A Keynote Conversation with Dr. Robert Floyd

[00:00:00] Speaker 1: Okay, if I could just encourage everybody to take their seats again. Ladies and gentlemen, it's my great honor to introduce for the next session Dr. Rob Floyd. Rob is a scientist, a public servant, a diplomat, and one of the leading practitioners and implementers of international verification today, who serves as the fourth executive secretary of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization. Rob spent the first 20 years of his career as a research scientist before moving into the Australian Civil Service. For 11 years, starting in 2010, he served as director general of the Australian Safeguards and Nonproliferation Office, which is responsible for implementing many of Australia's international obligations. And while he was doing that, he also chaired the advisory group on safeguards to the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency. And then in 2021, Rob began his tenure at the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization. He's going to be moderated by my colleague and my friend, Jamie Kwong. Jamie holds a PhD in war studies from King's College London. She joined us at Carnegie as a fellow in 2021. She served, amongst other things, as one of the U.S. representatives—as the U.S. representative, I'm sorry—for the P5 Young Professionals track. And if you haven't read her work, which covers issues of climate change and nuclear deterrent, NPT withdrawal, and, of course, nuclear testing, then I very much encourage you to do so. So please join me in welcoming to the stage Dr. Rob Floyd and Dr. Jamie Kwong.

[00:01:56] Speaker 2: Excellent. Great. Well, thank you so much, James, for that kind introduction. And good afternoon, everybody. And welcome on stage, Dr. Floyd. We're delighted you could join us.

[00:02:05] Speaker 3: Thank you, Jamie. And did you pay these people? Apparently. This is your fan club, right?

[00:02:09] Speaker 2: This is my little fan club right there. Lots of support.

[00:02:11] Speaker 3: I love it.

[00:02:12] Speaker 2: I've got to work on that. So we, of course, have lots to talk about today, right? We're here to talk about nuclear testing. On the eve of the CTBT's 30th anniversary, there's a real concern that we might soon see a return to nuclear testing. From Russia's de-ratification of the CTBT and its claims that it would only resume testing if Washington does, to speculation that both Moscow and Beijing may be testing above the so-called zero-yield standard, and some calls in the U.S. to prepare for or at least reduce the amount of time it would take to prepare for a nuclear test, altogether we're seeing a lot of concerning testing talk, if you will. And of course, the central concern is that if one state tests, the rest might follow soon. We might see this tit-for-tat testing dynamic unfold. So all to say, I think there's lots to unpack here. So I'll go ahead and start with some initial questions to Dr. Floyd, and we'll then go ahead and open it up for audience and Q&A. So please go ahead and submit your questions via the app, and we'll try to get to as many as possible. But to start, following what appears to have been a pretty serious discussion about whether the U.S. should conduct a nuclear test during the first administration, some advisors to President Trump have now publicly called for a return to nuclear testing. What's your take? Why and how does a testing prohibition serve U.S. interests?

[00:03:33] Speaker 3: Jamie, it's such a pleasure to be here, and to Carnegie, this is fantastic. I've got to say that the panel this morning on Iran was particularly good, because there were people from different positions respectfully engaging with curiosity and sincerity. And so what Carnegie does here, I think, is invaluable. And so a huge accolade to Carnegie. Yeah. Let's show our appreciation. And a big fist pump between these two down here. I wish we had the video on it. So I've just used up one minute of my time.

[00:04:19] Speaker 2: Hey. It's a tough question.

[00:04:23] Speaker 3: We are in uncertain times. Uncertain for a whole range of different reasons. But let's be very clear about the context when it's U.S. policy about the CTBT and about testing. And even reports in the media and elsewhere. Yes, there are some who could have access to the President and could advise him who have said that they can see a case for preparedness to test and think that it would be in the U.S.'s interest. I was also really encouraged last week to hear in the Senate confirmation hearings of the President's nominee for the Administrator of the NSA. And I believe that, I can't see with the lights, but I believe that Brandon's actually in the audience here at the moment. But when asked a very direct question, would you advise the President to return to testing, gave a very direct answer and said he would not. He would not. Now let's be careful. These are two different things. One is an opinion which says readiness to test. The other one, would you advise to test? And he said he would not. You ask what is my take, Jamie. My take is simple. I don't think it would be a good idea. Somebody agrees with me. I don't think it would be a good idea. And I would also say that I don't actually think it's in the U.S.'s best interest to return to testing either. Now why would I say that? One of the things, and Jamie, your introductory comments alluded to it, is about the cascade effect that could take place. That if the U.S. returned to testing, the Russian Federation has already promised that they will do likewise. And I think it would be a brave person to say that's where it would stop. But very likely other possessor states would see that we should too, or we're losing out. And so there could be that cascade in returning to testing. But then there's another aspect altogether, and that is can you return to testing and stay as a party to the treaty? Does that make sense? And in international law, if you are a signatory to a treaty, those that study international law here know the rest of the sentence, you are committed to the object and purpose of the treaty. Friends, that happens at signature, not at ratification, at signature. Which is really important when you think about the Russian Federation situation, right? Really important. But to return to testing and then act not in a way which is consistent with the object and purpose of the treaty would be a tricky maneuver. And so then if we saw states start to pull back from the treaty, that would not be good. But you know what would be worse? The U.S. hosts the largest number of stations in our international monitoring system. So if they pull back, then those stations probably disappear from the international monitoring system. If they disappear from the international monitoring system, we have this huge black hole. And the confidence that all states have would disappear. For those of you that don't know, the international monitoring system is 337 facilities all over the planet, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, detecting vibrations in the Earth's crust, sounds in the ocean, sounds in the atmosphere, or radioactive material, gases or particles in the atmosphere. So that all nations of the world, or at least the 187 that are party to this treaty, can know for sure that somebody tested a nuclear device. Friends, I would not want to see that disappear. And I say that is not in the U.S.'s interest.

[00:09:11] Speaker 2: Well, thank you. I think that's a great opening sort of set of comments there, and I tend to agree with you. But you know, of course, there's a difference between testing for technical reasons and testing for political reasons. And I'm wondering what you make of these distinctions and how you might respond to an argument in favor of one or the other, or perhaps in favor of one under the guise of the other.

[00:09:39] Speaker 3: Some talk about testing as political messaging. The treaty doesn't talk about testing for political purposes versus technical purposes. The treaty is really straightforward, don't test. And don't allow testing to take place on your territory. It is very straightforward. So I don't think there is room to wriggle on that particular point.

[00:10:11] Speaker 2: So I want to go ahead and zoom out now a little bit. You know, of course, we're talking about nuclear states returning to testing. But if they were, that would have a global effect. So what's the global view on this conversation about this potential return to great power testing? You know, I'm quite curious about what your dialogues with member states around the world look like, what types of concerns they're raising about how this increase in testing talk and these setbacks in test ban diplomacy might impact them.

[00:10:40] Speaker 3: Yeah. Yeah. One of the wonderful things about my job is I get to visit many of our state signatories. And it's amazing to see people in far-flung distant places that are operating our monitoring system stations. I met a guy just recently in the most southern city in the world. Who knows where the most southern city in the world is? Hey, right, Ushuaia. Down Tierra del Fuego, down the bottom of Argentina. For 22 years, he's been there in that cold, barren landscape, maintaining this station so that the data comes in. But this is the global family. But when I talk to them, they are concerned. Not just those people, but the diplomats, the leaders, the presidents and prime ministers I visit in various places, they are concerned. And I often describe it as we have a number of dark clouds in the nonproliferation and disarmament space at the moment. Threats of use. Language that many of us never thought we were going to hear. Threats of testing or returning to testing. Accumulation of large amounts of highly enriched uranium for purposes difficult to understand. And so it goes on. Unrestrained relationships. So I hear these concerns. And in our world, some states were concerned about the de-ratification of the treaty by the Russian Federation. And has there been an impact upon the states? Oh, yeah, there has. What I see is the states are more determined than ever to commit and support the CTBT. To commit to and support it. And one indicator which is a straight, you know, people here, some of you are into evidence-based policy and good analysis, aren't you? Okay. Let me give you some numbers. The assessed contribution of all states to contribute to our organisation. You know, the magic number that divides it up according to your GDP and things like that. Two years ago, the CTBTO had its highest collection rate of that assessed contribution ever. 97%. Last year, when the Russian Federation contribution finally gets through the maze of banking restrictions, it will be 98%. Again, the highest ever. So what does that mean? I have no idea. But it's got to be good. It's got to be good. Is that states are so committed. But it's beyond that. You know, we've seen in the last three and a half years, we've seen nine states ratify this treaty. Another state, Somalia, signed yet to ratify. But we already have 187 signatures and 178 ratifications. These are big numbers already. But there is a surge in recent years. And I think that surge is partly a response to the concerning situation. So I see greater commitment. And what

states see is the value that the international monitoring system is providing to peace and security for all. We have seen such a dramatic change. 1996, when the treaty was opened for signature, through the great work of the NPT Review Conference. Well done. But in 1996, 24th of September, the day before my birthday, or the anniversary of my birthday. Before that date, over 2,000 nuclear tests. At the height of testing, one a week. A huge amount of money being spent by countries around the world. But from that date through to today, how many nuclear tests have taken place? The answer is probably 10. 10 compared to 2,000. And this century, or if you want to be dramatic, this millennium, by one state only, by North Korea. That is success. That is the peace and security dividend that the treaty is delivering, which backs up the global norm, or the taboo, whichever way you like to look at it. Because we know the international monitoring system works, and nobody can test in secret. It will be shown to all. And if I've got just a moment, I want to tell you a different story. Because of course you all know that the CTBT is all about detecting nuclear tests. But on the 5th of October last year, it was just a normal day at the International Data Centre, and there's seismic activity going on around the world all the time. And there were two small, small seismic events in northern Iran. And our system, what we say, screened them out. It looked at it and said, these are natural events, just earthquakes. But social media had a different idea. And before long, there is this huge flurry of activity where people are saying, Iran has tested these two seismic events, actually nuclear tests. And there's other people saying, no, no, it's just natural, and it was going backwards and forwards. So there was some really active misinformation, possibly disinformation taking place. It got some take up in traditional media as well. I asked my analysts, go and look at those two small seismic, I said they're small seismic events, and draw in all of the data across our network that could give us some idea what took place. And satisfy yourself, is there any evidence whatsoever that it could be a nuclear test? They did that. It took close to two days. They had 43 different stations of data that they looked at. And they came back to me and they said, those two events are entirely consistent with natural seismic events in that part of the world. So we put out on our social media feeds that finding. And do you know what happened? It surprised me. It surprised me. All of that activity that was going on, the trading of views backwards and forwards, we put our thing out and people grabbed it and they reposted it. And they said things like, look, the impartial international experts have spoken. It's natural. And the whole thing died. Misinformation can be stopped. The learning for us though was information matters. Good science still matters. Believe it or not, good science still matters. But reputation together with it is so important. And there were things that we could say as an international organization that will be believed that it's really, really difficult for any other state to say. Long answer to a short question, but what I see is states that are so committed because they see the value and they still want to hear that voice. And that is in all of our interests.

[00:18:50] Speaker 2: And I think that value add is, in my opinion, without question. I wonder, and I want to bring in some audience questions here. So Jackson DuPont from CSR and I have a very similar question. In addition to committing themselves to the CTBT, if some of these states are also seeking assurances from the nuclear states that they won't test. So you know Jackson is asking, is there a way to reinforce the CTBT with an additional no first test agreement between the nuclear states? This is actually something I've written about before, essentially the idea that absence of the entry into force of the CTBT, states should commit not to be the first to conduct a nuclear explosive test. So wondering what you think about that as a

potential assurance or other sorts of assurances that the nuclear states might be able to put on the table.

[00:19:42] Speaker 3: I'm so glad that that question has been asked and that thinking is happening. You may have got the impression from my comments this far that I'm not worried about entry into force. That's not true. What I'm telling you is that the treaty is amazingly successful already. It is supporting that global norm. It is supporting decision making by states. In this uncertain times, we need to protect what we have. That is something that's working. Something that is really working. We need to protect what we have. We think about those kinds of issues of ancillary commitments that could be made. What we think is probably most doable, and I have asked all possessor states to do this and most of them have actually followed suit, is to publicly recommit yourself to the moratorium. Because it's a unilateral commitment. As soon as you try and make it bilateral or plurilateral or multilateral, well, I don't know we've got that long. If a state is to clearly, publicly, decisively recommit itself to the moratorium not to test, that is a good thing. Most of the significant possessors have in fact done that. As we now are on the glide path to the next NPT, PREPCOM, and then the review conference next year, that is something I would love to see all states do. If we could go further to something more legal, great. But let's at least get states declaring that. Because that's what all countries of the world, they want to hear.

[00:21:41] Speaker 2: So I think everybody headed to PREPCOM next week. We have some homework to do there. So I want to go ahead and turn back to your comments around, of course, we have had one nuclear power test this century. And, of course, there's a renewed concern about North Korea conducting its seventh nuclear test. So my colleague, Tong Zhao, from the Carnegie Endowment asks, what conversations have you had with the major powers that may have leverage over North Korea to prevent this from happening?

[00:22:15] Speaker 3: We as a priority engage with all states that have not yet signed or not yet ratified our treaty. For those that understand our treaty, there is this annex, Annex 2, which has got a list of 44 countries. And the treaty drafters decided, for entry into force, we don't need every country in the world to agree, but we do need these 44. So it was so that you could get entry into force quicker. It's a joke. But the fact is that there are nine of those countries that have not yet ratified. And a difficult set of countries, and hard to see that there's going to be rapid change in that any time real soon. What we do is we engage with every one of them in a respectful way, because for virtually all of them, they actually want to ratify the treaty. They want to see the treaty enter into force. But there's various geostrategic calculations which make that quite problematic, and some other things. Yeah. That's the reality. And so in the case of North Korea, they're one of those. We certainly do engage with countries that have close relations with North Korea, those that actually have diplomatic presence in Pyongyang. I am very keen to be able to brief North Korean leadership of the value of the treaty, and how they could have a close relationship with it. I'd love to be able to report to you that that's going well. But I've got to say that there are a number of different angles where that is actually – it's a process which is moving. I would love to see the opportunity to talk with them about how them committing, signing this treaty, would be a powerful first step in terms of opening up a further discussion about the future of the Korean Peninsula.

[00:24:23] Speaker 2: Great. Thank you. So picking up on your point, I think, which is really important of these geostrategic challenges that some of these Annex II states might identify as making it difficult to ratify the treaty. We have a question from Matt Korda from the Federation of American Scientists asking, what do you think are the biggest misconceptions that the US, Russia, and China have about each other's nuclear testing intentions or infrastructure?

[00:24:54] Speaker 3: I'm not sure what misconceptions they have, but what I'm very convinced about is that to see the US and China to ratify the treaty – because it used to be Russia had ratified – but US and China to ratify the treaty, it's going to be a synchronous activity. There is no doubt. And now, actually, I think there's three of them. After the Russian Federation de-ratified, some have said, oh, this must make entry into force all much more harder. I actually don't agree. I don't agree. I do not believe that the Russian Federation will be an impediment, that if the US and China could agree that they would ratify, the Russian Federation would move with them. I am quite convinced of that. Why are we just touching on the Russian Federation? So their de-ratification a year and a half ago, deeply regrettable, very unfortunate. But it is interesting that whether it be the ambassador in Vienna or Deputy Foreign Minister Rybkov, they have points that they keep making to me almost every time I see them, the same points each time. And they remind me that they remain as signatories to the treaty. And so our signatories – you know how before I talked about acting in accord with the object and purpose – they formulate it slightly, the rights and the obligations of the treaty remain for them. They inform me a second thing, and that is that they remain committed to their moratorium commitment, unless the US does first. The third thing they say is that – they used to say – is that they would finish all of the international monitoring system stations that are in their territory, 32. At the time they de-ratified, there was one to go. And before the end of that year, even that one was established. And they also say to me is that we will make sure that the data from these stations is transmitted to Vienna, and then we share it with the rest of the world. And since then, they have continued to do exactly that. So it's – when I hear reporting and see reporting which says that the Russian Federation has withdrawn from the treaty, that's quite incorrect. They de-ratified, which is really regrettable, but they have not withdrawn from the treaty.

[00:27:46] Speaker 2: And I think that's a very helpful distinction. And related to the ratification question, we have a question from Margot Bonnet asking, could you share your expectations regarding quite concrete and constructive diplomatic initiatives that states' parties could take to bring the treaty into force?

[00:28:05] Speaker 3: Yeah. And with one minute and 33 seconds to go – Counting down. I think there's one final point I would make. A lot of people, they say to me, Mr. Executive Secretary, what are you doing to see all of these treaty – these countries ratify or sign and ratify the treaty? And I tell them. But then what I often say to them is, but actually, Mr. Foreign Minister, you're held in such high – Mr. President, you're held in such high regard by so many. What you could do is actually way more powerful than what I could do. And I actually recently gave a president of a country some homework, and he wrote his homework down, and he says, I will do it. It's actually a team effort, and it's not just all about me, absolutely, that would be a real problem. And it's not just about the Secretariat and the CTBTO, but it's actually what we can all do together that makes a difference. And the perspective that really echoes in my mind is the perspective of two presidents, one president and one prime minister, that I met in small countries, small island countries around the world. They

agreed to ratify the treaty, and they did. And both of them said almost the same thing. Reflecting on the global situation, they said, you know, if another country chose to invade us, there's nothing we could do to protect ourselves. There's only one thing that protects us. I said, what? One thing protects –? So I said, Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, what is that? And they both said the same thing. They said the international rules-based order is the one thing that protects us. This perspective of a small state, the absolute rock of their national security strategy is the international rules-based order. Now, I know in this room we will have a lot of people that will debate whether that's a thing, whether that's the right description. But I'd love you to sit down with those leaders of those countries and explain your point of view. But for them, it is the absolute bedrock. So I think what we have is a responsibility for the nations of the world to protect what we've got, whether it be the CTBT, whether it be the international monitoring system, and see it continue to flourish and provide peace and security benefits for all. Thank you.

[00:31:03] Speaker 2: Excellent. Well, thank you so much. And please join me in thanking Dr. Floyd. So I have just a few instructions to share. So for the young professional track participants, we'd invite you to go ahead and stay in the room and please gather up front. You have some special programming with Dr. Floyd. And we'd kindly invite all others to move rather quickly out to the hall and enjoy some coffee and tea and conversations. Thank you very much.