

UN nuclear talks under way in New York
Interview with Corey Hinderstein
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The nuclear non-proliferation treaty review conference under way in New York has had a rocky start with Western delegations walking out during a fiery speech from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Iranian President called nuclear weapons "disgusting and shameful," and said countries that threaten to use them - like the United States - should be punished. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Iran was making the "same tired, false and sometimes wild accusations".

Presenter: Joanna McCarthy

Speakers: Corey Hinderstein, Vice President for International Programs at the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

HINDERSTEIN: Well I thought it was consistent with what we've heard from him before. A lot of exaggeration, a lot of kind of a desperate attempt to put his program and the questions around his program in a kind of an unfair context. It's not to say that the nuclear weapons states, including the US have done everything right. But I think that he was really showing that he wanted to try to turn the attention of this conference to him, and he may have attempted to do that but I don't think he succeeded.

MCCARTHY: Certainly he may be playing to the gallery here, but how much sympathy for his view is there in the developing world?

HINDERSTEIN: There certainly is sympathy for some of the principles underlying his view, and that is the right of states to pursue peaceful nuclear programs and the obligation of the nuclear weapons states to move faster with nuclear disarmament. That being said we didn't see a lot of echoes of this speech, he was one of the first speakers. He did not kind of carry the room. He did not get a lot of agreement on the specifics of his point that he's being unfairly persecuted and that Iran's program has been singled out in an inappropriate way.

MCCARTHY: Well let's look at Secretary Clinton's comments, she's announced a campaign to raise 100 million US dollars to help these developing countries gain better access to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Is this a case of too little, too late however?

HINDERSTEIN: I think this was an attempt by the Secretary of State and the US delegation as a whole to try to put some deeds behind the words that they have spoken many times with regards to balancing the pillars of the NPT. This means having an appropriate attention to peaceful uses and non-proliferation and disarmament. We hear a lot on non-proliferation from the US and we hear a lot on disarmament from the other states, and I think this was an attempt to say we need to have an equal balance among the three pillars and this is one way we're going to show our commitment to peaceful uses of nuclear energy. I don't know if it will be enough, but I think it is a sincere attempt and I think it will actually resonate very well in many capitals in the developing world.

MCCARTHY: Indeed and the US has also disclosed for the first time the overall size of its nuclear arsenal. How significant is that disclosure?

HINDERSTEIN: I don't think the number is going to surprise a lot of people. The approximate number has been in the unclassified world for a while. But what is extremely significant is this principle of transparency and openness, and we have been saying for years and the United States has been saying that states need to be more transparent, more open, more willing to answer questions about their programs, and that includes a country like Iran where there are questions about the intent. And I think this was an attempt by the United States to say we're going to take some of those principles on ourself, we're going to be more transparent and open. I'm not sure what the reaction to it will be, but I think it kind of proved that you can release this number and the world's not going to come to an end. We really need to be talking about practical steps and part of those practical steps are knowing where is our launching point, where are we starting from today when we talk about future reductions.

MCCARTHY: Let's look at these calls for a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. Egypt of course wants to see an international conference on this issue, while Israel, which is not a treaty member, is objecting. Where does this leave the United States?

HINDERSTEIN: I think that the United States is in a difficult position on this issue, clearly having a very strong relationship with Israel. But the United States was one of the co-sponsors of the resolution in 1995 that called for a weapons of mass destruction free zone in the Middle East, and you'll note I made a distinction. If we're going to talk about a weapons free zone it should be weapons of mass destruction free, and not just nuclear free. And on that basis I think Israel is more willing to engage in that kind of conversation. But the United States rightfully has a special responsibility in this area, and I hope that the treaty parties, including the US and Egypt, can come to an agreement on how we can at least start thinking about how this could move forward; whether it's a conference or some sort of pre-negotiation stage. But it does need to move forward in order to gain confidence for all the states in the region that the NPT still matters to them.

MCCARTHY: And just briefly of course turning to India, India has signed a nuclear deal with the United States, a civilian nuclear deal despite not being a signatory to the treaty. Is this likely to be an issue before the review conference?

HINDERSTEIN: I think we'll certainly see the US and India deal come up in the review conference. It's been the basis of many criticisms of the United States for hypocrisy and frankly the entire nuclear suppliers group agreed to this special exemption for India. So the blame can be spread around, it's my personal opinion that this deal was not good for the non-proliferation regime. And we've seen just in recent days announcements that China and Pakistan may be entering into a similar sort of deal. So I think we'll see the repercussions of this deal and we need to figure out a way to make sure that we cast the rules as applying to everyone; with nuclear weapons states, non-nuclear weapons states and that we all have a burden and a responsibility to carry out the principles of the treaty.