greatly.

Amy Nelson:

And if you've got up to go to the bathroom, that was it? You ceded some ground or something?

Elaine Bunn:

It was an unspoken contest-

Amy Nelson:

Toughness.

Elaine Bunn:

... almost.

Silly. Silly!

Amy Nelson:

All right. So INF Treaty violations are coming into focus, and New START has just been signed and there is a huge push to get it ratified on The Hill. Can you talk about the intersection of those two?

Elaine Bunn:

The huge push to get New START ratified was 2010.

Amy Nelson:

Oh, that's right.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. I heard about it, I read about it, but I wasn't involved in it. Actually, I was at NDU when then Vice President Biden came over and did the big speech on the modernization program. The timing of it, I would say, was part of the effort to get New START ratified. Again, deployments for arms control, right?

Amy Nelson:

Right.

Elaine Bunn:

But that had more to do with the Senate. And getting those who were dubious about, who weren't particularly supportive of New START to, "Okay, you get this. You get the modernization program."

Amy Nelson:

A bargaining chip.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah.

Amy Nelson:

Throughout our conversation, you've alluded to tensions between State and DoD, which you seem to have had to manage quite often. Can you talk about what those tensions are, particularly when it comes to nuclear weapons and their deployment, and tools of the trade for managing?

Elaine Bunn:

Personalities matter. And how much of a fight there is depends on who's... Between Rick Burt and Richard Perle, it was a big clash. I would say, 2013 to 2016 when I came back to Defense

Department as DASD, we had differences of views sometimes on how best to do this or do that. And you'd struggle over words and talking points and that sort of thing. But it wasn't the deep divide that you saw. So personalities do matter.

And my view is that State is doing its job, and Defense is doing its job. The role of State, they are the diplomats. They are the leads in delegations. Defense is saying, "Okay, from a national security, military/defense perspective, what things are we trying to protect and what things are we most worried about that we'd like to get rid of? And how do we get there?"

Remember in 2010, like before many negotiations, even after the Nuclear Posture Review, there was another review that was... The Nuclear Posture Review, in essence, the first part of it was, what forces do we need to carry out Presidential guidance? The president gives the guidance on nuclear weapons employment. So the, "what do you need if deterrence fails" to meet the objectives that any president spells out? That is DoD's role in there.

So both policy and combatant commands, especially STRATCOM, joint staff, they are looking at, what do we need? What do we need to protect? If the Russians are at this level or if they're at this level, how much difference does it make? How do the targets you need to be able to hold at risk change? And so those big studies need to be done before you go negotiate the agreement.

And so that was part of what was going on with New START. Both, what do we need to retain, what can we get rid of? What would we really like to see the Russians do with their force structure? What are we most worried about? Those kinds of things. That's DoD's role. And yes, there's a State input into that, but who does the first draft? For that, DoD has to do the first draft. For, what's the negotiating position ingoing going to be? State drafts that.

And so together you have to get to a negotiation. So I see it as, each is taking the role, is carrying out its mission appropriately. And yes, your perspective is different from mine because we have different roles. And that's fine. And then usually it should be the NSC that says, "Okay, is everybody getting a voice? Including IC. How do you see this? What do you see going on?"

But not, "What do you think the policy should be, or what should the negotiating strategy be?" That's not their role.

So I see State and Defense as carrying out their role. And if you can disagree without being a jerk, and then get to some kind of position, US government position, that's what you should be doing.

Amy Nelson:

You've won.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah.

Amy Nelson:

Today, there's a lot of tension between those who think we need all the nuclear weapons for deterrence, and this contrived divide between those who believe in deterrence and those who believe in arms control. Where do you think that came from, and should those concepts be so distinct from one another?

Elaine Bunn:

Having done both in my career... I've worked arms control, I've worked deterrence. Both in NATO, extended deterrence, US deterrence, reviewing targeting plans for civilian oversight up to the Sec Def. So I've done both in my career.

And I think… my view is that certainly in defense, the organization should be such that those who work the arms control aspects should also be the same people who work, certainly at the DASD level, who work the deterrence and what do we need for deterrence piece. And what do we need for allied assurance. They should be in the same organization. There should not be two separate offices for that.

State, I want my arms control people... I love it when my arms control people have some experience in that. I can think of a couple of people who worked in my office as IPAs, either from a lab or from a think tank, doing the deterrence side, and then went over to state and worked in the arms control organization there. [inaudible 00:42:28]. I think that's great.

I think a lot of times people spend their careers doing only one or the other, and I think that's where the us against them comes in. For US national security, both are important. And they're not either/or. As I say, I think the basis of arms control positions have to be: "Wait, wait, wait. What does the security environment look like? What does the president tell us we need to be able to do to deter? And if deterrence fails? What do we need to do to assure allies?"

All those have to be factored into your arms control proposals. If they're not, you get nervous allies. You get the Joint Staff saying, "No, Senator. I don't agree with this." So yeah, I think they need to work together. And if you can work a career where you do some of each? Much better. You appreciate the complexities of both.

Amy Nelson:

That's great advice. Well, fast-forward to today, the United States is on track to deploy a new nuclear system, the SLCM-N.

Could this be en route to a second dual-track phenomenon? Is this, in your view, contributing to deterrence effectively? How could it be deployed in ways that are stabilizing? Do you have thoughts?

Elaine Bunn:

First, you said a word that is one of my... What does stabilizing mean? It is one of those terms that too often people use it as, "I'm doing this, therefore it's stabilizing. You're doing something I don't like, therefore it's destabilizing."

I think it does mean something, but it's really hard to pin down. Once you get past first strike stability... And most people don't use it just to mean that. Crisis stability is much harder to measure. Arms race stability. Those are the three classic versions. Does it mean all of those? What does it mean? Some people use it just in a vacuous way.

So, is it stabilizing or not? I don't know. What's your definition of stability? But that's just one of my little bugaboos. Having tried to, for instance, in, I don't know, 2015 or so, when the 2010 NPR had said we're going to discuss strategic stability with the Chinese, obviously to figure out together what it means in our relationship. Because obviously it means something different than it did in the US-Soviet than US-Russian relationship.

And the USG was trying to figure out what issues, which aspects of strategery, as I put it, we all now know about integrated deterrence. And it's nuclear, and conventional, and cyber, and space, and information, and it's everything. Okay. So which aspects that contribute or detract from stability were we going to discuss with the Chinese? How broadly or narrowly did we want to define this term?

And let me tell you, OSD and the Joint Staff couldn't even agree. And it's not that we didn't get along, it's just that two different people writing papers, we couldn't even get it to the interagency because DoD couldn't agree on how narrowly or how broadly to define it.

So is SLCM-N stabilizing? We've had it before. We'll have it again, probably. It's now a program of record. I was dubious of it, and then I became a, "Yeah, we probably should deploy it."

Why? Partly for deterrence reasons. I don't know if the Russians think we don't have appropriate responses if they used short-range or intermediate-range nuclear weapons, even in a Ukraine scenario. But certainly in a NATO scenario. Do they believe that we're hamstrung, that we would be paralyzed because we don't have appropriate responses or not?

Now, do we or do we not have appropriate responses? Okay, when LRSO comes out, is that appropriate or not? Someone would say, well, but air defenses, Russian air defenses or Chinese air defenses, would make that not as viable as… well, great. And B61-12? Well, their air defense is an even bigger problem for a...

Amy Nelson:

And all our new tech.

Elaine Bunn:

F-35 for a while may be able to do it, but not indefinitely. Our delivery systems get better, their air defenses get better, our delivery... So this is a constant, this happens. Do I call it an arms race? I just call that, that's the progression of technologies, right?

So SLCM-N may deter an adversary from believing that we don't have an appropriate response, maybe. But I guess if budgets were unlimited, I'd say, yeah, it's always good to have more on this side of the scale than not. So maybe it helps deter. So let's put it over there to help deter.

Do allies? I haven't heard... Yes, you can always find someone in an allied nation who goes, "Yeah, I think that's the answer." But certainly allied governments have not spoken up like the Germans did in 1977 and said, "No, we need something here and SLCM-N is the answer."

You will hear some allied experts say that, but I haven't heard governments say that. But might it? More allies are beginning to think, "Well, does this add something to extended nuclear deterrence? Do I think a president might be more likely to use this in my defense than an ICBM or an SLBM?"

These are all about perceptions, and there's no absolutely yes or absolutely no to it.

Amy Nelson:

Is SLCM-N a potential bargaining chip? What could you see the United States bargaining it away for?

Elaine Bunn:

Mattis talked about it. When it first came out in the 2018 NPR, Mattis made some comment about, "Well, it could be negotiating leverage." Or, "It could be a bargaining chip." Don't recall which term he used. And then others said, "Oh, no, no. No. This is something we need. We're not going to bargain it away."

All the Russian short-range nuclear forces... But well then what about the Chinese dual-capable systems? Which one of them is really worried about it? And who could you entice into negotiations with it? We laughed at one point during the INF violation period. How could you get the Russians to be serious about this? To be serious about talking about what they were doing with the SSC-X-8 at the time.

And some of us said, "Well, we own the LRSO office. Why don't we just hang a sign that says it's an air-launched cruise missile, sea-launched cruise missile, ground-launched cruise missile." It's just a cruise missile that we could deploy however we might in the future need to.

Amy Nelson:

If we're playing games with ranges.

Elaine Bunn:

And it's just R&D. It's R&D. At that point, it was just R. And so pointing to, "Well, we might consider doing the kind of things that you're doing if you're not careful." And we couldn't get that through the interagency.

Amy Nelson:

Shocking.

Elaine Bunn:

So will SLCM be useful in this? I don't know. Depends on how it's used. Would we want to give it up?

This is what I said when I'd had to testify before Congress in '23, I think: Look, if we think we need this for our own security, then we should go forward with it. But we should be clear in our own heads why we think we need this. Either for negotiating leverage, and not because the allies are asking for it. Because I haven't heard allies asking for it. Let's not pin it on the allies. Let's decide whether this is in our security interest or not.

Amy Nelson:

Is it a step backward for the long project of arms control?

Elaine Bunn:

A step backwards? No, nah. Because, look, SLCM-N has never been part of arms control. But if it is in the future, well, that might be a step forward for arms control, right?

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Elaine Bunn:

And again, which perspective are you looking at this from? But no, I wouldn't call it that.

I'm curious. What's the argument for, it's a step back in arms control? Because it's a...

Amy Nelson:

New nuclear-

Elaine Bunn:

New now system.

Amy Nelson:

New nuclear system. The long project of arms control was for the NPT, make continual progress towards disarmament. This is moving in the opposite direction.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. So are Chinese deployments and so are the Chinese buildup. Yes, a lot of people do think of arms control as one way. Remember when we had treaties back in the early SALT days that were limits to which it built up?

Amy Nelson:

Yeah.

Elaine Bunn:

It hasn't always been reduction, reduction. Sometimes it's a cap.

Amy Nelson:

And sometimes it's a hotline agreement or information sharing.

Elaine Bunn:

Right. Sometimes it's risk reduction. Sometimes it's incidents at sea agreements.

Amy Nelson:

Let's talk about missile defenses and your work on that topic.

Elaine Bunn:

Okay.

Amy Nelson:

First tell me in what capacity you worked on missile defense.

Elaine Bunn:

So I first worked on it in... Goodness. We're really doing history-

Amy Nelson:

Do you want me to circle back?

Elaine Bunn:

We're really doing history now. Well, it had to be pre-'86, because I was working on the SDI MOUs of cooperation with allies before '86 when my daughter was born. So must've been '85, because then I went to the compliance office in OSD, like in '84, '85. And then somehow I got to the office that Kent Stansberry ran doing space and missile defense.

And I was on the missile defense side. That would've been in the late Reagan and early George H.W. Bush administrations that I was working missile defense. So when I was working compliance, we did do some ABM Treaty compliance issues that was from Krasnoyarsk radar. We were doing the Krasnoyarsk radar. And I remember Mark Schneider going, "Yeah, but let's just go into the interagency and tell them that the power aperture radar is 70..." Whatever the number was.

And I was like, "Mark, I don't know what that means. And the folks at State and the NSC are not going to know what that means. Explain, please." So anyway, it was-

Amy Nelson:

So tell us what it means.

Elaine Bunn:

Yes, exactly.

Amy Nelson:

No, no, no. For our purposes.

Elaine Bunn:

I have no idea what it means. It meant that what they were building-

Amy Nelson:

The Russians.

Elaine Bunn:

What the Russians were building at Krasnoyarsk was over the power aperture radar limits of the ABM Treaty. That's what it meant. So I did that for just a little bit. So I had a little bit of that ABM-

Amy Nelson:

So, it was a potential violation.

Elaine Bunn:

Right.

Amy Nelson:

How was it resolved? Do you remember?

Elaine Bunn:

I wasn't working this issue anymore when it was resolved.

Amy Nelson:

Oh, okay. No. Well, we can move on.

Elaine Bunn:

Did they tear it down? I think they tore it down, didn't they? I think they got rid of it. But anyway, this is what happens. See, when you work too many arms control things and you work them for a while, and then you move on to something else, and then you move to something else. So going from MBFR to INF to ABM Treaty to START.

Then I went to the office that worked... Oh, ABM Treaty interpretation. I also did that. I spent time in the archives. And that was also for Fred Ikle. That would've been in the Reagan administration. That would've been '87, I think. Working on, remember the broad and narrow interpretation of the ABM Treaty?

Amy Nelson:

Mm-hmm.

Elaine Bunn:

Yeah. Well, Abe Soffer at the Department of State, and Dave Stevens was a PMI. And we were sent over. I don't know, I was probably a GS-15 by then. I was sent over to the National Archives to look through all the records of the ABM Treaty negotiations to see, really, what did we say? What did the Russians say?

Amy Nelson:

Explain for the students watching this video, what's the broad versus the broad versus the narrow, please?

Elaine Bunn:

Oh, the broad versus the narrow interpretation of the ABM Treaty, it centered on the term "other physical principles."

So the ABM Treaty limited the technology that existed at the time in '72, ground-based interceptors. But when it came to, technology was going to move forward and so what should we do about missile defenses that weren't based on rockets on the ground? What should we do about that? They carved out this phrase about other physical principles. And you could do R&D on it, but you couldn't... Anyway.

How far could you go on work on other physical principles? And of course, at that time, we'd been sold a bill of goods. Reagan had been sold a bill of goods about lasers in space, that somehow they were going to work. And so we wanted to go forward with missile defense based on space-based lasers. That was the original SDI. And it was going to make intercontinental ballistic missiles impotent and obsolete. Yeah, right. Well, all ballistic missiles, impotent and obsolete. That was the '83 SDI speech.

And so here we are in '87 trying to go find out what the negotiating record really is on other physical principles. And some said, "Oh, no, that's not allowed." And others said, "Oh, no. That's not so clear based on the negotiating record." So that's when I was sent to find the smoking gun. There were no smoking guns. There was some enlightenment.

But Peter Sullivan, he was the lawyer in Defense who was working on that. And so, bringing back all your-

Amy Nelson:

What did he think?

Elaine Bunn:

Well, he was trying to justify what...

Amy Nelson:

What Reagan wanted to do?

Elaine Bunn:

The Reagan administration and Cap Weinberger wanted to do at the time. So he was looking for, how can we move forward with lasers in space?

This is what comes from being a civil servant. So I was a civil servant for most of my career. And only in my last job was I a political appointee into the Obama administration.

Amy Nelson:

Tell me about that. Let's shift to that.

Elaine Bunn:

Oh, being a civil servant?

Amy Nelson:

Tell me about your political appointment.

Elaine Bunn:

Oh. Well, the political appointment came because I was at NDU at the time. They were losing a DASD; Brad Roberts was leaving. And by then Michelle Flournoy was gone. It was Jim Miller who said... They talked to me before the Obama administration about various jobs. But my husband died the week before, two weeks before his inauguration. So I didn't go in. I stayed at NDU then.

But 2013, they were looking for a DASD. So Jim said, "Can you come?" And I said, "Sure. Is it political or civil service?" And he said, "We could do either." Because I'd been SES, Senior Executive Service, before. And I said, "So what's the fastest way to get me there?"

"Political appointment."

"Okay, sure." So I took a political appointment. And I don't regret taking one for Obama at all. As a civil servant all those years, going from Carter to Reagan, to George H.W. Bush, to Clinton, to George W. Bush, to Obama, my last one. As a civil servant, I could work for all those people.

It as I told incoming presidential management interns who would come and talk to me, because I was the last living intern in the Pentagon at some points, and go, "If you have such strong views on a topic that you're working on, that you cannot get up in the morning and look yourself in the mirror and feel good and go and do your job, and make the arguments that you need to make in the building and the interagency to an international audience, then you need to quit. This civil service life isn't for you. But if your attitude is, 'This isn't what I would do if I were king or queen, but I'm not. And this is the way our political system works, and it's within the reasonable middle. This isn't exactly what I'd do. I'd probably do this instead. But okay, I can go make that argument.'"

I had people say that to me in the INF world, back early in my career. They would say in an interagency meeting, "Elaine, you can't really believe that?" And I'd say, "If you want my personal views, let's go have pizza and beer, and I'll tell you what they are. This is the OSD position and here's why."

So that's what being a civil servant is.

Amy Nelson:

Tell me about the-

Elaine Bunn:

Being a political appointee is very different. You're working for the president. But having spanned both of those, I probably had more of a civil servant outlook than a political outlook, even as a political appointee.

Amy Nelson:

Interesting.

Elaine Bunn:

All those people I worked with in all those administrations, most of them didn't know whether I was D or R. I had both of them ask me to come to the NSC to do a rotation of the NSC. Just never worked out in my life. I was pregnant with this one... Yeah, it didn't work out.

Amy Nelson:

Complicated.

Elaine Bunn:

For various reasons. Yeah.

Amy Nelson:

Tell me about what was in your portfolio as DASD.

Elaine Bunn:

As DASD? I touched on some of it. We certainly had the arms control implementation for INF and New START.

Well, I talk about this in terms of, the portfolio was within OSD. It was within the Pentagon. It was with broader, with bigger DoD, and the combatant commands. It was the interagency, it was international. Somewhere in there is Congress. It was Congress. It was international. So you were dealing with all those audiences.

Amy Nelson:

All the equities.

Elaine Bunn:

All the issues of implementation for INF and New START. Oversight, nuclear weapons guidance, and civilian oversight of targeting. One of the really important roles of that job, I think.

Civilian oversight of the military? Well, it happens in the nuclear world as well. And so that office is the one that got down in the nitty-gritty, reviewing plans. And then if there was something that we thought needed to be pushed up the chain to the Sec Def, then we did that.

But mostly it was a back and forth with Strat. And, "Gee, explain why this and why not that." And, "Oh, wait a minute. So how does this implement the guidance document?" And the guidance would be presidential, Sec Def, Joint Staff guidance, and then your STRATCOM. So that was one of the roles.

And that also meant being in on the plans, reviews that a different office did. But they reviewed all the conventional plans. But they were in AORs where we had nuclear armed adversaries. And so I was always the one who said, "That's a great conventional plan. What happens if they use a few nuclear weapons?" So that was my role there too.

For both nuclear and missile defense, it was testifying before Congress on programs and the policy aspects of programs. So the modernization program, making sure that it was moving along.

Amy Nelson:

And doing good.

Elaine Bunn:

The missile defense. What do we need? What is the administration's policy on missile defense? We helped develop it, and then we helped implement it. It was both ways. And that meant dealing with allies.

It meant doing negotiations, back when we were trying to come to some agreement with the Russians, or at least make them understand where we were on missile defense. Going to negotiations on that. Most of the ones I went to were in New York with Jim Miller and Antonov. But those ended, I guess, 2014, I think was the last of those.

So both on the missile defense and nuclear side, testifying before Congress. I testified four times in six weeks before Congress, during the 2014 budget cycle. That was one of those where being a political appointee made a difference. Because I would be testifying with Admiral this and General that, and me. And so usually the way the hearing went was: "General, thank you so much for your service to our country."

"Admiral, you've made such a difference in this program. Thank you so much to you and your family."

"Ms. Bunn, why is this the lowest missile defense budget since the... Clinton administration?" Yeah, that's what testifying before Congress was.

If House, Senate, open, or closed, it made a big difference. Open or closed, actually. So it was more times than four because it was four in open session and more in closed session. Closed session, there was a lot less posturing. A lot less posturing by Congress.

Amy Nelson:

That makes sense.

Is there one particular lesson you would like the next generation of would-be arms controllers to know? What is the most poignant arms control lesson learned for you?

Elaine Bunn:

So one of them I've already stated, which is the arms control and deterrence pieces, they come together. It's not one or the other. Obviously, I see it because I spent more of my career at Defense than at State. But I see it as, you need to figure out what do you need for national security- if there is no arms control, if there is arms control, so under various scenarios, what do you need?

And then you go into the negotiations knowing that. That as a country, we are trying to protect this, do that. If there's an opportunity, then you bring it back and you go, okay, if this, then... And you work it that way. But working them together is so important.

I guess the other is that some people forget when it comes to arms control, especially when allies are not directly involved in the negotiations, is: when we're negotiating over their heads, it is so important. They've got an interest in this. It affects their security.

INF was a great example, but don't forget that it's all our nuclear forces that provide extended nuclear deterrence. It's not just the intermediate, medium, and short-range nuclear forces that provide that. It's all of our nuclear forces.

So all of the negotiations, be they, SALT, START, New START, all those, INF, anything having to do with non-strategic nuclear forces, CFE, MBFR, whatever you're negotiating, you need to really consult with allies. Really consult. Not fly over, land, give a briefing, and leave.

Actually, it's the listen as well as talk. And most importantly, don't surprise your allies. They can disagree, you can talk out, don't surprise them. That's really not good-

Amy Nelson:

That's a good one.

Elaine Bunn:

... for alliances.

Amy Nelson:

Thank you.

Elaine Bunn:

They shouldn't surprise us either, but.

Amy Nelson:

And my last question, what are you proudest of in your career?

Elaine Bunn:

Two things. One is, I guess professionally, the working with allies on whatever issue I was working on and trying to do just what I said. Which is, listen as well as talk, hear what they've got to say, not surprise them, keep them in the loop. Look at it from their perspective. That's one thing.

And the other is trying to support the people who worked for me, at various levels. At NDU, I had research assistants. And I had them in Defense as well. Actually, the deputy secretary who's just left, was a PMI in my office during the first Nuclear Posture Review.

So whoever is working, you are senior to and they're working with you, trying to support them and have their backs. Not send them out on a limb that you're then going to saw off. Because I had bosses like that early in my career who'd support. They may have sent me away into an interagency group or to an international meeting, and I didn't really know how far I could go, but they never sawed off the limb. And they always had my back. And so I tried to do that with the people who worked for me too.

Amy Nelson:

Fantastic. Well, thank you. Is there anything else you want to add? Anything you'd like folks to know? It's a changed world out there.

Elaine Bunn:

It is. And so whatever lessons we get from these interviews on arms control, you need to pick and choose what lessons apply and which ones don't. They don't all apply. It's not like we can tell you how to do this.

Some of it you just have to figure out yourself because the context is different now. The players are different, the context is different. So take with a grain of salt what you hear. Pick the lessons you think apply and throw away the rest.

Amy Nelson:

Terrific. Thank you, Elaine. It's been wonderful talking to you.

Elaine Bunn:

Thank you, Amy.

(END)